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eBooks: Acquisitions, the User, and the Future

by **Aline Soules** (Library Faculty, California State University, East Bay) <aline.soules@csueastbay.edu>

Introduction

Does anyone remember the “cuddlyfiche”? This short-lived wonder from the seventies was advertised with a picture of a woman sitting up in bed, propped against her pillows, knees bent, holding a small fiche reader on her lap. She was, of course, smiling as she read her “book.” This concept didn’t last long and as the debate continues about eBooks, there are those who think it will go the same way, but I believe that it will endure, thrive, and evolve into a new and exciting format.

It is an axiom that in the initial stages of automation, you replicate what you know. It takes time and experience before an idea trickles up to propel a new format into a life of its own. Right now, the eBook is on the verge of doing that. The new **Sony Reader PRS-500**, “the first E-ink-equipped eBook reader in the U.S.,” is a technical leap forward, a little heavy to hold, but much easier to read, with a long life battery, and titles available from **Sony** at about 25% of the cost of their hardcover equivalents.¹ In spite of the ability to mark, dog-ear, etc., it is still an automation of the print format, but a step closer to making eBooks viable for individual readers.

Packaged eBooks

In the academic library, for the most part, we are emulating with eBooks the structure in full text journal databases. We rent packages from **netLibrary**, **ebrary**, **Safari**, etc. and, as with journal databases, cede selection to the vendor. As a result, we get books we want

They are disconcerted if a title disappears (license issues, use statistics, expiration of the number of rented views, etc.). In the print world, we also withdraw titles, but, somehow, the disappearance of a print book is less disconcerting or perhaps noted by fewer students because eBooks seem to disappear in a more overtly instant fashion. Further, as we are part of a consortium, physical books not held in our collection are available from other institutions, something not possible with our eBooks.

Another disconcerting element is based on students’ learned behavior that a book has standard elements: location, call number, and status. When the record displays “Click on the following to Connect to this electronic book,” some students are confused and, initially, ask how to “get at the book.” Once they know how to gain access, however, their reaction is generally positive. When they learn that remote access is possible, they are even more positive.

If the student is present in person, the librarian will open an eBook to review key features, highlighting non-print-book features (such as live links to chapters), and covering areas of potential confusion, e.g., registration. This is not the remote access login, which is familiar to students, but the registration within the package that permits them to take advantage of enhanced features. However, there is also another registration that may appear if there is a technical problem. This can take them down a wrong road, e.g., to a screen that asks them to pay for access, which we discourage them from doing.

Another snag, at least at **Cal State East Bay**, comes when they reach the simultaneous user limit for the entire **Cal State** system. This can happen if a particular title coincidentally becomes a class textbook, driving up demand. When access is denied to a title they recently viewed, they think there’s a technical problem, when they may just have to wait and try again.

Printing, Cutting and Pasting

We’re discovering that students generally look for one chapter at a time to print or, increasingly, download. Later, they may also want to cut and paste information into a paper (a capability in some cases, but not others), but the first issue is printing/downloading. They discover that they can’t print or download a whole book or chapter, but have to work with one page or a few pages at a time. They complain about this, but it doesn’t deter them

or change their behavior. Ironically, it may cost more to do this than to buy a print version (new or used). If they only need one chapter or a small portion, it probably makes sense to print. If it’s a text that they will ultimately print out in whole, it’s not cost-effective, but they don’t always understand this. A purchase is hard cash out of their pockets. Printing in the library is a piecemeal cost over time. The cost of printing at home is essentially hidden and many don’t consider this. Of course, they are also driven by time constraints as they frequently work at the last minute and will do anything to get around impediments, no matter what the cost.

Beyond that, students are fairly adept with eBooks. Once they have identified an individual title of interest, they aren’t fazed by differences among packages (unless it’s print-related) because they are used to different database platforms. They may discover features in one package that they prefer to another, but they accept them. I suspect that only a small number of students actually make use of features such as dog-earing, marking, live links, etc. Once they are shown how to navigate through the table of contents, they generally jump to the section they want and start printing/downloading or copying/pasting. We have not conducted a study to determine if they read online or make use of enhanced features at home. Complaints we receive relate to access.

As for accessibility, the **Cal State** system recently articulated the **Accessible Technology Initiative**, an ongoing commitment to provide access to information resources and technologies to individuals with disabilities. This applies to all formats. While eBook packages may not yet be fully compliant, as contracts come up for renewal, the Chancellor’s Office, which conducts negotiations, will raise these requirements with vendors.

What Does All This Mean for Acquisitions?

In a nutshell, our experiences with users and eBooks are important considerations in a) contract negotiations and b) lobbying for improvements. While this seems obvious, it’s not as simple as it sounds because it hinges on priorities. Frequently, negotiations center on issues critical to the library and regardless of how necessary or legitimate, they are not necessarily user-focused. A classic example is cost. While this is key for the library and determines whether the user has access at all, once a package is acquired, users don’t know or care about cost. Other negotiating points include items both visible and invisible to users: needed technical improvements to

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“It takes time and experience before an idea trickles up to propel a new format into a life of its own. Right now, the eBook is on the verge of doing that.”

and books we don’t, but we certainly build a critical mass, making it more likely that eBook titles will appear in query results, whether users ultimately choose to view them or not. At **Cal State East Bay**, searches are often through the catalog (we download records as part of our acquisitions process), but we also offer links to the actual packages and provide **Google Scholar** capability. Although there are problems integrating cataloging records with those of equivalent print versions (we live with duplicate records for print and e-formats), these materials are bibliographically accessible, technically accessible (except on challenging days with “connection” problems), and generally usable.

We now have over 30,000 eBooks and users discover them in increasing numbers, with much interest expressed by students, who want to know what they are. Once students find them, however, they, too, expect these “books” to behave in the same way as print versions.

enable eBooks to “handshake” with the rest of the library’s technology, digital rights that determine print and download restrictions, archiving issues, etc. These may affect users’ attitudes about eBooks and their ability to use them, but users don’t connect these conditions to such things as print annoyances. It is the negotiator who must determine the priority to give to issues that directly affect the user. The higher the priority the negotiator gives to solving user frustrations, the more likely eBooks will be used and used often. If the acquisitions librarian is not the negotiator, he or she can be proactive about identifying and communicating user priorities to the negotiator on the users’ behalf. This is where acquisitions and the user are clearly connected. In larger libraries, where acquisitions is more divorced from the public interface, it can be particularly difficult to remember that actions and a sense of urgency about these issues are as important to users as the face-to-face interactions they have with public services librarians.

Individual eBooks

What are also entering the system in increasing numbers are individual eBooks separate from packages. These may be less easy to manage because we are just figuring out how to handle them, but they are important as they are selector-driven and chosen with the library’s particular users in mind. While the purchase of a print book inherently implies a contract, we have rarely had to sign one or deal with a shrink-wrap license, although both happen occasionally. With eBooks, however, there will likely be more of both. This will increase acquisitions workload, but as libraries develop lists of required, desired, and optional features, hopefully, priority will be given to users’ direct and overt needs.

The Future Evolution of the eBook

A more complicated issue is predicting the future. As librarians, we participate with vendors in discussions about the future, but in daily life, most of us react to industry developments. Many of us work in small or medium libraries, coping with constrained budgets, and not in large libraries that influence the future through Google partnerships and other initiatives. Further, while vendors stay abreast of industry developments, once they have products, they also react to stay competitive. They must stay in business today with their current products as well as survive transitions to the future, let alone creating that future. As a result, many of us, vendor or librarian, put aside the cutting edge to cope with today, instead of planning for potential future scenarios.

An interesting article in the *Miami Herald* addressed the question of the slow adoption of eBooks, in this case e-textbooks. The article quotes **Bill McKenna**, director of digital products at **Follett**, which operates more than 700 college bookstores: “Publishers are having a hard time figuring out what they need to do.”² **Follett** has about 1,000 titles in digital form and the e-version is about half the price of the print

against the grain people profile

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BORN & LIVED: Born in Scotland. Lived in Scotland, Ontario (Canada), Michigan, and California.

EARLY LIFE: I grew up in Scotland.

FAMILY: I am a widow with one son, now a Ph.D. in Computing Science working for **Hewlett-Packard** in Palo Alto, California. (Yes, I am a boasting mom!)

EDUCATION: B.A.(Hons.) in English Language & Literature, **University of Windsor**, Windsor, Ontario, Canada. M.A. in English in Ontario at the **University of Windsor**. M.S.L.S. in library science at **Wayne State University** in Detroit. MFA in Creative Writing at **Antioch University**, Los Angeles in a low residency format (i.e., primarily online via distance learning), which has taught me a lot about being a distance learning student.

FIRST JOB: Librarian, **Lawrence Institute of Technology** (now **Lawrence Technological University**). I was there for 2 1/2 years.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: **University of Windsor**, 12 years, various positions.

University of Michigan business school, 14 years, various positions.

California State University, East Bay. So far: almost 5 years.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Write poetry and short fiction. Sing — I belong to two choirs.

FAVORITE BOOKS: One of those almost-impossible choices! But here goes: *Einstein’s Dream*, by **Alan Lightman**. Poetry of **Jane Kenyon**, **Mary Oliver**, **Stephen Dunn**, many others!

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: Laziness, lack of persistence.

PHILOSOPHY: Never give up (to quote Winston Churchill). Care.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Another toughie! How does one make a difference? Does one make a difference? There are times when I think that what I am doing is making a critical difference and later, it emerges that it was just a blip on the landscape. There are other times when I think that what I’m doing isn’t that big a deal and it turns out to be more important than I thought originally. Ask me ten years after I retire!

I suppose the most meaningful thing we can all do is help people with information — finding it, evaluating it, whatever. It’s why we chose this career, I presume, so that, possibly, will be our most meaningful achievement in the long run.

Certainly, I have mentored people and that has been meaningful to me. You should probably ask them if it has turned out to be meaningful to them!

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: To keep going and find new goals.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Online. And what will we be doing? Who knows? Something different from what we’re doing now; something we can’t yet envision. 🐼



version. Yet, they’re not selling. The reasons cited are “lack of knowledge, poor marketing, and few choices,” yet publishers persist “so when an opportunity comes up, they can act on it quickly.”³ Once students and parents catch on, which will happen with reduced costs and publisher drive, and once faculty experience pressure to choose an e-version either from students or from the university’s growing use of online courses requiring links to learning management systems, e-textbooks

will likely take off. That, in turn, will drive the demand for library-provided eBooks, probably also linked to learning management systems, and we would be advised to be ready. Other drivers come from both inside and outside the industry. After hurricane Katrina, for example, **Springer** gave eBooks to seven New Orleans universities in what was described by recipients as an “unprecedented” gift.⁴ This could create a strong market in the New Orleans area

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where eBooks will more often be the users' only option. **Springer** could do this because they began digitizing books in their catalog and including them in their database of electronic journal content (another configuration for the eBook).⁵ In December, 2006, *Springer Science and Business Media* reported "an increase in the demand for its eBooks from the academic and business world as recent agreements have been signed with academic institutions around the world."⁶

Amazon is driving eBooks through its **Upgrade**, "which gives users immediate online access to the entire text of a purchased book at a fee of an additional 10%-20% above a book's list price. It also enables customers to search, annotate, bookmark, and print individual pages, leveraging digital functionality to enhance the book buyer's experience."⁷ Buy a \$40 book, pay \$4 extra, and you get web access. Once users read the whole book in print form, perhaps they will decide to keep Web access and discard the print copy or, better yet, sell it on e-bay to recoup at least their \$4 extra for the Web investment.

Of interest is that "the core value proposition of this program is to make purchase of physical books more attractive to buyers," according to **Dan Rose**, **Amazon.com**'s director of digital media.⁸ **Amazon.com** is only one company among publishers and brokers who are looking for ways to maximize profits on both print and digital formats. This goes back to the idea that they haven't quite figured out the right direction. In spite of that, as people try out new options through a company giant like **Amazon.com**, greater familiarity will drive greater demand. While this configuration is currently limited to the individual user, can sales to groups like libraries be far behind?

All of this, however, is only about eBooks as we currently think of them — replicas of print with added features. But what will the eBook of the future look like? Consider the possibilities. eBooks don't have to come in static form. *GAM3R7H30RY*, a networked book by **McKenzie Wark** that "explor[es] the critical theory of games" was created with the **Institute for the Future of the Book**, although one goal is to issue it, eventually, in print. Right now, however, the public is helping to write it, à la **Wikipedia**. There are "digital 'margins' that permit a stream of unabashed conversation." The dialogue is two-way and **Wark** gets permission to quote comments. The result "promises to be an unprecedented hybrid authorship."⁹

There is also *Growing Book*, "an electronic textbook that is co-developed, and has the ability to be constantly maintained, by groups of independent authors." Their analysis "demonstrate[s] that the content-based features of Growing Book appeal more to students than other features and are often used for immediate judgment of course materials." These texts are aimed at the distance learning market.¹⁰

Another possibility is offered by services

like **SpiralFrog**, which "offer music, videos, and, in one case, books for free in exchange for users having to view advertising. For businesses like music and book publishing, which are largely transactional, experimenting with an ad model is fresh territory that could ultimately deliver a new revenue stream and help battle piracy."¹¹ Free or not, if the title is wanted, library acquisitions will need to get it.

University presses may see eBooks as a way to cope with dwindling production runs. In July, 2006, **Rice University** announced that it would start the first all-digital university press as an experiment in scholarly publishing. They will retain traditional peer review and editing, but place the books on a Website rather than printing them. Distribution will be through **Connexions**, the university's open-source repository of scholarly materials. Users will be able to read the eBooks for free, but will pay to download or to order print versions, which will be handled by a third-party print-on-demand service.¹²

The possibilities and permutations will only increase. Now is the time for acquisitions to devise ways to manage these new information sources and formats. Gone are the simple days where most acquisitions fall into a standard pattern. While many options are currently aimed at the individual, as these types of materials proliferate, libraries will need to work with them. Certainly, the **Rice** experiment is likely to include libraries, a major market for scholarly books.

The User Perspective

If anything will convince the library of the need to work with eBooks, in whatever format, it will be user requests. Some users, e.g., students, are more familiar with the digital world and expect it. Others find uses that are ideally suited to the eBook. "**The Centre for Youth Literature** at the State Library of Victoria (Australia) has created **www.insideadog.com.au**, an interactive Web space where young people can post reviews, enter competitions, and generally communicate to one another about books. There is also an author blog that acts like an online writer in residence."¹³ In other words, everything's online except the book, which ultimately won't make sense.

At a different educational level, eBooks are used in midwifery education in the UK. A 2004 article by **Appleton** reported on a focus group of ten student midwives. The focus group was "used to gain insight into how eBooks may be used in an academic context for health professionals."¹⁴ The article reports on the responses to various questions about features and contexts, some of which have been realized in the intervening years. The interest is in reading student responses in their own words. They think library staff should promote eBooks and professors should direct them to these materials. **Appleton** writes: "The midwifery student group was still regarding eBooks as alternatives to printed books, but in actual fact they should be seen as complete[ly] different resource[s], and the Web environment in which they can be indexed and functionally searched needs to realize its full potential."¹⁵

Acquisitions for the User

Realizing the eBook's full potential is also true for acquisitions, where the ability to acquire eBooks must become as fast and efficient as possible. Not all the techniques used for print books will translate to eBooks. Librarians need to cope with the present while they predict and plan for the future. The choices, emphases, and actions taken when acquiring eBooks affect users once the eBooks are part of the library. Acquisitions is at the front end of the process and, more than ever, sets in motion what happens down the line. 🐘

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