Selecting and Acquiring eBooks: So Many Choices, So Many Processes

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Introduction

eBooks offer a variety of purchase models, from annual subscriptions to title-by-title purchases with annual access fees. Each of these models requires a different process for selecting and acquiring eBooks. This article will present a brief overview of the purchase models offered by popular academic library eBook vendors, including ebrary, netLibrary, EBook Library (EBL), Knovel, Safari and Books 24x7. Then, appropriate collection development and acquisitions processes for the various purchase models will be discussed. The practices discussed are applicable to most types of eBook purchases, regardless of vendor. The article will focus on Web-based eBook content and will not discuss portable eBook reading devices.

Overview of Purchase Models

netLibrary, the trailblazer in the eBook market, has stood by its original purchase models, which are based upon title-by-title selection. Much to the chagrin of librarians, it has stuck to its book-one user access model, which duplicates the disadvantages of print book circulation. netLibrary offers two primary purchase models: libraries can subscribe to an eBook by paying the list price of the book, plus an annual access fee of 15% of the list price; or libraries can “own” it by paying the list price plus a one-time access fee of 55% of the list price. netLibrary has also worked collaboratively with publishers over the years to experiment with new purchase models. Most notably, it promoted an IT collection in 2004 that offered subscription-based pricing and simultaneous access by multiple users. The experiment was unsuccessful and netLibrary’s original purchase models have remained in place for its standard collection. It continues to develop special promotions, usually in collaboration with a single publisher, that feature new purchase and access models.

Although ebrary is often thought of as an eBook provider, ebrary CEO Christopher Wn Amsterdam asserts that ebrary has never been in the eBook business; that ebrary offers much more than just eBooks. It licenses both its aggregated content and its technology platform. ebrary offers annual subscriptions to its databases that are priced according to libraries’ FTE and allow for simultaneous access by multiple users. Various subscription packages are available; libraries can purchase a subscription to the Academic Complete collection or to various subject subsets. Collections from single publishers such as Datamonitor and D&B are also available. ebrary does not currently offer title-by-title selection; however, the company is planning a major announcement in January 2005 about its plans to offer a virtual library portal, which will most likely change or expand its purchase and access models.

eBook Library (EBL), the newest entrant into the eBook marketplace, has worked closely with librarians and publishers in hopes of creating eBook products and services that improve upon those offered by existing vendors. EBL’s initial content focus was upon science, technology and medicine (STM) eBooks, but its collection is rapidly expanding into other subject areas, including the social sciences and humanities. EBL’s eBooks can be used in reserves and course packs, and can be used simultaneously by multiple users through its non-linear lending model. EBL allows libraries to purchase the eBook content and the reading platform separately. Its titles are purchased individually, and can be purchased directly from EBL or through Blackwell Collection Manager in the US, and Dawson’s in the UK. eBook title pricing is based upon the list price, but is set by the publisher, and any titles that a library purchases are owned in perpetuity. The eBook platform currently costs $5,000, or $6,000 if paid in increments. After purchasing the lending platform, libraries must pay an annual hosting fee after a one-year grace period. EBL also offers a “short-term circulation” option, which can be thought of as a book rental. Libraries may consider this option as an alternative to Interlibrary Loan. The cost increases according to the length of the circulation period, which can range from one day to four weeks. Libraries utilizing short-term circulation do not have to pay for the lending platform, but instead pay an access fee of 15% of list price for each title. A handful of other library eBook vendors are worth mentioning here. Knovel (STM), Safari (IT) and Books 24x7 (IT and Business) have cultivated eBook collections that tend to have a narrow but deep subject focus. Knovel and Books 24x7 offer subscriptions to their databases of eBook content priced according to the collection(s) purchased and the number of simultaneous users. Safari has a unique title-by-title purchase plan that is based upon “slots” and the number of desired simultaneous users. A library purchases a number of slots, and each eBook in the Safari collection fills up between one and three slots, with most filling one slot. The library then selects titles to fill the purchased slots. A given eBook may remain in the collection for 30 days, but after that point, it can be swapped out for a different title. Thus, the eBook collection can be kept current and relevant without purchasing new titles.

Knovel stands out as a vendor that has created an innovative product that transcends other current eBook offerings. Knovel’s eBook database features innovative search tools and an array of other complementary interactive tools that facilitate the research process.

An increasing number of publishers, including Elsevier, Kluwer, Oxford University Press, Gale and Wiley, sell and host eBooks directly; some of these also have partnered with eBook distributors such as netLibrary, ebrary and EBL. Each offers a slightly different eBook purchase model, but all tend to bundle eBook titles in some way, usually as subject or reference collections. For these providers, title bundling is the most cost-effective way to sell and provide access to eBooks, and most publishers provide direct access to these bundled eBook collections via annual subscriptions.

eBook Subject Areas

The current selection of eBooks from the large distributors such as netLibrary, ebrary and EBL spans most subject areas but is nevertheless concentrated most heavily in science, technology, medicine (STM), business and reference. This is due in part to publishers’ initial focus on preparing eBook content that had a broad user base and thus high sales potential. However, in response to libraries’ requests, these distributors have worked to acquire quality content in new subject areas such as education, sociology, history and literature.

There are also several new eBook initiatives in the humanities, most notably Early English Books Online, Early American Imprints, Gutenrberg-e and the ACLS History eBook Project, that are very different from existing eBook offerings, both in their content and in their purchase models. It is likely that similar initiatives will emerge, tailored to particular disciplines. This will complicate eBook purchasing processes even further.

Title-by-Title eBook Purchases

netLibrary, ebrary and EBL have partnered with Blackwell Book Services to integrate eBooks into Blackwell’s Collection Manager, its online collection development and acquisitions system. The integration of eBooks into Collection Manager allows librarians the ability to quickly see when both eBook and print book versions are available. Integrating the title-by-title eBook selection process into a collection development ordering interface can also help librarians ensure that any duplication of eBooks and print books is intentional.

At the time of publication, netLibrary and Blackwell’s had severed their relationship due to sales restrictions placed on Blackwell’s, and netLibrary titles were slated to be removed from Collection Manager. netLibrary eBooks are still available through TitleWave II, Baker & Taylor’s online ordering interface. Although ebrary does not currently offer title-by-title purchasing, it does offer a “preview” tool that enables Blackwell’s customers to look at the full-text of eBooks with the goal of generating interest in its bundled collections. EBL just announced its partnership with Blackwell in mid-2004, and the titles are currently being

continued on page 28
Selecting and Acquiring eBooks:
from page 26

loaded into Collection Manager. Libraries purchasing EBL titles in Collection Manager will have consolidated invoicing through Blackwell’s. Blackwell’s is also beginning to work directly with publishers to add their eBooks to Collection Manager.

In reality, eBooks are often released to eBook vendors after the print counterpart has been published, thus reducing the utility of these integration efforts. More publishers are beginning to publish eBooks and print books simultaneously, but they still may place an embargo period on eBooks sold through distributors, similar to the process of embargoing current issues of e-journals in aggregated databases. Both Blackwell’s and EBL have been working collaboratively with publishers to find mutually beneficial arrangements that facilitate the early release of eBooks.

netLibrary has developed two of its own eBook ordering tools, TitleSelect and TitleDirect. TitleSelect is simply an online ordering interface for netLibrary’s catalog of more than 70,000 eBooks, journal titles and other materials. Lists of titles can be shared among librarians before submitting an order. TitleDirect is a profiling tool that allows librarians to create eBook profiles based on subject areas, publishers and publication dates. Lists of new content matching the profile are emailed at desired intervals (every 30, 60 or 90 days). Although these tools aid librarians in navigating netLibrary’s large collection, they require a separate process for eBook selection, which can be very time-consuming.

Subscription-based eBook Purchases

eBook distributors such as ebrary and EBL offer packages of eBooks in databases with annual subscriptions, creating a selection and acquisitions process very similar to that employed for aggregated e-journal databases (i.e., those provided by EBSCOhost and Gale InfoTrac). Many libraries purchase subscriptions to these eBook databases using serials funds and reevaluate the subscription each year. The utility and convenience of these eBook databases may outweigh the concern that eBook titles within the database are duplicates of titles in the library’s print collection. Access to a collection of content that is constantly being refreshed may be the larger priority.

A growing trend among eBook vendors is to offer eBooks as part of mixed-format databases of e-content. Some vendors such as Gale and Elsevier are creating mixed-format databases that contain eBooks, e-journals, white papers and conference proceedings. ebrary’s Academic Complete collection contains maps, sheet music, journals and reports, and netLibrary has subtly changed several occurrences of the word “eBook” to “eContent” on its search interface. As mentioned previously, ebrary will be making a major announcement in January 2005, about a new development that will enable libraries to create virtual library portals of e-content. The goal in amassing a focused pool of e-content with a common search interface is to create a tool that facilitates a more seamless research experience. It is clear that the eBook marketplace will continue to change and expand at a fast pace, offering libraries new purchase models that will further complicate selection and acquisition processes.

The Cost of eBooks

Although eBook vendors are exploring new purchase models, eBooks can still deliver sticker shock. Is the cost justified by user needs and benefits such as full-text searching and anytime/anywhere access? eBooks purchased at the title level usually carry an annual access fee, and PTE-based subscriptions can be very expensive for medium to large libraries. On the other hand, eBooks can be easily and quickly made available to users, MARC records are often provided at no cost, and eBooks do not require shelf space.

Libraries have realized significant cost savings by participating in consortial eBook purchases. Consortial purchasing can work very well for subscription-based, bundled eBook packages. However, libraries participating in a shared collection built at the title level (such as netLibrary) may experience frustration at their reduced ability to tailor the collection to their own user community, and the process of building the collection can be a time-consuming effort.

Considerations for eBook Selection

Fortunately, librarians are beginning to understand more about how patrons use eBooks. Usage statistics show that eBooks are being adopted at an increasing rate. As all types of reorders encounter them in the online catalog and on the Internet, the demand has increased. Students appreciate the convenience of being able to access eBooks from their homes at all hours, while professors want the ability to include links to eBooks in course packs and use them in course reserves in the place of or in conjunction with a print copy.

Some important evaluation criteria should be considered in both title-by-title selection of eBooks and evaluation of bundled eBook packages:

• User Expectations: It is important to acquire eBook collection(s) that best serve your users’ needs. Do you have a distance education program(s) to support? Does the faculty on your campus want to be able to use eBooks for reserve, to link them in course packs, or integrate them into Web instruction software such as Blackboard and WebCT? It is important to note that eBook vendors may limit or restrict these types of use.

continued on page 30

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
Selecting and Acquiring eBooks:
from page 28

- **Currency:** How important is currency to each discipline? If currency is important, would an annual subscription to a database of constantly updated content be most appropriate? If currency is not important, would a collection of selected titles with long-term or perpetual access be better?

- **Long-Term Access and Archiving:** If an eBook is being purchased in place of a print copy, what are the ongoing costs for long-term or "perpetual" access? Do the vendors providing this type of access also provide archiving? If so, what type, and how much does it cost?

Some more specific questions to consider in the selection of eBooks include:

- **Searchability:** Is the search page well-organized, making the search options clear? Does the search engine increase users' potential for success by suggesting alternative spellings, performing case sensitive searches, etc.? Are search tips included on the search screen? Can users browse subject areas to find relevant content?

- **Ease of Use:** Is the interface intuitive, allowing users to easily navigate to relevant content? Once a user is in an eBook, is it easy to navigate back to the results list? Is it clear how to print, copy and use tools such as full-text searching? Is the "help" section useful and easy to use?

- **Functionality:** Does the eBook interface offer tools that transcend the print book? Most eBooks feature full-text searching, but are other features such as highlighting, linked tables of contents and indexes, and embedded dictionaries included?

- **MARC Records:** Catalog integration can dramatically increase discovery of a library's eBooks. Are MARC records available from the vendor? Are they high-quality? Are they free?

- **Usage Statistics:** Most vendors now provide usage statistics to library customers. What level of detail do these statistics provide, and are they compliant with current standards such as I-ColC? Are the usage statistics easy to access? Can they be delivered to customers by email at regular intervals?

- **Access Limits:** Does the vendor place limits on printing and copying and pasting? Are these limits acceptable?

- **Content:** Is the vendor limited in its ability to provide newly-published titles in eBook format? Are the eBooks missing content, including illustrations, due to rights restrictions?

**Conclusion**

As the very definition of an eBook continues to evolve, libraries have a myriad of purchase models, access models and content collections to choose from. With so many different types of products available, the processes of selecting an eBook vendor and selecting and acquiring content can vary widely. However, librarians can evaluate these resources using a common set of criteria. As the eBook marketplace continues to evolve, librarians will have to continue to refine selection and acquisitions processes and take advantage of new tools that can help streamline these processes.

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**Bibliography**


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**A Success Model for eBooks**

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Abstract: This case study on OECD's eBooks library, *SourceOECD*, explains how the concept was developed and evolved, provides some statistics, and describes some of the problems and pitfalls faced and improvements planned. Launched in 2000, *SourceOECD* was an early (perhaps the first) attempt by a publisher to offer all its books on an annual, all-you-can-eat subscription model. Four years later; the model has shown itself to be robust and sustainable. More than 350 institutions worldwide now choose to subscribe, and a number of additional publishers have launched services modeled on *SourceOECD*.

**Introduction**

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is an international organization that publishes 150-200 books each year on economics and public policy in English and in French. These books include analytical reports, conference proceedings, reference books, and a large number of annual statistical reports and policy reviews/outlooks covering such subject areas as economics, agriculture, development, education, employment, energy, financial affairs, industry, public management, science and technology, social affairs, and transportation. Many contain authoritative cross-country statistics and policy information not available in comparable form elsewhere.

As with many specialist book publishers, sales of OECD's printed books had been steadily falling during the 1990s. More seriously, the number of core institutions opting to take standing order plans to OECD books was falling. With pressure on book acquisitions budgets unrelenting, partly because of the "Big Deal" model for e-journals, any recovery in the core library market seemed remote. So, in a spirit of "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em," OECD started to look at eBooks and the...