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People Profile: Brian Clark

Editor
State University examined how patrons preserve digital content. Six participants were asked to find an eBook related to their field of study. They were then asked to save a portion of the book, as if they were doing research for a paper. Of the six participants, three users stated that they would perform a copy/paste as their first option. Two other participants suggested they would try to email the pertinent section—a feature that is not an option in netLibrary. (They came to this decision based upon the use of library databases that do allow users to email content to themselves.) Only two of the six suggested that they would print the passage, but this was not their preferred choice (England, 2001). Nor, apparently, is it netLibrary’s. Their current interface offers printing tips, but it is buried in the “reading tips” index, where you may also read a copyright warning about attempting to print the entire eBook.

ALA’s eBook Task Force created a long list of functions that are believed to enhance readability and understanding and to make an eBook’s content richer than a paper book. These functions include the ability to search both within the current text and other eBook texts; hyperlinks to items in the book, such as a table of contents, as well as related research; sufficient mark up and structure to provide a sense of content involving chapters or sections; and a sense of place that lets the reader know how far along he or she is in the book (Gibbons, 2003).

Both Books 24X7 and netLibrary offer the option of being able to search within the current text or other eBook content. Both vendors also offer a way to virtually turn the page with a click of the mouse. However, only Books 24X7 offers a progression bar to give the reader a sense of how far along he or she is in the book. With the ability to create your own folders, bookmarks, notes, even email the current page, Books 24X7 offers the reader more functionality than netLibrary. Books 24X7 calls it “a more user defined experience,” but that experience also has a higher learning curve (Ouellette, 2004).

Technical considerations aside, is there a market for eBooks? If we are to believe the recent sales figures, then eBooks are here to stay. The Open eBook Forum reports that eBook retailers had modest gains in growth during the second quarter of 2004 with a five percent increase in eBook units sold and a 23 percent increase in eBook revenues over the same quarter in 2003 (Bogarty, 2004). The consultancy firm Accenture predicts that eBooks will make up ten percent of all book sales by 2005, totalling 2.3 billion (Dormer, 2003).

So, who’s buying, and does saleability equate to readability? Lynch sees “anecdotal evidence that younger people, who have grown up with text on display screens from childhood, are more...