February 2005

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Recommended Citation

Widmark, Wilhelm (2005) "Textbooks as eBooks -- A Case Study from the University Library of Stockholm, Sweden," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4737>

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Textbooks as eBooks — A Case Study from the University Library of Stockholm, Sweden

by **Wilhelm Widmark** (Electronic Resources Coordinator, 106 91 Stockholm, Sweden; Phone: +46 8 16 27 33; Fax: +46 8 16 14 00) <wilhelm.widmark@sub.su.se>

Background

During 2002-2003 the **University Library of Stockholm (SUB)** and **eLib**¹ started a joint project in order to provide students at the University with textbooks in electronic form. The main objective was to find new ways to manage textbooks. In Sweden there are some compulsory textbooks within various subjects that all students have to study. As a service to our students, SUB had a library designed exclusively for handling these textbooks. However, this textbook library faced a number of challenges. Due to the high demand for textbooks, they were expensive for the library to handle. In addition, the library could only serve a small number of students, because there were only three copies of each textbook per course. The students that could not get textbooks from the library had to either buy or copy them. For these reasons, the textbook library did not work satisfactorily either for students or the library.

With the intention of helping students find the required literature for each course the University Library created an online database, *Kursnätet*², containing lists of required textbooks for all university courses. From *Kursnätet* students could find links to the library catalog and to local bookstores. It was felt this database would be greatly improved if it could provide links directly to the complete text of the books themselves. This solution would take advantage of the electronic format and give students access to textbooks at any time. The challenge was to find a technical solution and to convince publishers that this was a good idea.

Technical and Economical Solutions

SUB's eBook group and eLib had discussed for some time creating an eBook service for academic libraries. At the same time eLib, in cooperation with the **Stockholm Public Library**,³ created a system for time-limited lending of eBooks at public libraries. Today there are over one hundred public libraries in Sweden that have joined the system and even some public libraries in Denmark and Norway.

After some discussion, eLib and SUB decided to try to adapt the public library system to the academic market. The main goal was to create a win-win situation in which all parties: the library, students and publishers, would gain something through the project. But, as always, there is a loser in this scenario. In this case

we dropped one link in the chain of book distribution — the bookstore.

I have already discussed what the library and students had to gain from the project. The predicament was to convince publishers and authors that they too had something to win; otherwise we would not have any eBooks to supply via the platform. Therefore we had to find an economic model that pleased all parties.

The economic model used by the public libraries is based on cost per download of a time-limited eBook. The library pays the fee and there is no cost to the patron. The main objective of the public libraries was for eBooks to be a complement to printed books. The books they make available are mainly novels, and in the beginning the libraries did not count on many downloads.

In contrast to the public libraries we expected that many students would choose to download eBooks. Sometimes there might be over one hundred students who would want to download the same eBook. We came to the conclusion that it would be too expensive for a university library to finance such expected download frequency. We could have chosen to limit the number of downloads per title, but that would have resulted in the same problems as the old system with printed books; just a few students could get the book and the others would be compelled to buy or copy the book. Normally a library never charges users when they borrow a book but the case of textbooks is different. We came to the conclusion that students are used to paying for their textbooks and that the library could help them get their books cheaper in electronic form. The only economically feasible solution to serve all students with electronic textbooks was if the students paid the download fee themselves. Many students would probably continue to buy printed books, but the eBook would be an alternative option that would allow students to get textbooks for a reasonable fee. As another service to the students, we decided that the library should have some reference copies of the textbooks available from certain computers at the library.

To gain support for the project we contacted the Students' Union. The chairman of the Students' Union found the project interesting and accepted that the download fees were something that the students should pay. To launch the pilot project SUB applied for, and received, some development money from BIBSAM.⁴ SUB and eLib agreed to split the development costs of the system.

The development of the system quickly went

from an idea to a working system. First, we needed to have some eBooks to make available. In the pilot project we concentrated on getting Swedish textbooks within two subjects: Pedagogy and Labour Economics Studies. From the literature lists of the courses SUB chose relevant titles and eLib negotiated with the publishers to submit books to the project. Unfortunately, the interest from the publishers was weaker than we had expected. Most of the publishers were essentially positive in their response, but they did not want to make any contribution to the pilot project. The publishers had a number of different arguments as to why they did not want to participate. Some were afraid that they would sell fewer paper books. Others argued that it was too short a time frame in which to make a decision and wanted to wait and see how the project developed. In addition, the largest publisher of textbooks in Sweden, *Studentlitteratur*, had negotiated with another company to form a platform for their electronic textbooks. At the time they had not come very far with their endeavor, so we continued our project.

The main argument used to convince the publishers to supply literature was that they would get paid when the eBooks were used. A problem for the publishers is that many students, instead of buying the textbooks, tend to photocopy them. We assumed that if the students could read the textbooks in electronic form for less than the cost of copying them they would probably do so. The risk the publishers had to take was that they may end up selling fewer copies of the paper books. We assumed that this would not be a dilemma, as many students would still want to have an actual textbook. The students that bought the textbooks in the past would probably continue to do so. The eBook system would probably be used by students who had formerly borrowed books at the library or photocopied them.

One demand from publishers was that the eBooks be copy protected, because they feared the same thing that had happened to music would happen to eBooks. Consequently, they did not allow any print outs or "copy and paste". We tried unsuccessfully to convince them that they should allow a limited number of print outs and "copy and paste" features.

In the pilot project the download cost for 24 hours of active reading time was 34 Swedish crowns, and 59 crowns for 120 hours.⁵ Of course, the library made no profit from the eBooks. The download fee was divided between the publisher, platform, credit card costs and VAT.⁶ There was also an option to download and look at the eBooks for 10 minutes at no cost.⁷

To download the eBooks students identified themselves with their SUB library ticket num-

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ber. From a technical perspective, it was easy to download eBooks. The students could view an eBook on the computer with just a few clicks by using **Adobe** software, which was already installed on most computers or available for download free of charge. The students accessed the eBooks from Kursnätet, the library catalog, the eBook pages on SUB's Website, and the Websites of the university departments. The library did not have to make any special technical arrangements because the system was housed on **eLib's** server.⁸ There was no need for any adjustments of the libraries' other systems.

Evaluation of the Pilot Project

By August 2002 we had a working system and five eBooks in the pilot project.⁹ Before we introduced the eBooks to the students we contacted the teachers concerned and presented the project. Most of the teachers were positive, but some of them did not think that certain books were suited for an electronic format, and they felt students should have important textbooks in print form. The eBooks provided were for four different courses within the two different subjects. We presented the project in the introductory lectures of the courses. In conjunction with the completion of the courses we handed out a questionnaire to get responses to the project.

To examine students' attitudes towards the project we asked students what they thought about the idea of textbooks as eBooks. Most of the students (65%) said that the idea was good or very good, some found it neither good nor bad (24%) and only 3% found it bad or very bad. Another interesting question asked if students were ready to pay for textbooks in electronic form. A large percentage (37%) answered that they did not want to pay for eBooks, 33% said maybe, and 25% were willing to pay for eBooks. Afterwards, I realized that we should also have asked how many were interested in reading eBooks if they did not have to pay for it. That so many of the students did not want to buy their textbooks as eBooks was an expected result. It is understandable that many of the students do not want to read their literature directly on a computer screen or to pay to do so. In the meantime, 58% were somewhat ready to pay for eBooks and we found that promising enough to continue the project.

Something that interested us was how the students had acquired their textbooks. Most of the respondents (60%) had bought them, 20% had borrowed them and 10% had photocopied them. Many students want to own their literature, but the eBooks would be an alternative for those who photocopied textbooks or found them too expensive. They are also a good alternative in those cases when only a few chapters from a book need to be read. We had expected that a larger percentage of the students photocopied their textbooks. (For publishers this was good news.)

against the grain people profile

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BORN & LIVED: Born in 1963 in Uppsala, Sweden.

FAMILY: Married to Anna-Karin and we have two sons Carl and Nils.

EDUCATION: Master of Arts and Master of Library and Information Science at Uppsala University.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: I think that working as project leader for SUB's eBooks project was the take-off of my career. Recently I have been appointed deputy member of the library board of Stockholm University Library.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: It is very hard looking into the future, but I think that the electronic libraries will have developed a lot. Maybe we have been able to solve the problem with the increasing journal prices. Hopefully open access, in some way, will be the dominating publishing form. In Sweden we will have one functioning eBook platform for literature in the Swedish language.

Of course, this percentage breakdown would probably vary depending on the cost of the textbook in the bookstore. The books in the project had a rather modest price due to the fact that the publishers would not make their expensive bestsellers accessible in the form of eBooks.

The survey respondents were given the opportunity to give their own comments. They noted both positive and negative aspects of eBooks. There were many who expressed their love for printed books. Some pointed out the inconvenience of reading off the computer screen. Others responded positively to eBooks. One respondent said "It went better than I thought and I will really in the future continue to read eBooks." There were some comments indicating that they would have used the eBooks if they had known about the project earlier. Some wanted more eBooks and felt that the electronic format would be more useful. None of the respondents made any comments addressing the fact that students had to pay for the download.

Conclusions

The project answered many of our questions. Since its completion we have continued to acquire eBooks from **ebrary**, **netLibrary** and directly from publishers. The usage statistics on eBooks are high and many of the students, researchers and teachers are pleased with the new format. We did not continue with the textbook project, because a commercial firm started its own platform and had an exclusive contract with the largest publisher of textbooks in Sweden. The market in Sweden is too small to gain from two

different eBook alternatives. I am sorry to say that the new commercial platform has not yet come up with a pricing model that suits academic libraries. But we have an ongoing discussion, so we will hopefully come to a solution that suits all parties. In the meantime students will get used to textbooks as eBooks, but for the time being only in English. 🐘

Endnotes

1. eLib produces and distributes eBooks. eLib is one of the biggest companies in the world that distributes eBooks with copy protection. eLib is owned by the publishers Natur och Kultur and Piratförlaget and the Internet bookstore AdLibris. URL: <http://www.elib.se/>
2. URL: <http://www.sub.su.se/lan/kl/kursnatet/kursnatet/klhuvudamne.ASP>
3. URL: <http://www.ssb.stockholm.se/>
4. BIBSAM is the Royal Library's department for national co-ordination and development.
5. Active reading time implies that the time runs only when you have the program open. One US \$ is about eight Swedish crowns.
6. For a 24 hour book the publisher gets 10 kr, the platform 10 kr, credit card cost 7 kr and VAT 7 kr.
7. The free 10 minute download was limited to three times per user.
8. URL: <http://www.elib.se/univlib/titles.asp?uni=57>
9. Three publishers submitted books to the pilot project: Natur och Kultur, SNS and Agora.