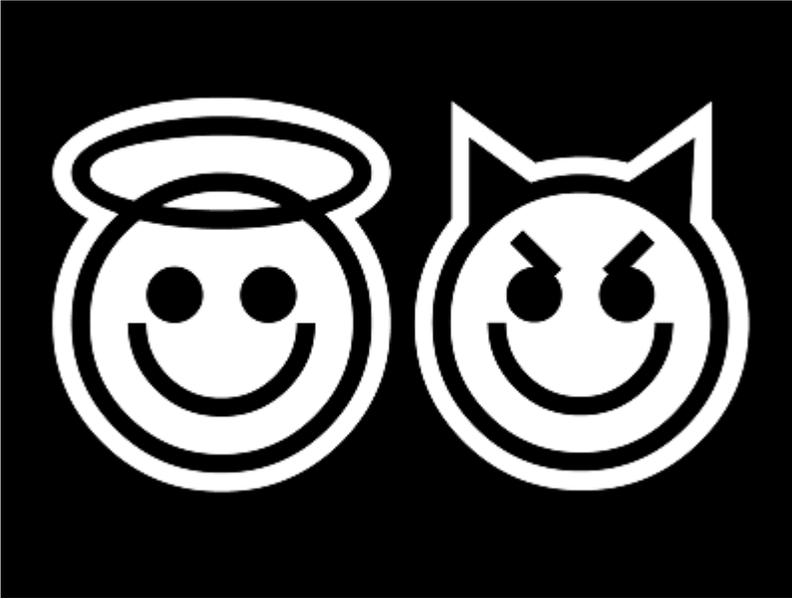


Wednesday, August 06, 2008

[What if Ebooks Were the Dominant Platform?](#)



What if Ebooks Were the Dominant Platform?

Posted by Mac Slocum

<http://toc.oreilly.com/2008/08/what-would-the-world-be-like-i.html>

I recently came across an old blog post from Harvard Business School professor Andrew McAfee that discusses the utility of the "technology flip test". McAfee writes:

At a conference years back I was sitting on a panel that was asked to talk about future of the book. As the discussion was heating up about the inevitability of the electric media, someone on the panel (I wish it had been me) proposed a flip test. He said "Let's say the world has only e-books, then someone introduces this technology called 'paper.' It's cheap, portable, lasts essentially forever, and requires no batteries. You can't write over it once it's been written on, but you buy more very cheaply. Wouldn't that technology come to dominate the market?" It's fair to say that comment changed the direction of the panel.

The ebook vs paper flip test is intriguing for a number of reasons:

It inverts the offense and defense: Ebook advocates become defenders and paper-book supporters become disruptors. Shaking off the vestiges of a default argument is always a good idea -- think of it as a "debate cleanser."

It amplifies the strengths of each format . . . initially: When I ran through the flip test on my own, I at first honed in on the cost savings of ebooks (no paper, no printing, no shipping) and the sensory aspects of print books. But further review revealed deeper complexities to this debate. And that led me to . . .

It upends assumptions: Print's dominant position in the real world causes me to challenge pro-print arguments, most notably the tactile experience overreaction that often derails discussions. But placing ebooks in the hot seat gave me a new perspective on ebook defenses. For example, if my default reading environment was electronic and networked, would I want (or need) a disconnected outlet? Would I crave solitude and a languid pace? Does the upside of ebook economics supersede the other reading/storytelling experiences I'm looking for, or would I welcome a print alternative the way I now welcome an electronic option?

What's your take on the flip test? Does inverting the argument open the discussion, or is this a diversionary trick that detracts from the issues at hand? Please share your thoughts in the comments area.

