E-Books: Report on An Ongoing Experiment

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Last spring, North Carolina State University Libraries experimented with the new electronic reading device technology—buying seven Rocket eBooks and five Softbooks. We purchased a number of titles to load onto these reading devices and have been lending them to users since the fall semester began in August. We also signed up as an initial subscriber for netLibrary.com to provide 1320+ titles to our users to be read on a computer: either their own, ours in the Libraries, or one of the many laptops the Libraries lends to users. We launched netLibrary.com to our users beginning in November. The process of purchasing and providing access to these devices and titles has been an interesting one.

Many of the issues we encountered when purchasing and servicing this new technology were reminiscent of those we dealt with when we first brought electronic databases and serials to our users. Not the least was the number of purchases made directly with the provider rather than through the traditional library vendor relationship. It took a few years for many of us to depend on our traditional vendors to provide services to electronic serials. I hope it doesn’t take that long to provide that relationship for purchasing ebooks. Recent library literature and news releases indicate that vendors are now forming partnerships and alliances to embrace this new technology.

These electronic reading devices were originally marketed to individual consumers. Each of these devices is different and each meets different needs for different users. But the underlying concept is you purchase a number of titles, load them onto your device, and read the titles at any time you desire. You do not need to read from your computer screen; you have the advantage of many titles on one small gadget. The number of titles each device will hold varies with the titles chosen and the number of peripheral “items” on your reading device, such as a dictionary, freely offered titles, news materials, and instructions for use. The Rocket eBook is small and comes in a leather pouch; you purchase the titles from either Barnes and Noble.com or a few other bookstores and download titles through your computer using a cradle connection provided with your reading device attached to the serial port of your computer. Softbooks are purchased from Softbook Press which is also the sales representative for their titles. Their device resembles a more traditional book. Their titles are downloaded through an analog phone line.

Both companies are expanding the number and subject matter of the titles they provide for purchase. Each also provides a supplemental battery pack to plug into the device and recharge the batteries on the devices.

Rocket eBook devices were relatively easy to purchase; buying titles and loading them onto an individual device took some tweaking, but a computer savvy individual could figure it out quickly. Purchasing titles for the library presented other concerns, most of which were answered by the staff saying “why would you want to do that?” or “we’ll have a meeting about that and get back to you.”

Softbook worked with our Acquisitions staff to ease the purchasing process, but the discovery of a hidden license agreement on the device after negotiating a license agreement presented additional delays and problems. We balked at agreeing to a license agreement that negated a previously negotiated license. Then the vendor wanted us to alert every user to the issues of copyright by sending the user a statement the user would sign before the lending process could be completed. We explained how important copyright issues are to libraries, but we went on to explain we do not ask users to sign compliance statements for the 600,000+ print titles we lend each year. The vendor acquiesced. His final comment was he was pleased we were educating him about library issues!

Unfortunately, each title we wanted to load was purchased for a specific device. We could not load Rocket eBook titles onto a Softbook or visa versa, although each company carried the same titles in a slightly different software format.

Two problems we didn’t anticipate until we started to download the titles were: 1. Complete bibliographic information was lacking at the time of purchase. Advertisements for the titles say you can purchase Shakespeare’s Sonnets or the works of Poe. That level of title information is sufficient for a consumer purchase, but libraries that catalog their titles need to know which edition of Shakespeare’s Sonnets is really being purchased. The bibliographic data question didn’t get resolved until the title resides on our devices and we could look at the actual title pages. 2. The advertisements for the devices say 10 titles will fit on a Rocket eBook and continued on page 24
E-Books
from page 23

7-8 titles on a Softbook but when we went
to download the actual titles we discovered
the size of each title varied and it depended on
which combination of titles you purchased as
to how many could actually reside on a de-
vice. We solved this problem by using our
hand-held calculators and subtracting byte
size while we downloaded the titles and
juggled which we could load onto each de-
vice and which we would hold on our server
site to be interchanged as space became available.

We have cataloged the devices and also
the individual titles in our online library sys-
tem. The title lists also reside on a highlights
page of our Web catalog—another way to
advertise these new services to our users.

Checking out the reading devices pre-
vented some other concerns that we have
handled: neither of these products provides a
large enough container to lend the device, its
accompanying battery pack, and a printed
instruction sheet. We solved this problem by
loaning the devices in our Library bags. In-
structions for use and a statement of respon-
sibility of the user was included in the note.
Also included was a user-survey; these would
be tabulated after return of the devices.

A summary of the returned surveys indi-
cated that users enjoyed using the devices, and
that each device seemed to have its own set of
likes and dislikes:

Users felt that the Rocket eBook size was
appropriate for reading fiction and current
titles while more serious readers preferred the
Softbook. Users liked the possibilities of read-
ing in less than ideal lighting environments
and everyone liked the advantages of increas-
ing the font size to allow for easier reading.
Users noted the ability to change the position
of the text on the screen as a plus in the Rocket
eBooks and others liked the feel of the
Softbook as being nearer to the traditional
book format. Each device has the capability
to allow notes and underlining to be done
throughout the text. The ability to look up
words in a dictionary on the device is a real
plus. Many users wanted a different mix of
titles on the device they borrowed. A favorite
survey result was the user who wanted us to
digitize the whole collection so he could check
out any book in the library and read that book
on a device.

Although the available titles are not always
of the scholarly nature that academic librar-
ies buy, these devices provided us with some
ideas for other uses that we are investigating
and going forward with in the second phase
of this project. These include:

1. Loading these devices with information
about the Libraries and using the devices as a
handheld guide to tour the Library. Perhaps
we could point out how to use the online cata-
log, where the branches are located, etc.

2. Working with faculty in the English
Department to load all the titles needed for
an English or American literature survey
course onto the device. Each of these devices
has a way for users to upload data and texts.
We have learned how to load Project
Gutenberg public-domain titles onto each of
these devices. Because these are the types of
titles students must read when completing lit-
erature survey classes, we plan to work with
a faculty member and student to try this
possibility. I hope the next offering from
netLibrary.com will allow us to purchase
multiple copies for use in this project.

3. Using these devices to provide users
with popular newspapers and journals in a
timely manner has great appeal. Each of the
sellers of these devices is partnering with the
publishers of the Washington Post, The Wall
magazine or US News and World Report to
provide daily or weekly news compilations
on the devices. We are going to implement
this feature immediately.

4. Adding these devices as a "low-tech"
addition to our services for Users with Dis-
abilities. The idea of increasing the font size
for non-popular titles has a great deal of ap-
peal on a college campus. In most instances,
large print books are offered first and fore-
most for popular materials, not titles of a more
scholarly nature. This feature also reduces the
stigma of checking out large print titles. The
ability to turn the pages of these texts with
the click of a bar is also very appealing, as
electronic page-turners are unwieldy to use
and expensive to purchase. A library col-
league wrote she found the reading devices
very good for users suffering from an inabil-
ity to read text on paper due to light and glare
problems. These devices can provide adjust-
able backlighting for different readers' needs.

5. Lastly, using these devices for loading
course reserve materials for students study-
ing in the reserve room. If their readings can
be put on these devices and be checked out
for use, faculty believe there will be better
use of reserve materials. Here again, I see a
role for netLibrary.com.

Softbook is making plans to market their
devices to corporate clients who need to have
access to product catalogs and maintenance
manuals as they visit clients in the field.
Someone in our discussion noted these de-
vices could be used by extension agents visit-
ing with staff and clients away from cam-
pus or out in the field.

Libraries are very aware of issues sur-
rounding copyright, and I believe we have
done a very good job of educating the user
and the publisher with our needs for copy-
right and fair use. But when it came to con-
vincing the vendor that, "yes, I wanted to
purchase one title and use it on two machines,
but would not lend it more than once at a given
time?" negotiations came to a halt. I finally
agreed to purchase multiples of the same title
to load onto different machines. But that
meant that I might have to loan more than
one device to a borrower if he wanted to read
different sets of titles than those loaded on a
specific device. This predicament was also
the biggest concern voiced by our users when
they returned the surveys after trying out the
reading devices. Users want to pick and
choose from an array of titles to download
and read. This will be an issue for future ne-
gotiations as more libraries use these readers
and more alliances are formed between pub-
lishers and device manufacturers.

License agreements and understanding
who really owns the titles we purchased are
clear in my mind, but I am not sure the pub-
lisher understands. If the devices are upgraded
and I am still using them, I would expect to
be able to refresh this data and still lend it.
If users delete a title, or damage a device, I
would expect to be able to buy another de-
vice and reload the original titles on that
device without having to repurchase the titles.
In my mind, I have purchased these titles, not
leased them. Can I Interlibrary loan one of
these titles or a device? I'm not sure! The is-
ues of what providers of electronic texts
could do with patron information and circula-
tion history gives one pause. I have to trust
the netLibrary.com provider that the infor-
mation compiled when users plug into their
site is kept strictly confidential. This was a
question from a user who trialed this new ser-
dvice. As electronic technology moves forward,
this is an issue which many in the field will
be addressing in the future.

Is this a technology that is going to stay
at libraries? I suspect yes, but perhaps not
in the format it is being sold right now.
There will be many opportunities to refine
and redirect the products to meet the chang-
ing needs of our user clientele. Users may
not like carrying around another device
besides a computer on which to read texts;
that is what businessmen say now. Microsoft
is counting on that dissatisfaction as they
debut their new computer software
for reading eBooks on full size com-
puter screens early next year. Other
comments heard include the need to down-
load materials from the Web through the
computer rather than the phone lines—al-
though more citizens have access to phone
lines than computers at the moment. I sus-
pect this option will be coming very shortly.
Greater memory size would also allow a
greater number of titles to be kept on the
devices at any time. Another comment
heard is the inability to buy a new title and
load it on to any reading device. Whether
that be a Rocket eBook, a Softbook, a Per-
sonal Data Assistant (better known as a
Palm Pilot), a gameboy device, or some-
thing we are not even familiar with today.
Having one standard that all e-texts use
would eliminate this problem right now.
This standard has been developed; now it
continued on page 25

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
needs to be increasingly accepted and adopted. Perhaps the greatest number of comments we heard from users were clarity of screen definition, cost, and the inability to read graphs, charts, and pictures on the reading devices. But all this will come just as better, faster, sharper definition screens, and cheaper computers came with use and demand from users.

Perhaps a combination of offerings using a reading device and combining it with on-demand titles from netLibrary.com will offer options for users and scholars. NetLibrary.com offers some older materials and many of those have been purchased previously in print format by academic libraries. Having the ability to purchase additional copies of a text in an electronic format which can be "loaned, throughout our readership area at the touch of a button" offers some very desirable features for those who provide distance education to users located or studying away from the traditional campus setting. In a recent interview in LJ Online, Dennis Dillion of UT-Austin noted netLibrary.com's vision meant sharing collections with all their authorized users. We see it as a way to increase the critical mass of online titles. We also see this concept as a service we can provide which is not staff and labor intensive. Check-out and check-in is done online eliminating the need for staff to do those associated tasks. There are no excuses about whether a title was actually returned to the library or its condition when returned. Excuses such as "I lost the book," "the dog ate the book," or "it fell into the tub" are no longer valid.

Does this new technology mean the end of the library or the librarian as these new electronic texts and devices move into the academic market? Not for a while, I am sure. The traditional book will always have a place in the university—the library will continue to be the point of socialization on the campus, and the user will still need assistance in mediating all of the information the user encounters in this information age. Even if we move to a fuller electronic environment, it will take years to digitize all the materials that traditional scholars depend on when doing research in the library. Many peripheral questions need to be addressed regarding archiving and preserving a critical mass of titles in electronic format. Will this solve the problem of overcrowded shelves in many academic libraries? I doubt it because we will continue to buy traditional printed books for many years to come. People will still want to read a traditional book if they have more than 20 pages to read. For those titles you need to consult occasionally for research, reference, or quick look, these alternatives offer promise. This new technology will evolve into the services offered by libraries.

Throughout this technology experiment, we experienced many instances where staff and departments came together to solve problems and invent new ways of providing these services to users. That was a plus! Staff from different areas in the Libraries interacted with each other more than if we were just purchasing print titles in the traditional manner. New alliances were forged and new procedures were discussed, as were new ways to advertise these new services. We saw a changing of roles for some staff members: access services no longer shelved these books nor read those shelves—instead they re-ghosted machines to remove any notes a previous user may not have deleted from the borrowed reading device or laptop computer. A staff member had to go onto the server and re-download the title a user accidentally deleted from a reading device. Library staff learned a lot about eBooks and dealing with staff at stores that were not particularly library-centered when we began this experiment. It was a learning experience for everyone!

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