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Citation

Barth, E. (2018). Bookswapper.DE and the Easily-Shared Paper Book, 4, 153-158. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/123158>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

BOOKSWAPPER.DE AND THE EASILY-SHARED PAPER BOOK

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The digital age and the Internet have changed the way media are shared. Media spreadability, governed by content producers as well as consumers who share and repurpose content according to their own needs, allows for content to travel in more complex and messier ways than formerly possible. Rather than increasing the spread of e-books, these digital advances have facilitated the spread of physical books. The German book sharing website bookswapper.de is one example of this. Making use of laws and customs surrounding books as objects as well as symbolic and cultural goods, the website uses an online system to spread physical books to its users, highlighting the problematic spreadability of the e-book in the digital age.

Keywords: book swapping; bookswapper.de; book circulation; e-books; media spreadability



In 'What Is the History of Books?' Robert Darnton attempts to bring order to the field of book history, which, in his opinion, had started to look 'less like a field than a tropical rain forest'.¹ With this aim, Darnton proposed a holistic model that links together the many disciplines of book studies and connects the agents in the life cycle of the book. In the model, imagined as a circuit, the book

is a traveler, moving from agent to agent through a path that goes from author to reader. Since its conception, this model has been influencing book scholars; but, as the digital age progresses, and as order gives way to disorder, Darnton's Communications Circuit begins to seem overly simplistic.² The metaphor of the circuit, 'closing, firing, connecting',³ does not always do justice to the

complex movement of digital media as they travel and spread. For this, a new metaphor is apt: dandelion seeds in the wind, floating away from the source in unpredictable patterns.

This is the metaphor used by Jenkins, Ford, and Green to explain what they call ‘media spreadability’, a term that describes digital-age media circulation as it is posted, re-posted, shared, linked to, blogged, re-blogged, and so on.⁴ The use of the term spreadable media is an alternative to the oft-used ‘viral’, which, according to the authors, places too much agency on media producers and not enough on audiences who ‘share content for their own purposes’.⁵ Instead, their understanding of modern media circulation is ‘a hybrid model’, one where a ‘mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways’ than previously possible.⁶ In the digital age, media-sharing websites that make use of this circulation model—such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram—are ubiquitous. On many of these sites, professional and amateur content is given away freely, shared with others based on interest and blown into the online breeze.

And while this hybrid model of media spreadability is not a purely digital phenomenon (informal and creative person-to-person media sharing has always been possible—just think of the mixtape), the Internet has certainly contributed to this messy, participatory media spread, although at times in surprising ways. While video and music have made the jump to digital—songs are streamed

and remixed with personal videos, and television shows are no longer confined to television sets—the e-book lags noticeably behind. Although e-books, as digital files, have the capacity to be shared infinitely, cheaply, and quickly, these potential added values are rarely exploited. The opportunities for online media spreadability, rather than enabling and increasing the spread of *digital* books, are, in fact, benefiting the *physical* book.

This contradictory situation is evinced by the existence of online book sharing websites like bookswapper.de, a German website aimed at providing readers in Germany with access to used English-language books.⁷ Nearly everything about the website’s book exchange system is digital: the organization and description of books, the coordination of swaps with people from all over the country, and the feedback for completed swaps. However, despite this streamlined online system, when it comes to the actual book exchange, things move offline. This is because the books shared on bookswapper.de are physical, not digital.

The bookswapper.de system works like this: participants that want to swap their reading material for something new register with the website and create a user profile, then upload information about the books they own but no longer want, such as the length and condition of the book, a brief plot description, and a digital photo of the cover. They wait for another user to request one of their books, and when a request is made, the owner is notified with an email containing the name and address of the requester so

the book can be sent through the mail. After the book is received, the user gets a 'token', a piece of online currency they can use to request a book from another bookswapper.de user. Hence the idea of the 'swap'.

Immediately, the disadvantages of this system become apparent. To receive books, participants must give up their online anonymity and divulge their name and home address to complete strangers on the Internet. They must find packaging, buy postage, and make a trip to the mailbox, all to send the book via "snail-mail". With an online system already in place, it seems as though swapping e-books would be far easier, and potentially safer, than swapping paper books. Yet, these disadvantages have hidden advantages; in particular, the legality and traditions of sharing physical objects, and the low rate for sending books as cultural goods through the German mail.

These advantages stem from the fact that physical books are *supposed* to spread. Designed to be portable, books are vehicles, both real and symbolic, of knowledge and culture.⁸ Books are objects, and, as objects, according to the German law, they are able to be shared with others.⁹ Acts of sharing, such as giving a book to a friend or 'lending' a cup of sugar to a neighbor, are so common that they go nearly unnoticed. The legal right of exchange of ownership is woven into

the fabric of everyday life. For book lovers and readers in Germany, this includes visiting a city's free bookshelf; purchasing second-hand books; and picking up a novel while on vacation from a hostel's take-one-leave-one shelf, to be read at the beach, and then be discarded before the journey home. These are mundane actions that have become so commonplace, that the laws to support them are rarely, if ever, consulted. Evidence of this from bookswapper.de is that the website makes no mention of the legality of exchanging physical books through the site's online system. The closest they come to addressing this is in their Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section. In reply to the question 'Do I get my books back?' the website responds: 'No, you do not lend books here but swap them for good. The swapper who requested and received one of your books then owns it'. This, apparently, is all the website feels it must say on the matter. As an object, a book is free to be shared and spread.

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But physical books are not only material objects; they also possess symbolic and cultural value. German culture has been unquestionably influenced by the book, both by what it contains and by what it represents. This is, after all, the country of Gutenberg, Luther, and the Frankfurt Book Fair. The cultural importance of the spreadability of physical books is supported in Germany by the ability to send books through the mail at a

reduced rate, of which the bookswapper.de system takes advantage. To get this low *Büchersendung* rate—one Euro for books up to 100 grams—the envelope must be clearly marked as a book and closed in a way that facilitates inspection by post office officials. The only other caveat is that nothing else may be inside the envelope besides books (or other approved printed material, such as maps).¹⁰ This method of sending books through the mail goes back to the 1950s, with earlier iterations dating back to the early 18th century.¹¹ Through changing governments and world wars, from government oversight to privatization, the cultural value of spreading books easily and cheaply through the mail has been supported in Germany. This is because, according to Rolloff, the state has an interest in spreading knowledge, and ‘the cheaper prices [for sending books] are supposed to simplify the sending of the book as a cultural good’.¹²

In making use of German laws and customs regarding books as objects, as well as cultural traditions regarding the spread of knowledge and culture through books, the bookswapper.de system gets the best out of both worlds: the ability to share their physical books legally and cheaply through the mail, while, at the same time, using a modern digital system to connect a large number of interested readers. But the bookswapper.de system also highlights the problematic spreadability of the digital book. Although it might be expected that digital technologies, especially the Internet, would bring about a shift from the sharing of physical books to the sharing of digital e-books, that has not been the case. Many websites

allow bibliophiles to congregate online in order to review, discuss, and recommend books, but sharing the content of those books remains heavily restricted. When compared to the material book, it seems as though e-books are not supposed to spread. They are *not* owned but licensed, they have an uncertain existence (as evinced by Amazon’s 1984 Kindle erasure debacle),¹³ and they are restricted by digital rights management (DRM). ‘[A] convoluted set of electronic rules put in place to protect the copyright owners’,¹⁴ DRM prevents digital books from being copied and shared, from person to person, or even from device to device.¹⁵ The e-books that do live up to their full potential as digital files, without DRM, and freely shared with the online masses, mostly exist on pirate websites. Thus, sharing these books, even if they are scanned from the physical copy sitting on your own bookshelf, is illegal.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that the book exchanges taking place through bookswapper.de resemble online file sharing, in which one file is made available to many people. For example, there is the bookswapper.de ‘current reading list’ function. When a swap is made and a user receives a book, the online listing of that book is not deleted from the website, but is instead saved in the new reader’s ‘current reading list’. When the user has read and/or wants to swap the book again, they do not have to create a new book profile. Books can thus be re-listed on the website with a simple click of a button, facilitating multiple swaps of the same book. The website acknowledges this as its aim, stating that with the ‘current reading list’, users ‘can easily relist books to offer them for

swapping (again).¹⁶ This shows that the website's intention is not for books to be swapped once and then find a permanent home on the new reader's bookshelf, but instead to be part of ongoing and continuous exchanges between many different users.¹⁷ In this way, bookswapper.de has similarities to the continuous copying and sharing of digital files; however, the bookswapper.de system of sharing physical books shields the website from any question or conversation about potentially illegal activity.

It is no wonder that in this environment, with e-books so tightly shackled, it has been questioned whether the e-book will ever be able to possess cultural and symbolic value similar to that of the material book.¹⁸ As Jenkins has noted, 'if it doesn't spread, it's dead'.¹⁹ So far, e-books have been dead; they are neither objects allowed to be shared like any other, nor valuable symbols for those who come in contact with them. Without this spreadability, which should be simple for digital media, e-books are limited in the ways they can become a

'So far, e-books have been dead; they are neither objects allowed to be shared like any other, nor valuable symbols for those who come in contact with them.'

fundamental part of their readers' lives, as the material book has been. In this way, Darnton's model remains relevant. It is a circuit of *communication*, with the book, the traveler, symbolizing the 'mediated relationships' of those involved in its spread.²⁰ We may wonder to what extent readers can commune with and through their digital e-books, but evidence—from Instagram images of reading devices posed next to steaming mugs of coffee, to scannable QR codes for out-of-copyright books on

Project Gutenberg—shows that e-books not only can be shared but, in fact, are already being shared in unexpected ways, by readers interested in spreading this medium for their own purposes. The limited spreadability of the digital book and all the cultural implications it entails may simply be part of our current transitional phase of the book: the growing pains resulting from a gradual shift to digital

media. History reminds us that physical books were once locked in chains, and what we are experiencing now might be the e-book in chains.



¹ R. Darnton, 'What Is the History of Books?', *Daedalus*, 111:3 (1982), pp. 65-83, there p. 66.
² Although it continues to be a valuable tool in the digital age, it should be noted that Darnton's model was only ever intended to be applied to the life cycle of the printed book. *Ibidem*, p. 67.

³ L. Howsam, *Old Books and New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book and Print Culture* (Toronto/ Buffalo/ London: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 31.

⁴ H. Jenkins, S. Ford & J. Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York/ London: New York University, 2013), pp. 291–292.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁷ On this, the website says: ‘For all those expats or just lovers of English books who return frustrated from flea markets where English books are always rare. For all those who don’t want to or simply cannot buy new books all the time. For all those who have run out of space to put all the books they own. For all those people there is now a place to meet and swap English books for free.’ Bookswapper.de, ‘bookswapper.de - swap English books for free’, <<https://h5.bookswapper.de/bookswap/#howitworks>> (5 February, 2018).

⁸ Books, to quote Van der Weel, ‘carry an important symbolic meaning, especially as carriers of knowledge (both religious and secular), and culture’. A. van der Weel, ‘e-Roads and i-Ways: A Sociotechnical Look at User Acceptance of E-Books’, *Logos*, 21:3 (2010), pp. 47–57, there p. 53.

⁹ According to § 903 and § 929 of the German Civil Code (BGB). Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz, ‘German Civil Code BGB’, <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_bgb/englisch_bgb.html> (10 February, 2018).

¹⁰ Description found in the Lexikon des gesamten Buchwesens Online. Brill, ‘Büchersendung - Brill Reference’, <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/lexikon-des-gesamten-buchwesens-online/buchersendung-COM_021921> (14 January, 2018).

¹¹ E. Roloff, ‘Unterwegs mit Rabatt: Die Büchersendung und ihre Regeln’, *DAS ARCHIV. Magazin für Kommunikationsgeschichte*, 4 (2013), pp. 34–37, there pp. 35–37.

¹² ‘Die günstigeren Tarife sollen als unveränderter Grundsatz den Versand des Kulturgutes Buch erleichtern’. Author’s translation. *Ibidem*, pp. 36–37.

¹³ The New York Times, ‘Amazon Erases Orwell Books From Kindle – NYTimes.com’, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/18/technology/companies/18amazon.html>> (5 February, 2018).

¹⁴ J. Gomez, *Print Is Dead: Books in Our Digital Age* (Hampshire/ New York: Macmillan, 2008), p. 122.

¹⁵ For more on DRM and its effects on consumers, see T. Gillespie, ‘Designed to “Effectively Frustrate”: Copyright, Technology and the Agency of Users’, *New Media & Society*, 8:4 (2006), pp. 651–669.

¹⁶ Bookswapper.de, ‘Bookswapper FAQ - all about tokens books how to swap books and use this site’, <<https://h5.bookswapper.de/faq/>> (1 February, 2018).

¹⁷ As of January 2018, the number of swappable books on the website was over 1,600, with many of these books likely having been swapped many times over.

¹⁸ Van der Weel, ‘e-Roads and i-Ways’, p. 54.

¹⁹ Henry Jenkins, ‘If It Doesn’t Spread, It’s Dead (Part Three: The Gift Economy and Commodity Culture) — Henry Jenkins’, <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p.2.html> (5 February, 2018).

²⁰ Howsam, *Old Books and New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book and Print Culture*, p. 31.