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Equality in e-book access: e-book reading devices in the public library

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Abstract

As e-book reading devices continue to improve and more titles become available, public libraries are collaborating with Web-based e-book providers to integrate this new format into their catalogs and distribute electronic content to patrons while at the same time protecting copyrights. E-books present a potential cost savings, and public libraries should not fail to embrace this technology, but strategies should be developed to ensure patrons have equal access to this digital information. Public libraries should make devices available to patrons in order to combat exclusivity and to ensure that e-books do not serve to deepen the digital divide.

Introduction

Far from causing a revolution in reading, e-books are nevertheless appearing more frequently in the catalogs of public libraries. A still-maturing technology, e-books have evolved from the hype of the 1990s to the subsequent near-demise in 2001, to a

recent resurgence. The growing interest of public libraries is intrinsically linked to improvements in the e-book reading devices (ERDs) themselves. Every model of e-book integration in public libraries has its advantages and disadvantages, but no matter which is adopted it is unethical to divorce e-book content from the technology necessary to access it. Access to e-books requires access to ERDs. To separate the two is to promote inequitable access and an exclusivity that disenfranchises patrons according to race, age, and income.

The Evolution of E-Books: An Idea Ahead of its Technology

Promising “huge libraries of electronic books, available to everyone, everywhere, all the time” (Coyle, 2003, p. 8), the e-book hype of the 1990s culminated with the publication of Stephen King’s *Ride the Bullet* in 2000. Though the novel was a relative failure, e-book hype continued as marketing firms predicted a multi-billion dollar marketplace for e-books (Lynch, 2001). Public libraries, however, were unsure how to react to the rapidly evolving technology. “Organized around the acquisition and management of physical items” (Ormes, n.d., p. 1), they were faced with a format that did not fit into their model. Pace (2005) notes that most libraries took a “second mouse gets the cheese approach” to e-books, letting those “on the cutting edge bleed a little” from their experiments (p. 30). When the dot-com bubble burst in

2001, e-books were largely forgotten by a public suspicious of Internet hype, and their promise put on the back burner by libraries short on public funding.

Much has been written about the initial failure of e-books, the general consensus being that it was an idea ahead of its technology, plagued by device limitations, software incompatibilities, reader skepticism, and an unfortunate economic climate. Coyle (2003) maintains that the dominant e-book reading devices (ERDs) of the time were awkward attempts to look like books, and despite concerted attempts to market the devices, the public was unimpressed (p. 9). Most people failed to see the point of reading a book on a screen (Lynch, 2001, p. 3). Lichtenberg (2001) believes that e-book publishers should have provided free ERDs to public libraries to familiarize readers with this new format (p. 24). Publishers also had serious doubts about e-books; Bell (2005) attributes publishers' reluctance to invest much capital in e-book content to the devices themselves. Not "book-like enough," too expensive, and suffering from their own proprietary nature, they inspired little confidence, and only a tiny selection of titles was initially made available (p. 32).

There has always been a close link between e-books and e-book reading devices. Ormes (n.d.) notes that ERDs themselves were sometimes called e-books (p. 1). As the technology has evolved, the devices have gotten lighter, easier on the eyes, and more compatible across platforms. With softer lines and leather covers, many ERDs now come close to resembling a printed book. They allow users to conveniently store, organize, and access large amounts of e-content, and provide searching, highlighting, and bookmarking functionality. Downloading content from a PC is performed via USB or infrared ports. PDA functionality such as calendars and address books is commonly available. Ranging in cost from \$150-\$500, the devices are still somewhat costly; however, improvements

have once again made e-book publishing an attractive option. Coyle (2003) notes that in the relatively stagnant market of publishing, e-book development is one of the few growth areas. Rogers (2004) notes that just a few years ago there were no copyrighted e-books, while today, there are over one million copyrighted titles available.



The I-Rex Iliad, today's state of the art ERD

Photo courtesy of eReaderOutfitters
www.eReaderOutfitters.com

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E-books in the Public Library: Common Operating Models

Public libraries have begun to respond to the challenge of e-books. Mitchell (2005) notes that more than half of the public libraries in mid- to large-sized cities now carry e-books. Datema (2006) reports that e-book circulation in the New York Public Library system averages around 400 titles per day. Before considering how public libraries are integrating e-books into their collections, it is important to understand just what an e-book is.

Although some purists still see e-books as texts created exclusively for the e-book

format, having no previous incarnation (Gall, 2005), “e-books” in the context of the public library also includes electronic versions of printed books, circulated through a proprietary website, accessed by a patron’s library card or barcode, and read on a device such as a dedicated e-book reader, a PDA, a tablet PC, or a generic PC. Software programs such as Adobe Reader and Microsoft Reader protect copyrights by ensuring that only small portions of the text can be copied. Printing is generally not allowed. Full-text search capability is built into the software, as are annotating functions and dictionaries.

Explaining why public libraries are interested in e-books, Rogers (2004) lists their many advantages, including a “significant saving of physical space, efficiency (fewer staff involved), permanency (e-books never get lost or stolen), and 24/7 availability” (p. 24). Public libraries’ collections can quickly grow if e-books are adopted, and there are many different licensing options that can be tailored to a library’s needs. Purchase on demand is one such option—once the terms are set up with a provider, new titles can be added to a collection whenever a patron selects an e-book from its website. Overdue issues cease to exist, since software controls the length of check-out by making the content unavailable. Distribution issues are simplified for rural community libraries, as content can be distributed over the Web from a centralized repository. Theoretically, issues of unequal access between ‘good’ branch libraries in rich neighborhoods and ‘bad’ branch libraries in poorer neighborhoods should diminish (Rubin, 2004), since all patrons are selecting from the same centralized website.

In a survey of the various Internet e-book providers that market to public libraries, Rosenblatt (2004) discusses three that predominate. Founded in 1998, and acquired by OCLC in 2002, netLibrary is the oldest provider, offering digital access primarily to books in the public domain.

Developed with research and reference in mind, netLibrary has a broad collection that is especially appealing to academic libraries. Accessed from the library or from home, it has check-out periods in hours, and requires that the patron maintain continuous connection to its website. OverDrive, a Microsoft partner, resembles an Internet storefront. It uses Microsoft reader, Adobe, and DRM (digital rights management), and has a growing list of public libraries as customers. With check-out periods of several weeks, it provides for cover-to-cover reading by downloading content to patrons’ devices. Founded in 1999, ebrary focuses on professional topics including business, careers, computers, education, and the humanities. An e-book digital reference library, ebrary has sophisticated search and annotation capabilities, and allows its users to seamlessly cross-reference data and look up bibliographical information.

Certain providers work better with specific reading devices. OverDrive is more suitable for use with a dedicated ERD or tablet PC. Libraries that use OverDrive commonly include a statement similar to the following on their e-books FAQ page: “Please note that digital books can be enjoyed at home, at work, or when you travel, but are generally not for use on the computers in your library” (Maryland’s Digital e-Library Consortium, n.d., ¶ 4). Research-oriented providers such as netLibrary and ebrary require continuous Web connection and can be used on more traditional desktops or laptops; however, they also require a fast Internet connection and more equipment time than is generally allotted at most public libraries.

E-books and Issues of Equitable Access

One of the fundamental characteristics of an e-book is its reliance on a device, and in the public library, this device-dependence puts a price tag on information that is supposed

to be free. Few library patrons own ERDs or tablet PCs, and many have no clear idea of what an e-book is. Spending money on a device to read a book on a screen is not an idea that appeals to them.

The most obvious solution would be for public libraries to loan out ERDs. Robin Bryan (2001) describes a successful pilot project at the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (N.C.) which began to loan out Rocket e-book Readers in July 2000. Available in five genres—mystery, romance, science fiction, teen, and general interest—the ERDs came pre-loaded with up to 100 titles, circumventing the need for a Web-based provider such as OverDrive. Patrons, who were responsible for any loss or damage to the devices, were able to place holds on the ERDs and check them out for up to 21 days. The library's website provided an online tour of the Rocket e-book reader that introduced novice users to the device's functionalities.



Four of the original e-book reading devices.

Photo courtesy of Susan Gibbons

Such success stories are rare, however, and few libraries currently loan out ERDs. Rogers & Oder (2003) quote Patricia Lowery, head of Cleveland Public Library's technical services, on the library's decision to use OverDrive, but not to loan out ERDs:

"We're not in the device business. We're going to be in the content business" (p. 18). At the heart of this reluctance to embrace ERD technology is cost: buying, maintaining, and loaning out devices appears to negate any promised savings. E-book technology is still immature, and libraries hesitate to spend precious funds on devices that can quickly become obsolete.

The trend away from lending ERDs creates a barrier between some patrons and information they seek, fostering what Rutenbeck (2000) calls "exclusivity" by separating the "digital haves" from the "digital have-nots" (p. 32). Rubin (2004) notes that "librarians support fundamental democratic values by emphasizing equality of access to knowledge" (p. 467). By their very nature, e-books challenge equitable access: there is little equality in the e-book reading experiences of two patrons, one sitting at home in a comfortable chair, connecting wirelessly from an expensive tablet PC, while the other reads an e-book on a public library PC under a 30-minute time restraint. Some might argue that a patron without access to an ERD could instead check out the paper version of a book. While sometimes a valid alternative, this different-but-equal-access argument only promotes exclusivity and stifles any opportunity to experience the advantages of this new technology.

As public libraries add e-books to their catalogs and streamline their websites so that downloads are seamless for patrons with appropriate devices, they also need to develop strategies to ensure that e-books are accessible to everyone. Librarians need to introduce this new technology to patrons who are unfamiliar with its use and conduct training sessions to encourage otherwise skeptical users to give e-books a test drive. Libraries that have adopted netLibrary or ebrary need to provide more PC dedicated to e-research with longer time allowances for patrons. Libraries with OverDrive need to make ERDs available for use inside the library, and if funding is available, pilot

programs should be initiated that allow patrons to load content onto ERDs and check them out as they would any other book in the library. Follow-up surveys should be conducted to measure patron interest and satisfaction. Public libraries need to review new e-book providers and re-evaluate the most economical licensing options. Perhaps, as done by the Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, many popular titles should be bought outright and loaded onto genre ERDs, thereby circumventing the need for an e-book provider like OverDrive. Public libraries need to appeal to community leaders, digital advocates, and corporations to help support and sustain these pilot programs. Finally, public librarians need to ensure that e-book title offerings are diverse, and do not perpetuate a cycle of exclusivity.

If public libraries are sincere about embracing the potential of e-books, they must ensure that e-books can be accessed by all patrons by making ERDs available for check-out. By showcasing e-book functionality, public libraries can accelerate patron interest and acceptance. Advances in technology continue to dramatically alter the operating models of public libraries, and integrating them will always be a balancing act when issues of equitable access are juxtaposed with the public library's struggle to stay relevant in an increasingly digital world; however, equitable access should never be viewed as an outdated ideal.

According to a 2004 report conducted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the ALA, public libraries play a key role in bridging the digital divide—"the disparity in technology usage, resulting from a lack of access, skills, or interest in using technology" (p. 4)—and that role has only revitalized their community stature. According to a Marist College study (2003), Americans feel that one of the three most important services the public library can provide is free computer usage. Fourteen million people regularly use public libraries for their digital needs (U.S. Department of

Commerce, 2002) and as more collections move toward digital and demand increases, it is surely a step backward for public libraries to separate e-book content from the technology needed to access it.

Conclusion

Although they represent a small part of the collection of any given public library, e-books have the potential to save space and money, and the literature cited here clearly suggests they will only become more prevalent in the future. But as currently offered by most public libraries, e-books are not for everyone. For many patrons, e-book technology may be confusing, mysterious, and not worth learning about. Other patrons may be interested, but for a variety of reasons do not have access to the technology necessary to read an e-book. Librarians have a long history of helping patrons learn about and use new technologies, and it is in the public library's interest to have them showcase this new way of reading and highlight the convenience of having large amounts of searchable, digital text available for free. However, patrons can only be convinced by hands-on exposure.

As information formats continue to change, the public library needs to rapidly adapt in order to remain relevant. But in its race to keep up with technology, it should not abandon the ideals of equitable access. The integration of e-books into a library's collection continues to present a unique challenge to today's public library. To adopt e-book content and not provide access to its hardware component is equivalent to placing a price on information. Public libraries need to make e-book reading devices available to patrons interested in this new way of accessing information. To do less only serves to deepen the digital divide that already separates readership by age, race, and income.

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Author's Bio

In his second year at the School of Library and Information Studies at Queens College, Scott Voth is interested in digital libraries. He currently works as a software developer for a telecommunications firm and hopes to use his background in technology to help develop and maintain websites for an academic library.