SPEED READING

Technology is playing a big part in getting books into the hands of South African children

Words Eugene Yiga @eugeneyiga

THE MISSION OF NON-PROFIT organisation Book Dash is to make sure every child in South Africa owns 100 books by the age of five. To achieve this, it gathers volunteer creative professionals to craft new African storybooks that anyone can read, download, translate, print, and share for free.

The library includes electronic books in PDF format to be read on a screen, as well as PDFs for printing out, and audiobooks. The books can also be read using the Book Dash app on Android.

Tech spoke to Book Dash co-founder Arthur Attwell to get the whole story.

WHAT WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS INITIATIVE?

Book Dash is a careful mix of other people's brilliant ideas. Our name is also a nod to organisations such as Book Sprints, whose founders first showed me that it was possible to compress a high-quality publishing process into a matter of hours.

At the heart of what we do are the people who create the books: These are the professional writers, illustrators and editors who pour their energy into our events. They are selected from a large number of applicants based on their talent, experience, and the diversity they bring to book creation.

HOW DO YOU MAKE THE BOOKS?

Traditional publishing processes get dragged out by inefficient systems, bad workflow and admin, and a lack of urgency and common purpose.

At a Book Dash event, about 50 creative professionals – writers, illustrators, designers and editors – volunteer to create new children's books. They are all selected from the numerous applications that we receive. Each team creates a book in one intense day. Anyone can download, print and share these books.

We also work with funders and partners to do big print runs of books together. We can print out high-quality books for just R10 a copy. Then, we work with many non-profits around the country, and they give the books to the children.

WHAT TECHNOLOGY DO YOU USE?

Our volunteers use Adobe InDesign, the industry standard software for book production. We provide an InDesign template with fonts and guidelines. Many of the illustrators use digital tools such as Photoshop, Wacom tablets and iPads. We use Dropbox to put the books online for the public, and for our printers to download. The new books are also accessible through the Book Dash Android app, which has had more than 50 000 downloads.

WHAT CHALLENGES ARE YOU FACING?

There is incredible progress and innovation in certain parts of the publishing industry, and desperately poor thinking and stagnation in others. We get a lot of volunteers and encouragement from some people in the publishing industry, but one thing is clear: Industries don't solve social crises such as the lack of books in impoverished homes and schools, because the solutions require sharing, and the businesses are inherently selfish.

Progress towards distributing books to scale is pretty slow. Today, publishers think that printing 5 000 copies is a lot, so printing 100 000 copies seems virtually unthinkable. Funders start thinking that the only way to get to scale is using new technology. The obsession to solve this problem by building an app then crowds out simple solutions in printing and physical distribution that would have real, immediate impact for the same price.



Books created by Book Dash are available through apps and the websites of other organisations around the world.

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WHAT OPPORTUNITIES ARE YOU SEEING?

I think we are seeing a massive growth in book sales under black South Africans, as we see more books by and about black South Africans. It is astonishing that it has taken this long, but it is finally happening. And it's a snowball: The more books like this exist, the more people will publish them – our impact will be greater if we are a tiny part of that snowball.

Also, remember that anyone can download, print, and sell our books. So, for any enterprising bookseller, our catalogue presents a massive opportunity. Anyone who can put more cheap, African books out in the world increases the impact we want to have.

WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS?

Our priority is to see more books printed and given away; that's the most important growth indicator for us. This is all about developing our funding partnerships, and getting funders to pool their money for big collaborative print runs.

Occasionally, someone will see fit to criticise us for giving away free books. I am quick to call that out as profoundly unjust, and ultimately self-defeating. Free children's books today are the key to creating new book buyers for the future.







BOOK SMART

600 MILLION BOOKS

NEEDED TO GIVE EVERY SA CHILD **100 BOOKS BY AGE FIVE**

R6 BILLION

WHAT IT WOULD COST, ***AT R10 PER BOOK***

R213.7 BILLION

SPENT ON BASIC EDUCATION IN SA EVERY YEAR

400 VOLUNTEERS

IN NINE BOOK-MAKING EVENTS SO FAR

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