E-Books in Academic Libraries

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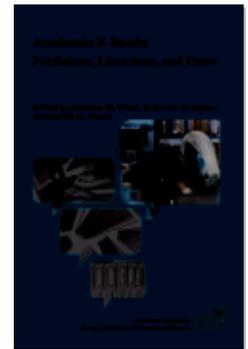Published by Purdue University Press

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5 | Platform Diving: A Day in the Life of an Academic E-Book Aggregator

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ABSTRACT

The author takes a close look at the e-books opened and used on a single day, September 24, 2013, on one academic e-book platform: MyiLibrary. Library users from 584 libraries in 39 countries across every continent began 15,954 sessions on the platform that day. The chapter is not a deep statistical study; it relies less on data and more on the detail of reader sessions to form impressions, make observations, raise questions, and present e-book reading. This brief glance at the activity on this aggregator's platform sheds light on how, when, and even a hint at why users are opening e-books. The glance also looks at the day's statistics on the numbers of books that were only opened and those that were used more heavily.

THE DAY BEGINS

At 7 p.m. Greenwich Mean Time on September 24, 2013, a library reader from Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, England, opened an e-book about film entitled *Documentary*. It took this user under a minute to look at eight pages before moving out of the book. At that same time, at 2 p.m. in the Canadian afternoon, a reader associated with the Université du Québec à Montréal opened *Dictionary of Architectural and Building Technology*, viewed 16 pages over seven minutes, and left. At that very same time, users were viewing titles at Western University in London-Ontario, at Rutgers University, and at Vancouver Island University. At the University of Utah, *Nonparametric Statistics with Applications to*

Science and Engineering hosted a session lasting one minute just before lunch in Salt Lake City.

These six users all opened their e-books within the first minute of a 24-hour period. This is the subject of this chapter: a single day for one academic e-book platform, MyiLibrary. We do not know why these users chose these titles, do not know if they found what they were looking for, and do not know what projects had engaged them in the first place. We do know that by opening e-books, these users—all members of their local academic communities, joined another community of sorts, a temporary one comprised of e-book users from 584 libraries in 39 countries across every continent where there are libraries—converged to begin 15,954 sessions on the platform that day.

Of course, this was no real community, in that users were unaware of one another and likely had no idea that anyone had done anything to enable their e-book use. On September 24 and 25, MyiLibrary staff went about their work as always, preparing the platform to host users for many days into the future, as they have done day in and day out since MyiLibrary's launch in 2004, writing computer code, handling invoices, negotiating with publishers, and many other duties. Few staff members would have been directly aware that users from Newcastle upon Tyne to Salt Lake City were engaged with them at all. As thousands of their e-books were opened, publishers were more distant still from the day's users, who, as has usually been true across the history of books, would remain unknown to them. Onsite users were most likely to have engaged with the librarians and other local staff who no doubt fixed printers, provided e-book instruction, helped recover lost network credentials, answered questions, and solved other problems, while perhaps authorizing more orders to follow the thousands of orders that had built up local MyiLibrary collections for use on this day.

We do, however, refer regularly to the "academic community," and all these groups contributed to a shared experience that was a particle in the galaxy of higher learning spinning across those 24 hours. Today academic e-book use is well-established, widespread, and growing. Five, and certainly 10 years ago, it would have been stretching the truth to say that academic e-book use was "well-established." Today it might be another stretch to refer, quite yet, to academic e-book use as "routine." This chapter will be something like a one-way mirror on those users who visited the MyiLibrary

e-book platform that day in 2013. It will attempt to piece together stories from this representative day, one that ended at 6:59 p.m. Greenwich Mean Time on September 25, when a user from Arizona State University spent 33 midday minutes with *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture.*

The chapter does not aspire to statistical significance, nor attempt to prove anything, and does not closely engage with past studies of e-book use, not even the 2009 *JISC National E-Books Observatory Project*, a "deep log analysis of MyiLibrary" (JISC National E-Books Observatory Project, 2009). This study relies less on data and more on the detail of reader sessions in order to form impressions, make observations, raise questions, and present e-book reading in a less disembodied way than studies sometimes do.

It is difficult not to be struck by how broad—geographically, topically, and temporally—use of the platform was. To take a few of what seemed limitless examples of that breadth: at 9:41 in the evening a reader from the University of the Highlands and Islands in Scotland opened *Mountain Geography* to begin the first of four sessions for the e-book at the university that night. At 5:53 the next morning, a different member of this community opened *Debating the Highland Clearances,* the first of as many as 14 users who consulted that e-book into the afternoon, before another Highlands and Islands-based reader spent 32 minutes in *International Business Economics: A European Perspective*, to close the day's MyiLibrary activity at that archipelago of 13 colleges in the Scottish north.

Meanwhile, a hemisphere away but within the same minute as *Mountain Geography* was first opened, a user in Armidale, New South Wales, at Australia's University of New England opened *Cardiac Arrhythmia Recognition*, the first of 18 sessions at that university, while 1,328 kilometers south, in Melbourne, a La Trobe University patron spent five minutes with five pages of *Cancer Supportive Care: Advances in Therapeutic Strategies*. In an age of technological miracles, nothing here qualifies as one of them. To step back for a moment, though, it seems remarkable that users so far flung can briefly share online space to pursue interests as varied as these.

In other ways, though, the view is different, and use seems less broad. Users opened 6,412 e-books on the platform, just over 1% of some half-million titles available on the platform. However, over 40% of the time, users left their e-books within a minute. With nearly 7,000 sessions as short as that, how broadly could users have engaged with these e-books?

DOWNLOADING TEXTBOOKS

While many users must simply have closed unhelpful sessions, other users did engage with their one-minute e-books—if not at that moment, then later. These were users who either downloaded or printed pages. Downloading, which took place in 315 of these brief sessions, was by far the more common route to this form of "engage later" behavior.

Most download sessions involved textbooks, structured reading expressly assigned to students. A textbook assigned at the University of Bath is a typical story. *Integrated Marketing Communications* hosted 16 sessions there, 10 of them one-minute sessions where most of the day's 11 downloads took place, with most of these for an identical 80 pages. Nobody printed anything.

It is not hard to see why users would dip into their textbook, download, and leave. Having pertinent course readings from a variety of sources conveniently closer at hand than their printed textbooks would be one reason, but another is surely that these students did not own these textbooks and were relying on downloads to make their coursework possible at all. While United Kingdom academic libraries have been more accustomed than North American ones to providing textbooks (print and electronic) to students, there are limits to what any library can do. In recent years the high cost of textbooks has become an issue on both sides of the Atlantic. Rather than bear the expense of buying a textbook, students turn to their library.

Faced with lost sales, publishers counter with strategies such as raised prices, so more students look for alternatives, and prices go even higher. Another publisher strategy is to limit concurrent use of an e-book on aggregator platforms. This way, an entire class cannot rely on the library's online textbook unless students wait their turn, or the library buys more licenses for multiple simultaneous use, which then becomes a budget question. Publishers, too, sometimes withhold textbooks from aggregator platforms, eliminating this free (for students) option. Aggregators receive frequent requests from libraries, who ask on behalf of their students, to add a given title to a platform. More often than not, these titles are widely assigned textbooks that the publishers have specifically withheld from the aggregators.

However, this is not always the case. A Pearson textbook sometimes referred to as Giavazzi and Blanchard provides an example. Olivier Blanchard first wrote *Macroeconomics* in 1977. Working with a number of coauthors over the years, he collaborated with Francesco Giavazzi, of MIT and Italy's

Bocconi University, in 2010 to bring out an edition subtitled *A European Perspective*. It was assigned at two universities this day: the University of Exeter, where there were 43 user sessions, and the University of Sussex, where there were eight. During the Exeter sessions, 12 users downloaded pages. Nine of these users downloaded exactly 61 pages, one downloaded 60 pages, and another 59. Exeter's license permitted three simultaneous users in the e-book, and we can see in the use log how students laid their strategies to get access.

Remarkably, 16 of the Exeter sessions took place between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. on September 25, with sessions beginning at 3:07, 3:28, 3:38, 3:39, 3:44, and 3:57, to take examples from just one of those late hours. Another nine sessions, by early risers, took place between 6 a.m. and 8 a.m. These students must have known, probably from hard experience, than trying to get into the e-book during normal daylight hours would be difficult. Exeter also owned the book in print (or did at least on November 12, 2014, according to an online public access catalog [OPAC] search), but the chances of gaining access to the print book were possibly even more difficult (Exeter's two print copies were both checked out, according to the OPAC). Some students no doubt bought the book, but the image of weary students who had not bought it, opening their economics e-textbook at 3 a.m., is a most concrete way to suggest ideas about the nature of academic aggregator platforms. MyiLibrary was, of course, a lifeline to those students, for whom it was a way to save some money and pass a course. But surely these students would rather not have had to arise at 3 a.m. or stay awake till that hour. Professors assigning the e-book would prefer to prepare reading lists and not have to think about matters like this. Libraries would prefer to serve students with whatever was needed at all times. Of course, Giavazzi and Blanchard, not to mention Pearson Publishing, would naturally wish that that every student would just buy the book in print or e-format instead of using the library's electronic copy.

TURNAWAYS

Things could have been worse at Exeter. There was only one "turnaway" for the e-book (meaning, only one user attempting to open the e-book was turned away because all licenses were in use at that moment). The library had purchased a multiuser license, and students' late nights and other strategies were enough to limit concurrent use to three in all but that one

instance. This was not always the case across the platform that day, since many titles at many libraries had turnaways. At Central Michigan University (CMU), patrons were turned away 43 times from *Theories of Delinquency: An Examination of Explanations of Delinquent Behavior*, no doubt another assigned reading. CMU's license for the e-book, permitting one reader at a time, was on the other hand sufficient to enable 36 successful sessions, likely sometimes on the part of persistent students who had been turned away earlier. In contrast to Exeter, few students opened the e-book in the middle of the night (only one did so at CMU), and none downloaded or printed pages to read later.

Need on the part of CMU students seemed somewhat less acute than at Exeter. That may have been because students in the United States have come to expect relatively low support for textbooks from libraries, and so they turn elsewhere more quickly than would students in the United Kingdom ("Library Attitudes Are Changing, However: Charles Lyons, Library Roles with Textbook Affordability," 2014). The MyiLibrary use log for the day, in fact, showed heavy online textbook use at United Kingdom academic libraries, when compared to the United States, Canada, and most other parts of the world. This is possibly due to a difference in teaching styles, to a difference in library textbook policies, or, in some measure, to both. E-book reading in the United Kingdom focuses on assigned readings more than seems to be the case elsewhere.

Nobody likes turnaways. Locked-out students and their professors complain to librarians, who complain to aggregator representatives, who bring complaints to publishers, who weigh the economic impact of license terms proposed to alleviate the distant—at that point—frustrations of users. The economics are expressed on aggregator platforms by the various license types offered to libraries. They go by different names on different platforms, and not all platforms offer all types. Typical options include single-user, multiuser (usually three), unlimited use, fixed number of annual sessions, and short-term loans.

SHORT-TERM LOANS

Publishers and aggregators go through cycles of negotiation and renegotiation over the conditions under which academic e-books may be read, causing periodic turbulence. Short-term loans, a recent example, are a

pay-per-use license designed to reduce turnaways while expanding title breadth and saving libraries money. While MyiLibrary has not offered this license type, other platforms have developed and promoted the model. In 2014, based on the model's impact on sales over a number of years, a succession of publishers changed pricing terms or withdrew altogether, alarming librarians who had built their local e-book strategy around short-term loan licensing (Wolfman-Arent, 2014). How many users in an e-book at a time? One reader, as the laws of physics dictates for print books or, since those laws are suspended online, as many as need a particular title at the same time? It is all a matter of economics. Should libraries pay for user access to e-books just in case they are needed or when needed? As the terrain of online academic reading is being mapped out, these are significant boundary disputes.

LONG READING

Beyond the business relationships, aggregators act as advisors to both libraries and publishers: as ombudsmen to publishers on behalf of libraries and as enforcement agencies toward libraries on behalf of publishers. This role of policing use so that license limits are observed is most evident with textbooks. Monographs, on the other hand, or books that might only occasionally be assigned as course reading, have less need of being policed since simultaneous use is less frequent. The unlucky University of Bath reader, who tried to open *Market Place: Food Quarters, Design and Urban Renewal in London* but was turned away, was the exception, not the rule, for an e-book that invites sustained reader attention and did support six successful sessions. More typical was the Canadian user at MacEwan University in Edmonton who turned 16 pages of *Aristocratic Vice: A History*, or the German user from Leuphana University of Lüneburg who looked at 28 pages of *The Entropy of Capitalism*. Neither one was turned away. In fact, they were those e-books' only users.

More than 60% of the day's e-books were only used once. Slightly over half of these sessions were very brief visits of a minute or less. Many of those e-books, when opened, must have seemed of no use. The other half of these single-visit e-books, however, was used more intensively. Among these e-books used once, nearly 14%, over 500, hosted sessions of 10 minutes or

more. This contrasts with e-books used more than once, where ten-minute sessions took place not quite 6% of the time.

It is easy to imagine that a user in Mexico from the Universidad de Colima was as grateful to be able to spend over an hour with *No Word for Welcome: The Mexican Village Faces the Global Economy* as the scholar at Concordia University in Montréal who read *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand* for more than two hours, or a reader at the University of Cambridge whose session with the *Routledge Philosophy Guide-Book to Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* lasted for over three hours. Although these three long sessions suggest the kind of deeper reading for which print is probably the best format, these three users would likely say that title breadth is a valuable platform quality. That almost 90% of the 6,411 titles opened that day were used at only one library suggests the same thing.

TOPICAL INTRODUCTIONS

The day's MyiLibrary use suggests that there is a different type of reading for which e-books might be the ideal form. This is when a user needs a brief view of a large topic: an authoritative "introduction." That is, the word chosen by Oxford University Press for its *Very Short Introduction* series, whose use on this day was difficult to miss. More than 30 different titles in the series were opened at more than 30 institutions, from Canada's Athabasca University to Nizhny Novgorod State Technical University in Russia. Books from the *Very Short Introduction* series were opened 73 times on the platform, and sessions lasted over six minutes on average, which suggests that users found the introductions helpful. Sessions included one lasting 28 minutes with *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* at the University of East Anglia, and sessions across the world with *Advertising* and *Geopolitics, Marx,* and *Psychiatry.* These sessions were only the most noticeable among those where gaining hold of a topic seemed the goal, such as for a user at the University of Johannesburg who spent three minutes with *Introducing Architectural Theory,* or at Nottingham Trent University where a user spent two minutes with *Geology: The Key Ideas.* More accessible than print, more focused and authoritative than the web, and easy enough to skim or browse, these e-books must often have fulfilled their purpose.

SUBJECT USE DATA

Business and Economics

Studies of e-book use often present data by subject (for example, Christianson, 2005). Since library budgets usually are organized this way and work assignments frequently are, this makes institutional sense. It may not tell the entire story, however. Two of the most heavily used subject areas this day were in Library of Congress Classification subclass HD (industry, land use, labor), which had 1,096 sessions, and HF (commerce), which had 832. Both would be the territory of academic work in business or economics, whose students were clearly busy. Many of these sessions were assigned readings: textbooks such as *Theories of Development*, for example, had 51 sessions at Rhodes University in South Africa.

Literature

By contrast, use was low in the subclasses PR (English literature), with 178 sessions, and PS (American literature), with only 50; both high book-publishing areas, even considering that only part of that output is nonfiction. Although interest in e-books may well be lower among literature students than business students, is their interest truly that much lower? Textbook-based reading, so common in other fields, is largely absent in literary studies, which accounts for a sizable part of the difference in use. Looking at use by subject, then, and not by the different types of reading experience, might be too narrow a view. Use might have been higher had there been more opportunities for topical introduction, such as two titles: *Shakespeare: The Basics*, read for 20 minutes at Ryerson University in Toronto, and *Edith Wharton in Context,* also opened for 20 minutes at the University of Melbourne. Instead, carrying the textbook-use handicap, it is conceivable that e-book use in literature is misunderstood, and so possibly underfunded. Perhaps close reading sessions such as one for over two hours at Florida State University with *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature* would be more common if more e-books were available, instead of reinforcing by their absence a pattern of lower use.

THE BUSINESS OF SELLING E-BOOKS

Like literature, the sciences saw relatively low use, for example subclass QC (physics) only 163 sessions and QH (natural history, biology) just 161,

neither close to the total of GN (anthropology), which hosted 233. Does that mean that interest in online book reading is stronger in anthropology than in physics or biology? That is not likely the case. A more plausible explanation is the success publishers in the sciences have had in drawing libraries to their own platforms, instead of to aggregators. By withholding or delaying titles, by pricing and licensing policies, by imposing digital rights management (DRM) limitations, and by other means, large publishers who are able to build their own platforms have defined boundaries for aggregators.

Of course these publishers, in moving users in their own direction, have every right to act as a business would. Aggregators, also businesses, provide their value in maintaining relationships with buyers and sellers who could do business otherwise only with greater difficulty. Publishers are in a constant state of discussion with aggregators, who offer access to library sales across a wider base than the publisher might achieve on its own. Here publishers face a fundamental question: How much autonomy in controlling their titles can be ceded profitably to aggregators? If a patron at the University of Nottingham was able to open *Understanding the Steiner Waldorf Approach* and print 14 pages, but users at the University of Plymouth were turned away four times, that was because of the terms Taylor & Francis and MyiLibrary had agreed to offer libraries and the differing arrangements these libraries chose to make within those terms.

Although e-books from more than 400 publishers were opened this day, 11 publishers' e-books accounted for nearly 70% of all sessions, about 11,000 of some 16,000 sessions. If publishers withheld or restricted some e-books, enough were available for MyiLibrary to fulfill its part of the bargain by delivering large numbers of e-books to users whose libraries paid the bills. Of course, the day's reading on the MyiLibrary platform occurred alongside reading sessions on other aggregator platforms, on publisher platforms, on personal devices whose owners had bought e-books, and in printed books. So if MyiLibrary reading was low in the sciences and lacked any e-books from leading trade publishers who had barely begun to explore the academic library market, and if e-books even from some well-known university presses, such as Harvard, were not on the platform, it does not mean those books went unread. It does illustrate, however, that for publishers the role of academic aggregators can be seen as a marketing role, which individual publishers choose to use extensively, selectively, or not at all.

Patron-Driven Acquisitions

Today the plainest illustration of this marketing role is the prevalence of patron-driven acquisitions (PDA) or demand-driven acquisitions (DDA) programs, whereby aggregators in effect advertise availability of titles via MARC records loaded into libraries' online catalogs, and no purchase takes place unless a certain use threshold is reached. Although large publishers usually do not have the capability on their own platforms to track use against a trigger threshold and aggregator platforms generally do, PDA activity is largely aggregator-based. Some publishers permit their e-books to be offered this way, while others, troubled by free, prethreshold PDA use arrangements, do not.

Free use, that is, prepurchase use, was relatively uncommon on MyiLibrary, on this day at least, since only 103 prepurchase sessions occurred. Thirty-four libraries accounted for those sessions, so a small number of libraries, those most invested in PDA, accounted for the lion's share of use. They were led by Arizona State University, where 21 prethreshold sessions took place for titles as varied as *Leisure Programming for Baby Boomers* and *Data Analysis in High Energy Physics*. The day's 1,692 post-PDA purchase sessions (meaning, for e-books already acquired this way) far outnumbered the prepurchase sessions and, in fact, amounted to over 10% of all sessions. These took place in 96 libraries in 11 countries, showing how widespread PDA has become.

Platforms

Companies like MyiLibrary aggregate e-books, of course, but it is equally the case, and just as important, that they aggregate users. In doing that, MyiLibrary aggregated the needs of library patrons across the world who, for all their varied purposes, accessed the platform around the clock, or tried to, for short sessions and long sessions, with e-books assigned and unassigned, in many subject areas.

Every academic aggregator would probably tell a day's story that would be in some ways different, but in many ways the same; different, in that each company has its own strengths that would probably be reflected in the experience of users. When it comes to their challenges, whether looking at emerging customer interests like analytics or interlibrary loan, or at unfamiliar languages or even alphabets in newer world markets, aggregators would likely tell the same story: one of constant change and even volatility. There

is no need for them to tell it, since the public record provides a chronology of the start-ups, mergers, acquisitions, partnerships, successes, and failures that have shaped the industry ("Academic E-Publishing: Some Key Players," 2001; "Baker & Taylor's 'ED' Resurfaces," 2002; "Baker & Taylor Announces E-Book Partnerships," 2000; "Coutts Library Services Kicks Off E-Book Initiatives," 2006; "eBooks Corp. and Blackwell Book Services Have Extended the Scope of Their Collaboration Into the U.K. and Europe," 2007; "ebrary Snags Key Investors for Pay-Per-Use Service," 2000; "Alliances & Deals," 2010; Hane, 1999; "JSTOR Is Expected to Release Books at JSTOR in November," 2012; "Project Muse Editions (PME) and the University Press E-Book Consortium (UPCC) Merged to Create the University Press Content Consortium (UPCC) Set to Launch Jan. 1, 2012," 2011; "ProQuest Puts Ebrary on Its Books," 2011; "ProQuest Recently Acquired Ebook Library (EBL)," 2013; "Re: Coutts Bought by Ingram," 2006; "Strategic Partnership Announced Between Ebooks Corporation and Dawsonbooks," 2004; Young, 2001; 2002).

If users need a broad and always available base of academic titles, there is one usually unstated factor that librarians need from aggregators: stability. For that, "platform" might be the perfect word to convey stability with substance, activity, and purpose. Google`s Ngram Viewer shows that use of the phrase "computer platform" began to take off in the mid-1980s. Its earliest uses, though, were literal, in reference to the massive machines of the time, for example, a 1961 advertisement for "ELAFLOR . . . a solid, noiseless floor, free of vibration . . . a completely flexible computer platform, easily modified and suitable for end-of-room, wall-to-wall, or island installation without significant engineering changes" ("Advertisement," 1961, p. 62). Or in 1975, when a scholar of ancient astronomy described the "excitement of the hour when I stood one night on the computer platform of the Hayden Planetarium" (Pomerance, 1976, p. 18). Today e-book users around the academic world stand on platforms whose stability depends on the interwoven interests of libraries, users, publishers, and aggregators, all aiming to secure their place within the future of online reading.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Librarians' Challenges