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eBook Platforms: Lessons Learned From Managing Multiple Providers

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No two eBook platforms are alike, which is part of the challenge in managing multiple platforms at one institution. In most cases, eBook providers are keeping to their traditional library markets with separate products for K-12, public, and academic libraries, though these lines are starting to blur. For example, a public library may have only one eBook platform such as **Overdrive** or **3M**, but their neighboring university may have a combination of over thirty aggregator and publisher platforms. This article will give an overview of the experience associated with the management of multiple eBook platforms from the perspective of a large academic library.

Lay of the Land

DRM — “Digital Rights Management technology offers the ability to control the distribution and use of the intellectual property (including media/content) and thereby protect the associated revenue or investment for the digital content businesses.” — *Encyclopedia of Multimedia*¹

There cannot be a discussion about eBooks without a discussion of Digital Rights Management (DRM). This is an issue that stretches across the various platforms. Knowing the DRM restrictions of a platform is very important, and it should play into a library’s decision-making process. DRM can mean the difference between eager adoption and complete abandonment of an eBook by users. Table 1 shows the spectrum of DRM (including interlibrary loan restrictions) and how it affects the use of eBooks. While interlibrary loan restrictions are license-based, as opposed to technology-based, they play an integral role in the access and use of eBooks. Therefore, these restrictions are also included in the table.

When the ability to download an entire book as a loan is available, it will require using Adobe Digital Editions or other software where the DRM for the loan period will be applied. These features always require users to create an account or accounts. This creates data on the user, but the data collected and what is shared with the library varies by provider.

Format Options — There are many eBook formats in existence,² but in platforms available to academic library users the primary forms are: PDF (Portable Document Format), HTML (Hypertext Markup Language), and EPUB. Currently, PDF is the format that academic users seem the most comfortable with because it mirrors their well-established relationships with e-journals. HTML is also a comfortable and familiar style, but users become frustrated when eBooks are broken up into small, arbitrary segments that they have to continually page through. Increasingly, providers are starting to offer their content in the EPUB format, with EPUB3³ being the most current release of the standard. EPUB is the most flexible format allowing for more media integration and user interactivity.

Aggregator vs. Publisher Platforms — Publisher platforms provide access to eBooks only published by that particular publisher and their subsidiaries. Aggregator platforms host eBooks from a variety of publishers. There are numerous differences and similarities that intersect the aggregator and publisher-supplied platforms. This section will highlight some broad

generalizations that may distinguish the two.

Publisher platforms tend to be simple interfaces, and if the publisher is also in the journal market, eBook and e-journal content is often integrated. Many have little to no DRM, though there are some exceptions. Consequently, very few publisher platforms provide the option to download/loan an entire eBook. Format options are usually PDF or HTML. Their platforms are less likely to have user features, perhaps driven by the knowledge of the users’ reluctance to create one more account. Compared to aggregators, pricing for an individual book on a publisher platform is often better when considering multiuser access. However, the management of these multiple publisher platforms results in an increased workload with respect to title lists, record downloads, licenses, invoices, statistics, etc.

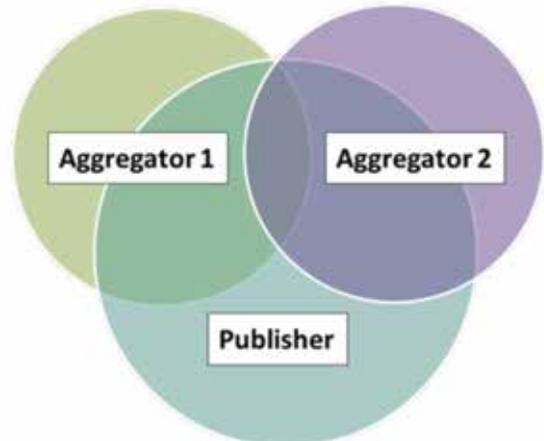


Figure 1: Content Overlap Between Publisher and Aggregator

The notion of an aggregator as a possible one-stop shop for all eBooks is appealing (one interface, one point of contact, one license, one vendor), but the reality is more complicated. First, there are several aggregators to choose from with catalogs that can range from multidisciplinary to subject specific. Therefore, institutions with a broad discipline base will likely need to work with multiple aggregators in order to meet their users’ needs. Second, there are several content-driven issues that affect aggregator selection. Figure 1 presents one such example of the content overlap that is commonly seen between aggregator and publisher. In this example, the Publisher releases overlapping titles to Aggregator 1 and 2; however, the Publisher also releases unique titles to Aggregator 1 or 2. In addition, the Publisher

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Grade	Characteristics
A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No restrictions for licensed users (printing, downloading, etc...) No interlibrary loan restrictions
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chapters/sections can be printed/downloaded with no page restrictions Multiuser accessible Interlibrary loan restricted
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Print restrictions of 21-60 pages or arbitrary segments Single user access/Multiuser access disabled when whole book is checked out Interlibrary loan restricted
D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Print restrictions of 20 pages or less No downloading Single user access only Interlibrary loan restricted

Table 1: Spectrum of DRM with ILL Restrictions

often retains other titles for exclusive distribution. Please note that the intention of Figure 1 is to illustrate the concept of overlapping and unique titles between aggregators and a publisher, not to represent actual percentages of overlapping or unique titles for any publishers or aggregators.

There is also the librarian's worst fear. A library contracts with an aggregator where one of the biggest selling points was content from a specific publisher. Then, that publisher's contract ends and they decide to remove their eBooks from the aggregator. Of course, this is only true of subscription options. If you purchased a perpetual option, titles will remain in your collection but only in a static form (i.e., you cannot upgrade from single to multi-user). Aggregator platforms tend to have more features such as creating bookshelves and making notations or bookmarks. There are usually more restrictions associated with an aggregator platform, which are publisher-driven and can create disparity even in the same platform system (i.e., one publisher allows 60 pages to be printed and another only allows 10).

Business Models

Perpetual Access vs. Subscribed Access

— Many factors influence the decision to purchase, subscribe, or even rent content on an eBook platform. One-time funds, course reserve needs, or the need for regular content updates often dictate the decision-making process. Single titles are typically purchased outright with perpetual access rights to the content, though the short-term loan (i.e., renting) is becoming a popular way to provide temporary access to a title (further explained in License Models). Many packages offer the option for either perpetual purchase or an annual subscription. However, there are packages, especially those with content that changes periodically, which may only allow for subscriptions.

Packages vs. Title-by-Title — Packages of eBooks offer a great way to provide access to a large number of titles for a relatively low cost, but packages rarely can provide all the eBooks your patrons will need. Firm orders are a great way to cherry pick eBooks to build your collection and fill in the gaps. However, some titles may not be available for individual purchase and can only be found in packages. BYO (Build Your Own) models offer the flexibility of choice, but often do not carry the discount of traditional packages. This model can serve as a starter package, with the ability to add more content title-by-title.

PDA/DDA — Patron- or Demand-Driven Acquisitions (henceforth referred to as PDA), is a hot topic in eBook acquisitions and has become increasingly popular. PDA eBook models use an approval plan type profile to generate titles lists and MARC records which are loaded into a catalog and/or discovery service. Purchases are triggered based on use. The number of uses which trigger a purchase is negotiated with the vendor. Actions such as viewing tables of contents, indexes, or limited page browsing typically do not constitute a

Full-text searching	✓
Highlights search terms	✓
Create bookshelf	✓
Create bookmarks and notes	✓
Print notes	✓
Automatic citations	✓
Mobile accessibility	✓
Printing/Downloading	✓
Whole book downloading/loans	✓

Table 2: User Features Checklist

use. Some PDAs require that libraries pay for short-term loans on uses prior to perpetual purchase. The benefit of this model is that it places the power of selection in the hands of the users, and libraries only pay for content that is used. Our institution's analysis of PDA return on investment indicates that the cost per use of titles purchased via PDA is lower than titles purchased through firm orders.⁴

License Models

There are several eBook licensing models which affect concurrent access. These models are generally referred to as the following: single-user, multi-user, unlimited, access/Non-Linear, and short-term loan. The single-user model is the simplest and provides access to an eBook one user at a time. While single-user models inherently block access to more than one user, the access block is only in place while the title is being actively viewed online by another patron. Most single-user models do not allow for loans, but there are exceptions. These exceptions can cause problematic situations when titles are checked out for days or weeks and are inaccessible to other patrons. Most platforms do allow libraries to purchase multiple single-user licenses, but this can become very costly. The multi-user model is a popular way to provide access to more than one user at a time, and is usually significantly cheaper than buying multiple single-user licenses. Multi-user licenses typically allow for three concurrent users, but there are models, particularly for database-like reference works on publisher platforms, that have concurrent seat limits that can range from 3-99. Depending on the publisher and platform, some multi-user licenses do allow titles to be loaned, with one concurrent use always reserved for online access. The access or Non-Linear lending model is a type of multi-user license that allows for a set number of uses of a title within a certain period of time, typically a year. Each year the number of uses is refreshed for no additional cost to the library. While this model has the potential to reduce turnaways, it could also mean having to purchase multiple licenses for high-use titles in order to maintain access to titles for the entire year. The short-term loan (STL) provides single-user access to a title, but it is limited by a set time period. STLs involve paying a percentage of the list price to gain access for a set period of time, with cost

correlated to the length of the loan. The STL model is akin to renting, and it may prove to be a cost effective alternative to borrowing titles via interlibrary loan. STLs are increasingly integrated into PDA plans, where libraries are charged STL fees for all uses before the use that triggers a purchase.

User Features

The features a platform provides to its users can drastically affect the usability (or lack thereof) of the eBooks a library purchases. Today's traditional undergraduate students have high expectations in regards to online functionality, and not all eBook platforms meet those expectations. Table 2 provides a checklist of features to keep in mind when making eBook purchasing decisions. The section below will discuss these very important features in more detail.

Browsers — It is best to investigate how a platform works in various browsers. Even if it does not play into purchase decisions, it is essential to know for marketing and user support. A provider whose main format is PDF is usually not a problem. But platforms that have their own readers (even built-in PDF readers) and special functions, are likely to have the most variation from browser to browser. It is also a best practice to investigate how content displays on Internet Explorer, Firefox, Chrome, and Safari at the minimum.

Mobile Accessibility — Libraries should also always investigate mobile access when it is promoted as a feature of an eBook platform because mobile access can mean a lot of things. Is there a mobile-compatible site? Does the provider have their own app? Does that app just give table of contents for their books? Is it an app with full searching capabilities and whole book downloads? Is it accessible on both IOS and Android devices? Bluefire Reader is a common third-party eBook app that works with many providers to apply the DRM which allows whole book reading on the device. In most cases, users will need an account for the eBook platform and an Adobe Digital Editions account.

Other Features — Many eBook platforms have interactive features which almost always require users to establish an account on the platform. Common features include a bookshelf

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where you can save the books you are interested in, as well as the ability to create bookmarks within the books and make notes that will be attached to pages. These features are not all standardized across platforms, however. One potential frustration for users is the inability to print/download/email the notes they have attached to the pages in the book. A feature that students particularly appreciate is an automatic citation option where, with a click, the interface will provide the proper citation to that book or chapter in a few of the more common styles. Being able to search the full-text of the eBook is expected by most users, but it is not always available. There are still platforms which only search the citation and abstract. When full-text searching is available, it does not always work the same way across platforms. The more robust platforms not only search the full-text, but they also display a list of where search term(s) can be found in the book and highlights the term(s) within the text.

Acquisition and Management

Managing multiple eBook platforms can be daunting. Just keeping track of administrative usernames and passwords is a task in and of itself. However, it is the administrative interface that allows libraries to make limited changes to affect how patrons interact with the platform, increase the discoverability of the content, add or purchase content, and ascertain how patrons are using the content in order to determine return on investment. Just as no two platforms are alike, neither are the administrative modules. Sometimes, just locating the administrative interface login screen can be difficult, and once you login the interface itself can be intimidating (“What happens if I accidentally click the wrong button?”). Expert training on the functionality from vendor representatives can go a long way to reduce librarians’ anxiety, but knowing what features are available can help librarians understand the possibilities or restrictions a platform may provide. While no platform’s administrative interface offers all of the features discussed here, Table 3 provides a checklist of administrative features to keep in mind when making eBook purchasing decisions.

Acquisitions — Many aggregator platforms offer collection management and acquisitions modules within their site, whereas most publisher platforms require one to request quotes and place orders through a sales rep. Some aggregators also offer their content through book vendors, such as **YBP** and **Ingram/Countts**, though, to date, none of the distributors have rights to sell content from all of the aggregators. This means that to determine availability, licensing options, and pricing for a single title, library staff must potentially:

- search their primary domestic book distributor’s database
- search the acquisitions module of multiple aggregators
- contact publisher vendor reps

Acquisitions & PDA Management	✓
Admin Alerts	✓
Authentication Method Management	✓
Institutional Branding	✓
Manage Download/Loan Period	✓
Manage User Accounts	✓
(free) MARC Records	✓
Correct & Current KB Metadata	✓
Discovery Service Indexing	✓
Usage Reports	✓
Title Lists	✓

Table 3: Admin Features Checklist

The administrative modules of most aggregators allow the librarian/staff to search that provider’s entire eBook catalog, view licensing options and pricing, and place orders. Many also allow for individual librarian/subject specialist accounts. These multiple accounts can accommodate workflows where subject specialists tag titles they would like to order, and acquisitions staff authorize and submit the order to the vendor. The ability to create and add titles to lists or carts is common, as is the ability to input and attach fund codes and purchase order numbers. Some aggregators also offer the ability to create custom course packs, which can incorporate chapters from multiple titles at a rate lower than purchasing the title outright. When running PDA programs some platforms offer the ability to add, remove, or block titles; to adjust profile options; and to manage mediated short-term loans or purchases within the administrative module. In addition, downloadable invoices and fee reports can be especially useful when managing budgets.

Administration — The ability to view and download title lists for subscriptions and/or purchases is a highly valued tool. For example, title lists can facilitate the reconciliation of titles in an Electronic Resource Management (ERM) system or Integrated Library Service (ILS) to ensure that all entitlements are accounted for and accessible. Such lists can also come in handy when performing collection assessment tasks, such as determining which disciplines are supported by a package subscription or performing an overlap analysis. License type or concurrency limits are very often included in these reports.

A convenient feature is the ability to create additional administrative and staff accounts and to set staff permissions. It is always a good idea to ensure that at least one additional acquisitions or electronic resources staff member is able to login to the administrative module and is at least somewhat familiar with the settings. Of course, the flip side of that is to have too many administrators or staff with more permissions than they need or understand. The ability to update contacts and bill to/ship to addresses is fairly common and can be useful during staffing or location changes.

Some platforms also allow librarians to setup alerts for specific situations, such as turnaway notifications, short-term loan or purchase mediation notifications, and the end of a loan period.

Many platforms offer the ability to control authentication methods. The ability to set, update, or at least view IP ranges is extremely common in most administrative interfaces. Being able to see which IP ranges a provider has on file for your institution is probably the most basic bit of information needed when troubleshooting access problems, and having to e-mail customer service to confirm IP ranges is inconvenient. Some platforms also offer the ability to configure Athens or Shibboleth authentication (or other single sign-on system), but unless one has experience doing this it is a good idea to get guidance from library/campus IT staff. Referring URLs and/or proxy server credentials can also be established for some platforms. Providers can also offer administrators the ability to establish and manage guest or patron accounts, including resetting passwords or revoking access; however, this is usually only necessary for institutions which do not employ IP range or proxy access.

Although institutional branding may not seem like a very important piece to managing eBook collections, it can go a long way in ensuring that students and faculty understand that the library or, at the very least, the college/university provided the content. Most platforms allow administrators to upload logos and banner text for display in the patron interface. Additional branding elements might include links to the library homepage, interlibrary loan login site, and ask-a-librarian sites.

Perhaps the most important functions of the administrative interface are those that allow a librarian to change settings to influence how patrons are able to access and interact with the platform and the content. Although the power the librarian has to change the platform is limited, small changes in the settings can be perceived as significant (either negatively or positively) by the user.

Platforms that allow for downloads and checkouts often allow administrators to set

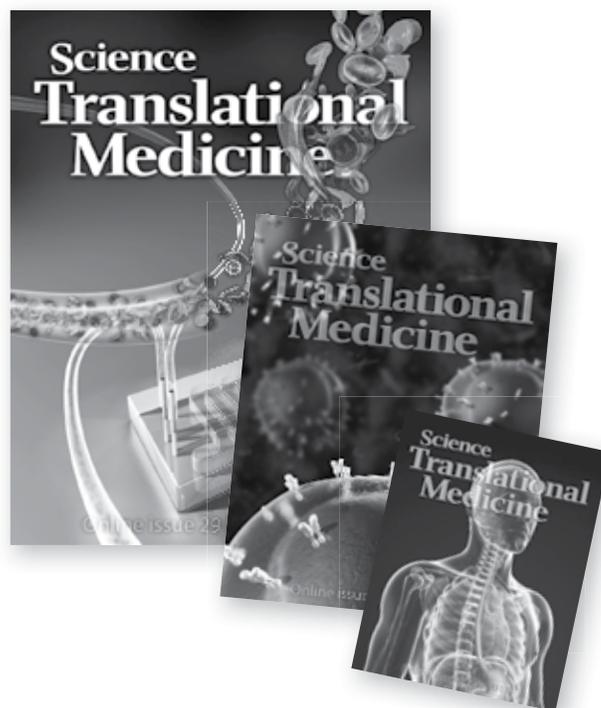
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loan period defaults, either for the collection as a whole or for individual titles. Although it is tempting to allow users the maximum checkout period, it is not always the best idea, depending on the platform options and license. When a title that is available for download is adopted as a course text, it is advisable to shorten the loan period for that particular title if possible. If the platform only allows administrators to set loan periods for the entire collection, then this title almost invariably ends up getting checked out by one person and (depending on the license) may not be available to other users for days or weeks. Hopefully in the future, more platforms will allow for adjusting loan periods or turning off the download option at the title level.

Some platforms offer additional options that can enhance the user experience such as setting the default landing pages, the default search settings, and whether all content or only owned/accessible content is displayed. If you choose to display all content on the platform, it would be wise, if possible, to also configure the settings for your institution's OpenURL link resolver. Although there are many options and settings available within some administration sites, once these settings are established, it is rarely necessary to make changes.

Discovery Considerations — Ensuring that your patrons are able to discover the content you have purchased or are providing access to is key. Why go to the trouble of spending the money or setting up the PDA if you are not going to make the content discoverable? There are three basic methods of ensuring discoverability:

- Load MARC records into the library catalog
- Tag titles or collections within an ERM and/or link resolver knowledge base
- Include titles within a discovery service (via MARC record upload and/or tagging in the knowledge base)

The method or combination of methods you implement will, of course, depend on the types of services your library offers its patrons.

Many eBook providers will offer MARC records to load into your library's catalog, often at no additional charge, for the titles or collections it sells or provides access to through a PDA. Generally speaking, the quality of the records provided by vendors has increased over the years, but this varies based on the vendor, the collection, and even the title. Many platforms allow downloading of MARC records from the administrative or acquisition module. Other platforms deliver the records via e-mail or FTP, while some allow download from a public site by anyone. Some providers include OCLC numbers in the MARC records, but most catalogers familiar with eBook records are quick to point out that just because there is an OCLC number in the record, does not mean it is a true OCLC record. There are providers, primarily aggregators, who are working directly with OCLC to deliver MARC records, and

User Side	Administrative Side
Both PDF and EPUB3 format options	Beautiful, robust, and free MARC records from OCLC
DRM Free = no additional software to download	DRM Free = no need to set loan periods
Compatible in all major browsers and mobile devices	Multiple librarian accounts with permission levels
Single sign-on Authentication with library/institutional accounts	Single sign-on for admin modules with library/institutional accounts
Truly unlimited user access	High profile institutional branding
Ability to personalize	Manage loan period title-by-title or turn off download option
Interactive content	COUNTER & Non-COUNTER usage book reports (i.e. no journal reports for book series)
Full-text searchable	Price equivalent to print
Ability to download entire book to any device (all titles, all publishers)	Full-text and chapter level indexing in discovery services
Uniform features across all platforms (i.e. e-journal evolution)	Seamless, comprehensive integration with ERMs and discovery services (i.e. no manual tagging)
	Ability to purchase titles and download MARC records directly from admin module
	All purchasable titles displayed in all book vendor interfaces (i.e. GOBI, OASIS, etc..)

Table 4: Ideal Academic eBook Ecosystem

this number is likely to grow with the advent of OCLC's WorldCat knowledge base and WorldShare Metadata service.

Tagging eBooks in ERMs and/or link resolvers (this is often one in the same for many libraries) can provide additional access points for patrons, such as a searchable A-Z eBook list or access to eBook content via the link resolver. Many ERMs also offer eBook MARC records as an additional service. eBook records from ERM services have some of the same quality issues as those from the platforms. It would be wise to assess the quality of records before loading them and to take into account other technical services workflows. One benefit of using MARC records services from ERM providers is that the URL in the MARC is maintained by the ERM provider, so library staff will rarely have to reload or overlay records when platforms undergo changes.

As more and more libraries begin to rely on discovery services as a supplement to the traditional OPAC, this will likely become one of the most crucial methods of providing eBook access. It is very common for libraries to upload their entire catalog into the index of their discovery service, but tagging titles within the discovery service itself may provide additional benefits such as the inclusion of table of contents and full-text indexing. No discovery service indexes all eBook platforms (yet), so it is a good idea to work with both your discovery service and eBook platform representatives to determine which platforms are or are not indexed and to what extent (chapter level, front and back matter, full-text, etc.).

Getting Data — Usage reports are one of the best tools librarians have at their disposal to see which of the resources are being used and how they are being used. The vast majority of eBook platforms offer a wide range of usage reports. Most aggregators and publishers offer COUNTER compliant usage reports, and almost all offer platform-specific reports (non-COUNTER compliant). While COUNTER compliant reports are the standard, platform-specific reports can also be extremely useful and informative.

The fourth release of the **COUNTER Code of Practice** was issued in April 2012,⁵ though some providers may only offer reports based on the first **COUNTER Code of Practice** released in 2006. The following five reports from the 4th release of the **COUNTER Code of Practice**⁶ deal directly with eBooks:

- *Book Report 1: Number of Successful Title Requests by Month and Title*
- *Book Report 2: Number of Successful Section Requests by Month and Title*
- *Book Report 3: Access Denied to Content Items by Month, Title and Category*
- *Book Report 4: Access Denied to Content Items by Month, Platform and Category*
- *Book Report 5: Total Searches by Month and Title*

The first release also included *Book Report 6: Total Searches and Sessions by Month and Service* which, for all practical purposes, is being replaced with *Platform Report 1*. Other notable changes between the first and fourth releases are that turnaways are now being referred to as "Access Denied to Content Items" and *Book Report 1* and *Book Report 2* now exclude titles with zero usage. It is rare for all five **COUNTER Book Reports** to be available from the same platform. How each platform makes its content available and tracks usage and turnaways will affect which **COUNTER** reports are available.

Platform-specific usage reports vary greatly. The objective of some platform-specific reports is to provide granularity on types of usage that are not accounted for within the **COUNTER** framework. For example, it would be impossible to drill down in a **COUNTER** report to determine the number of short-term loans a PDA generated. Some platforms also allow collection-specific statistics. This is exceedingly useful when one has a subscription-based collection, a PDA pilot that ended two years ago, a current PDA,

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and firm orders all on the same platform. Some platforms also give the option to limit the report by subject discipline. Other platform-specific reports give you most-used title reports and may include charts and graphs.

When it comes to gathering usage data, there can be other challenges. For example, there are platforms which do not offer title-by-title usage. In addition, there are providers that tout COUNTER compliance, but because of the way they treat their content, only journal or database reports are available as opposed to title-by-title book reports. There are also platforms which do not offer downloadable reports but email the reports monthly instead. Before committing to purchases on a platform, make sure that the usage reports meet the needs of the library.

The Perfect eBook System

This article has discussed many of the issues and features surrounding academic eBook platforms. The eBook platform of a librarian's dream would include every feature discussed above and more. Since no single eBook platform seems to contain all of the features described above, each library will have to make decisions about which features are most important to its users and staff. Table 4 represents responses collected from a live (non-scientific) poll at the **Charleston Conference** preconference session *Off-the-Shelf: E-Book Platforms for Academic Librarians* and is intended to give readers a picture of an ideal academic eBook ecosystem.

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Endnotes

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Rumors from page 10

Speaking of the **Charleston Conference** and *Against the Grain*, there was a lot of reaction to **Jenica Rogers** keynote talk in November. Read the editorial this issue, p. 78 — **The Charleston Conference Continues — Getting to No: Calling for an End to Contention** by **James Bunnell, Jill Emery, Michael Levine-Clark, Emily McElroy, Anne McKee, and Mary Page.**

Gosh! Bam-zowie! **Turpin Distribution** has announced the appointment of the wonderful **Nawin Gupta** as a Non Executive Director. **Nawin** will assist **Turpin** with their development and implementation of

growth opportunities within the U.S. market. **Nawin** is Principal at **Informed Publishing Solutions, Inc.** a publishing consulting practice based in Chicago, and **Secretary General of the Association of Subscription Agents & Intermediaries.** **Nawin's** experience in publishing spans over 35 years. **Lorna Summers** is Managing Director and owner of **Turpin.** And I remember when **Edwin Shelock** first introduced me to **Lorna** oh so many years ago! Remember **Edwin**? He was a frequent speaker at many **Charleston Conferences.** **Lorna** has attended several conferences but I don't believe she has ever spoken. Maybe we should rectify that?
www.turpin-distribution.com/



Heard from **Jeff Strandberg (EastView)** that he is relocating to Hong Kong. **Mike Peters** is taking over his accounts. **Mike** is an academic library sales veteran and we are looking forward to working with him!
www.eastview.com

I was devastated to learn that my absolutely favorite **ATG** columnist — **Bob Nardini** — says that he "has run out of gas!"

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