Who reads books anymore? Digital publishing, Kindle, the iPad, and the Web are killing the publishing star. Paper is old hat and we’re expected to respect that it’s in ever shorter supply.

But none of that is really true. Sustainable forests restock our paper needs. The Kindle is unlikely to kill the entire publishing industry. Nor has the web. In fact, each year the stats come out there are more pages printed than ever before. The same trend holds true in book publishing. About 1.7 billion trade books are sold each year. That’s about 500 billion offset pages. Professional books are essentially required reading for people in various professions and trades, including business, law and medicine. They can carry a high retail value and about 170 million volumes are sold each year. University presses are non-profit book publishers who keep low-demand yet intellectually significant books in print. Millions of books are sold through them each year.

What sustains these markets and makes them profitable? Digital printing technologies have changed the way printers operate. It goes without saying that not all books are going to migrate to a digital printing workflow and digital printing equipment. Offset remains the best option for many books that sell in large quantities and that are printed in long runs. But today, many books don’t fall into that category.

Digital is an ideal complement to offset when it comes to book production. There’s a sweet spot where books make more sense on a digital press. It lies right where run lengths are short for any number of reasons. Virtual bookstores sell obscure titles in quantities as small as one. Not a job for offset and warehousing. Textbooks have become more specialised as the country’s different educational institutions tailor their content. The sheer number of textbooks may not be on the increase, but there are more unique titles, each requiring smaller quantities. This is when lower volume sales of a book can mean very significant profits.

Trade books and manuals often have high demand in their initial publication period, but significantly reduced demand after just a few months. After the first release, frequent changes can take place with manuals and reprints are often required in smaller quantities for both manuals and trade books. Effective manuals and instruction books must include high-quality, clear images and diagrams. Fast-paced changes in technology require that trade books, manuals, and instruction book printers react quickly to implement changes. Traditional offset printing makes this an expensive prospect, but digital printing is a perfect fit.

Paul Haglich says electronic publishing hasn’t proven a threat to paper just yet