



Businessday, Nigeria – 16 March 2010

The digital universe is already here

By K Jayshankar



The launch of the iPad last month sent waves of excitement around the globe. Trust Steve Jobs to change the game! He did it before with the iPod Touch and the iPhone and he has once again pulled a rabbit from his magical & innovative hat! With this new launch he has revived the debate - is paper dead? And, has 'the age of Tablets' (as Fortune magazine calls it) dawned?

One of the hottest gifts last Christmas in America was the Kindle. It was first launched about three years ago. While the early adapters warmed up to it, it took a while for others to get used to the idea of reading from a machine. One can argue that the ubiquitous laptop and the cell phone should have made all of us used to the digital letter. Truth be told, a large number of bookworms still refuse to get tempted straight away by Amazon's offerings.

To them nothing equates with the smell and feel of paper and clearly they have decided that while you could cuddle with a book, a cold machine was just not the same.

But you cannot stop progress, can you? The tide is expected to turn this year and it is anticipated that Steve Jobs will open the flood gates, as in the past he has always provided the inflection point for new technology. Over a decade ago Nicholas Negroponte in his seminal work, 'Being Digital' spoke about the emerging world. He spoke about a new generation growing up in a world where electronic items are not novel to them. That world has arrived. While we all may today be digital citizens, Marc Prensky noted the emergence of the first generation, which he called 'digital natives'. These are our children whose fingers magically and playfully run over the keypad of a cell phone texting in a flash while many of us older denizens flounder with clumsy fingers desperately tapping on the cell phone one letter at a time. That is because we are the 'digital immigrants' who have moved into this world, some rather reluctantly, as the landscape evolved from the older familiar world. Prensky claimed that the new generation 'think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors', even going to the extent of stating that their 'brains have physically changed - and are different from ours - as a result of how they grew up!' Looking at today's children, who seem to relate better with an electronic game than with parents, this prediction may well be valid!

We, the immigrants, will survive but what of the 'digital illiterate'? Yes, we still have a number of them. Succour for them is at hand, thanks mainly to the ubiquitous cell phone.

The miracle of wireless technology has enabled many societies to leap frog from a world of no communication to cell phones which operate on 3G! This singular achievement has transformed the world as we know it. For those who in the past were deprived of opportunities and had an agonizing wait for incremental progress on the growth graph, the advent of three new technologies have not just been liberating but have, in some instances, provided a springboard to leapfrog into the future. I refer to the internet, satellite television & cellular telephone service. The radical societal transformation that these three combined have produced has propelled some of the developing nations into a fast-forward mode to the extent that countries like China, India, and some others in Eastern Europe & Africa, today possess some of the cheapest technological services, thereby fueling innovation.

Nicholas Negroponte's team at MIT's Media Lab also launched a global initiative with fan-fare a few years ago. This was the OLPC - one laptop per child - with the goal of creating a \$100 laptop focused on meeting the challenge of teaching to the forgotten masses and equipping the emerging generation of children with a weapon that will enable them to create a space for themselves in the brave new digital world that is fast overtaking everything.

While the project faces many critical queries from its skeptics, it has also found enthusiastic supporters in some national leaders and NGOs. The project is still ongoing and while it is taking time, it is worth keeping track of it because it promises a solution which will empower the forgotten millions in developing economies.

In this context, the e-reader market is expected to grow. The Kindle (and other e-readers, like Barnes & Noble Nook, and the Sony Reader), now faces competition from the iPad. With the advent of color readers, the market will take wings further, equivalent to the transformation that color television achieved over Black & White television. Already the newspaper and magazine world has taken preparatory steps to feed into this new channel that is open to them because the wireless media of the e-readers enables seamless delivery of their products right to the readers' hands. However, like with every new electronic device, it takes some learning before one can adapt to the Kindle and its kin, as I can personally testify. Also, like in all electronic products when competition aggressively brings prices to a more affordable level, the demand from emerging markets will be more visible.

But look at the opportunity that this medium offers to tomorrow's school children who will not have to carry a bag load of heavy books to class (so typical in Asian and African schools). Instead, they will carry e-readers, simple laptops/tablets and study in classrooms where digital feed from a satellite will make even the dullest subject come alive in High Definition and in 3D! An improbable dream? Look around, and you will find that a new digital world has begun to dawn. Makes you want to be a student again, isn't it!