E-Books in Academic Libraries

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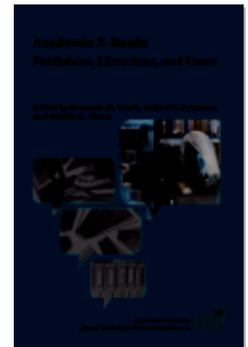Published by Purdue University Press

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Epilogue

Michael Levine-Clark

The University of Denver has been working with e-books in academic libraries since 1999, when it participated in a proto-demand-driven acquisition project with NetLibrary through the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries. At the time, Colorado Alliance librarians grumbled about the digital rights management (though without yet using that term), complained about poor selection of content, protested the high prices relative to print, and speculated that no one would ever want to use these things for immersive reading. The Colorado Alliance and the University of Denver went ahead with NetLibrary because they were convinced that e-books offered enormous potential benefits to their users, and they wanted both to learn about that potential and to help shape it. Sixteen years later, the University of Denver has over half a million e-books available, and use data show that it was wise to invest so heavily in this collection. Yet many of those same problems still exist, and librarians continue to complain about the unrealized potential of e-books.

In 1999, there were few choices for e-books for academic libraries. NetLibrary was founded in 1998, ebrary was founded in 1999, and EBL, founded in 1997, did not begin selling to libraries until 2000–2001 (Machovec, 2003; ebrary, n.d.; Paulson, 2011). Many publishers were wary of e-books, so their participation with these early aggregators was limited at best. It was impossible to purchase e-books through traditional academic library sales channels, so for most libraries e-books were something extra, something librarians thought of as marginal to their main collecting practices. As late as 2007, e-books had still not caught on in academic libraries.

A special issue of *Against the Grain* that year explored some of the reasons why that might have been the case, but Horava's (2007) lead article, "The Renaissance of the eBook," took a generally optimistic view, referring to "the newfound acceptance of eBooks" (p. 1). He then laid out the many challenges libraries faced in integrating e-books into their collections. In that same issue, I argued that e-books needed to be better integrated into approval plans for academic libraries to adopt them readily (Levine-Clark, 2007). Three years later, Slater (2010) made a similar point: "Ideally, the choice to acquire a print or electronic copy of a book should be as simple as a single choice (print, electronic, or both) integrated into the same acquisition systems libraries already use for print books" (p. 238). Although e-books have proven difficult for academic libraries, today they are a key component of our collections. At the University of Denver, as at many academic libraries, there are e-books from multiple vendors, delivered through multiple access models. In some ways, this is because libraries have been able to build e-books into traditional workflows—managing demand-driven acquisition (DDA) pools through approval vendors, for instance—but in others, it is because they have compromised. Librarians now accept access models and restrictions that seemed unacceptable early on and juggle acquisition across multiple platforms in sometimes inefficient ways. E-books are clearly here to stay, but just as clearly, there is room for improvement. What follow are a few thoughts on the current state of e-books in academic libraries, and some suggestions for how e-book access and use models might be improved.

TENSIONS

There are a number of tensions at play in the academic library e-book landscape. E-books have been widely adopted in the consumer space, yet have been less successful in academic libraries. Sometimes librarians want e-books to behave more like print, but in other ways want to take advantage of the benefits the technology can offer. Librarians often are uncomfortable with access restrictions to e-books, yet accept those restrictions to get content to their users. And, perhaps fundamentally, the ability to understand use patterns and user behaviors is forcing librarians to change the way they build collections and is forcing publishers to reconsider what to publish. The chapters in this book hint at some of these tensions, while also exploring many of the possibilities that e-books offer.

PLATFORMS

When academic libraries began offering e-books to their users, they were leading the game, but in 2007, with the introduction of the Kindle, libraries were suddenly very much behind the consumer market (Amazon Kindle, n.d.). Academic library e-books, which already seemed cumbersome, became comparatively even harder to use, and they have only improved a little since then. Loading academic library e-books onto an e-reader is a multistep process and is sometimes impossible. This inability to use the devices that patrons expect means that some forms of reading are extremely unlikely for these e-books, but may mean that other types of use are more likely. Vassallo's (2016) observation that immersive reading has been immensely successful on devices like the Kindle, while nonimmersive reference-like use of materials such as cookbooks has been almost nonexistent, is fascinating, given that the experience in academic libraries has been the opposite. Academic librarians hear from their users that they prefer print books for longer periods of immersive reading, while accepting or even preferring e-books for brief forays into the book to look up information or check citations. This suggests that academic libraries need to do a better job getting users to the device they need for a given task: a dedicated e-book reader for immersive reading or the web interface for shorter tasks, combined with the ability to provide local print-on-demand services for any e-book in the collection. Further, librarians and their vendors should consider whether these interfaces—which are designed for both immersive and short reading—might be better designed with only shorter reading and accompanying behaviors in mind, with easy capability to transfer an e-book to a reader when needed.

SOMETIMES LIBRARIANS WANT TO REPLICATE PRINT, SOMETIMES THEY DON'T

Academic librarians often express frustration that e-books do not yet allow users to do things that were impossible in the print world, but should be easy in the e-world. E-books, according to these arguments, should be accessible to many users at once, should be easily searchable, should be "chunk-able" into chapters or other logical parts, and should be easy to read online. In short, e-books should be better versions of their print antecedents. Solutions to some of these problems involve better digital rights

management (DRM), others involve better platform and interface development by vendors, and still others involve better integration into library discovery services.

A slight variation on this theme is that e-books should allow publishers to build something better than a digital version of a print book. Why are they still publishing long-form scholarship in the way it was a generation ago when e-books should allow users to experiment with hypertext, embedded media, and other creative forms of content? So far, the publisher and vendor platforms that libraries use have been built to provide nothing more than digital versions of print books. Experiments with enhanced e-books are relatively rare, because as Costanzo (2014) points out, "the market as it currently exists doesn't allow publishers to deliver the same enhanced product across all current digital platforms" (para. 3). So academic libraries are stuck with digital versions of print books instead of something new and improved. This is a tricky problem to solve, in that any solution involving a purpose-built platform exacerbates the existing problem of titles being unevenly available across publisher and vendor platforms.

Somewhat contradictorily, librarians also ask why e-books cannot behave more like print, because there are some features of print books that work very well. Perhaps most significantly, one copy of a print book is the same as all other copies of that print book. Libraries can get a print book from their preferred vendor, and if a copy of that book ends up in the collection from some other source, it is fully compatible with the existing collection. Not so with an e-book, which may only be available on selected platforms from particular vendors and will have slightly different functionality on each platform. It is completely reasonable for librarians to expect e-book purchasing to be as easy as print book purchasing.

In some ways, the basic structure of the print book is so effective that librarians wish to replicate it in e-books. Despite the wish for better searching in e-books, the traditional index is in many ways still a better entry point to the text than keyword searching. Reporting on important studies by Abdullah and Gibb (2008), Zhang and Niu (2016) observe that the index can sometimes still be the most effective way to access content within a monograph of any sort. This is a good reminder that there are aspects of the traditional print monograph that work very well and should be retained, and even highlighted in the designs of e-book platforms.

In other cases academic librarians use a print mindset to manage e-book collections. One simple way in which they do this is assigning a single call number to each book (as a shelf location) instead of many (as subject access points). Another is trying to replicate interlibrary loan (ILL), a function of the print world, instead of inventing something new. Interestingly, Litsey, Ketner, Blake, and McKee (2016) are explicit about having adopted a print model to create an e-book ILL system. ILL is fundamentally about providing a user with temporary access to an item not in that user's home collection. ILL is one way of providing that access, but is probably more labor intensive and costly than simply carrying out a short-term loan (STL) of an e-book from a vendor. This seems to be a case where inventing something entirely new might be more effective. For an expansion of this point, see Levine-Clark (2011).

DIGITAL RIGHTS MANAGEMENT

Librarians, rightly, are concerned about DRM of e-books. Providing access to content that has limitations on use is frustrating for the user and ultimately will make it harder for e-books to succeed. It may be useful to think of DRM as falling into two very broad categories, the second of which should concern librarians much more than the first. The first category of DRM has to do with controlling access to the library; it has a financial intent and involves mostly differential pricing for single vs. multiple user models. Libraries can choose to spend more to get broader access or less for narrower access. In reality, most books have low enough use that a single user license will suffice, and a model that would allow unmediated buy-up to add additional users at the point of need would solve most problems caused by this limitation. In some cases, such as course adoption titles, these limits on simultaneous use allow libraries to have access to titles that economic pressures otherwise would keep out of libraries entirely. This sort of limitation may be a necessary compromise, but, as Thomas and Chilton (2016) note, it is not reasonable for a user to be told that an e-book is "checked out" and therefore unavailable. Limited user models must allow some flexibility to increase access so as not to inconvenience the user.

The second category of DRM involves restraints placed directly on the user—such as limiting the number of pages that can be copied or printed and preventing the e-book from being loaded onto an e-reader. These barriers,

which happen after acquisition and therefore do not impact the publisher's bottom line, serve only to frustrate the user and need to be removed from academic library e-book models.

USE DATA AND USER NEEDS

One thing that e-books offer is the potential for better understanding of how library users interact with monographs. In the print world, circulation data could tell whether a book was checked out (but not whether or how that book was used while checked out), and sometimes reshelving data could be used to indicate that someone had looked at that title in the library. In theory, librarians can learn much more from studying e-book use than was ever possible when studying print book use, and those lessons can help to understand print collections better. In reality, librarians have done a poor job studying e-book use so far, partly because the reporting tools do not give a nuanced enough view of use. COUNTER book use reports, for instance, tell only how many section views took place, but often do not clearly define whether a section is a page or a chapter or something else ("The COUNTER code of practice for e-resources," 2012, p. 16–17). Some vendor platforms, such as EBL's LibCentral, provide more meaningful measures of use, such as the length of time in the book, number of pages viewed, and whether a download occurred. More vendors and publishers should follow EBL's lead in this regard.

Nardini's (2016) chapter, "Platform Diving: A Day in the Life of an Academic E-Book Aggregator," provides an example of another interesting way of looking at use. As he points out, so often quantitative views of use, made possible by the reporting tools described above, omit more subtle but telling observations, such as the times of day when e-books are accessed and the degree to which there are clusters of subject overlap. As e-books come to represent larger portions of library monograph collections, it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of use patterns.

Although the ability to measure use has not significantly changed librarians' understanding of user behavior, it has fundamentally shifted how they build collections. Most significantly, it has allowed the development of DDA, which has benefited libraries by allowing them to present their users with a much larger pool of content from which to choose than was possible under traditional prospective purchasing models. But as the

recent adjustments by publishers to STL pricing have shown, an unintended consequence of this new model is a decrease in predictable revenue for publishers and the potential for a decrease in their ability to publish some monographs. Gaining a better understanding of use may help publishers make better predictions about what to publish, and may push some monographs into other publication streams. Academic librarians must work with publishers to figure out how their choices will impact publication decisions, and in some cases may need to compromise their values around pricing and DRM in order to get potentially low-use monographs published.

CONCLUSION

From their first experiences with e-books, academic librarians have been excited about the possibilities they could offer in terms of greater use and better searchability. And equally, they have been frustrated because e-books do not ever quite reach their potential. Almost two decades after the first e-books appeared in academic libraries, it is clear that e-books are here to stay, but it is equally clear that problems remain. Librarians still want e-books to behave both more and less like print books (and should be able to have it both ways). They want better and more predictable access models. They want better platforms and easier access to e-readers. But there are some enormous opportunities. The ability to understand use can help shape access models, build better collections, and better serve users. The chapters in this volume express many of these frustrations, but also offer suggestions about how librarians, publishers, and vendors can provide a better e-book experience to end users.

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