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When Apple marketed the first iPhone and iPad, many fans camped out all night in front of the stores so they could be the first to own these new devices. The publishing world had great expectations for these new inventions – especially with hopes that mobile devices would stave off the decline of print media. Today the mood is sobering and cautious.

Surprisingly, last year saw a stagnation in the number of sales of electronic books. The sales turnover for ebooks grew by »only« 7.6 %, as compared with 60 % in the previous year. A further surprise is the rise of a strong competitor to Amazon, the online sales platform and leading e-book supplier. The so-called Tolino-Alliance – consisting of three Germany-based booksellers: Thalia, Hugendubel, and Weltbild – held a market share of nearly 45% in 2014, thus overtaking amazon.

The sale of e-books has also led to the rise of a new factor in the book world: the self-publisher, i.e. authors who sell their e-books directly, without involving a commercial publisher. In Germany there are now nearly 75,000 e-books available from self-publishers, of which 45,000 were only added within the past year. Market researchers estimate that by 2017 nearly 250,000 self-published e-books will be on the market. This is twice as many as being marketed by classical publishing houses.

Libraries will need to develop their own means of keeping their services relevant to readers, despite digitalization. Simply offering e-books is no longer enough. The New York Public Library sees their educational mandate in offering access to the Internet. This doesn't mean simply having work stations in the library, but Hotspots around the city, so that library users can have access from their homes. In this way the Internet is being made available for borrowing. Families are allowed to use it for six months at no cost.

Securing the existence of cultural programs in Germany's underdeveloped communities presents a real challenge, not only due to the intensification of demographic changes. Long-term cooperation between libraries and other local agencies dealing with cultural affairs is of key importance. There are numerous examples of such cooperative strategies in other European countries and in North America.

These are often related to theme-based partnerships. In Taal voor het Leven, in Holland, for example, a joint effort is being undertaken to help people with reading and writing disabilities. The coalition of partners includes libraries, local government, businesses, language schools, and nursing care homes. In 2013 and 2014 more than 10,000 people were helped with entry-level programs. In the U.S.A. the concept of »Local Cultural Councils« is dedicated to promoting cultural activities throughout the rural communities. In Massachusetts the councils are organized by volunteers and can apply for state funding, but establish their own priorities within the local community.

Alongside these forms of inter-institutional cooperation aimed at specific social needs, there have also been cooperative platforms which merge the services of libraries and other agencies into an integrated infrastructure. This involves creating a uniform digital access point to cultural and leisure activities in a region, and, going a step further, sometimes even merging physical venues or creating new multi-functional facilities.

The question of how to make digital media more visible in their real surroundings is an issue for libraries and bookstores alike. How can even small and affordable measures help to improve the connections between physical and digital items of the collection? How can access to online media be optimized onsite? These questions were tackled in a student project at the Stuttgart City Library.

The goal of the projects was to develop the means for arousing visitors' interest with unusual designs and to encourage them to spontaneously click and try out digital media. It wasn't necessary to make extensive changes, but simply re-design the already present tools. The laptops for public use which have been installed between the physical shelving received a new and eye-catching desktop screen that makes it easy to browse the digital collections. Bright colors and a modern grid of tiles direct the user's attention to a series of »theme libraries«, in which clearly arranged digital items on a specific topic can be readily accessed. At a short glance visitors see which portals contain digital content on a topic and are spared searching where nothing is available. By clicking on the tiles one is taken directly to the digital sources of interest. A positive side-effect of this optical design is its ease of use. Large-scale tiles enable a simple, intuitive navigation – even for library users who have difficulty reading or language barriers.

Translated by Martha Baker