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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 1300+ 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 lend 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 first was most of these purchases were 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; and 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 with 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 had to be 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 titles resided 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

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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 device. 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 device 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 system. 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 presented 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. Instructions for use and a statement of responsibility of the user was included in the tote. Also included was a user-survey; these would be tabulated after return of the devices.

A summary of the returned surveys indicated 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 reading in less than ideal lighting environments and everyone liked the advantages of increasing 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 libraries 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 catalog, 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 those are the types of titles students must read when completing literature survey classes, we plan to work with a faculty member and student to try out 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 Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Time* 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 Disabilities. The idea of increasing the font size for non-popular titles has a great deal of appeal on a college campus. In most instances, large print books are offered first and foremost 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 colleague wrote she found the reading devices very good for users suffering from an inability to read text on paper due to light and glare problems. These devices can provide adjustable backlighting for different readers' needs.

5. Lastly, using these devices for loading course reserve materials for students studying 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 devices could be used by extension agents visiting with staff and clients away from campus or out in the field.

Libraries are very aware of issues surrounding copyright, and I believe we have done a very good job of educating the user and the publisher with our needs for copyright and fair use. But when it came to convincing 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 negotiations as more libraries use these readers and more alliances are formed between publishers 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 publisher 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 device and reload the original titles onto 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 issues of what providers of electronic texts could do with patron information and circulation history gives one pause. I have to trust the **netLibrary.com** provider that the information compiled when users plug into their site is kept strictly confidential. This was a question from a user who trialed this new service. 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 changing 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 computer screens early next year. Other comments heard include the need to download materials from the Web through the computer rather than the phone lines—although more citizens have access to phone lines than computers at the moment. I suspect 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 **Personal Data Assistant** (better known as a **Palm Pilot**), a gameboy device, or something 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

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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 of

fer 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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