

## E-books in Libraries

### Introduction

While many readers, publishers, and information professionals remain unsure about the value of e-books, their popularity has increased dramatically in the past few years. First introduced in 1971 by Project Gutenberg, e-books did not become mainstream until many years later (Polanka 3). In 2009, affordable releases of the Sony eReader, Barnes & Noble Nook, and Amazon Kindle triggered a surge in e-book use. At this time, they accounted for a small percentage of book sales (Encyclopedia Britannica, s.v. “e-book”). However, e-book demand and interest have increased substantially in the past two years (Joss 13).

E-book lending in libraries has grown as well. The amount spent on e-books has increased in all types of libraries, with a 2010 survey noting a 150-200% increase in e-book materials budgets. Currently, 94% of academic libraries, 33% of school libraries (Rapp), and approximately 75% of public libraries (Joss 12) provide e-books for patron use. These figures are expected to rise in coming years with libraries predicting e-book circulation increases of 65 to 84% between 2010 and 2011 (Rapp).

As libraries attempt to integrate e-books into their collections, they face new opportunities as well as new challenges. This paper will provide a brief overview of the fundamentals of e-books in general and e-books in libraries in particular. It will highlight some of the benefits of e-book use in libraries and address some of the limitations and shortcomings, including concerns voiced by information professionals as well as those voiced by readers/users. It will offer suggestions for developing, maintaining, and growing an e-book collection in a library setting. Finally, it will discuss how the library’s role must change as patron demands shift.

## Overview

There are approximately two dozen types of e-readers and e-reading software programs, including the Amazon Kindle, Sony eReader, Barnes & Noble Nook, and a myriad of e-reading applications for computers, tablets, and smartphones. Although the number of people using e-readers is rising (Joss 12), the most popular way to read e-books is on a computer (Colvin 18). ePub is the most commonly used e-book format (Polanka 64) although there is currently no industry-wide standard. Content can be purchased from several sources: directly from publishers and authors, through booksellers, and via aggregators like OverDrive and EBrary, who include titles by multiple publishers and authors.

Libraries add e-books to their collections via one of a handful of purchasing models. Through title by title purchasing, libraries order materials one at a time, based on expected interest or demand. Libraries can also purchase multiple titles from a single genre, author, or subject through bundled collection purchasing. Via the subscription purchasing model, libraries pay an annual fee for a collection of titles that are updated each year. Subscriptions generally include less popular titles but can be an excellent way for libraries to add materials to their collection at a low cost per item. Finally, libraries can add titles via “patron-driven” or “pay-per-use” purchasing. Using this model, bibliographic data for items is loaded into a library’s catalog. Patrons can browse these titles but the library is not charged for items until they are accessed by a user (Joss 13).

Purchasing models vary from library to library depending on an institution’s needs. Academic libraries who wish to offer access to a wide range of expensive, low-demand titles may find the “pay per use” model appealing, while public libraries may opt to purchase cheap,

high-demand titles one by one. Purchasing models generally dictate lending models, which fall into two categories: one book/one patron and unlimited or simultaneous access (Polanka 76).

### Libraries and E-books: Challenges

Libraries face a number of challenges related to the acquisition, integration, and provision of e-books in their collections. While some of these are minor and will likely require minimal adjustment to effectively address, others present significant issues for information professionals. Effective solutions for many of these larger issues are not immediately obvious. Suitable resolution will likely require the cooperation of librarians, publishers, and vendors.

One major challenge for libraries is that publishers dictate lending terms. Libraries license, rather than own, e-books and must adhere to lending terms set forth by publishers in licensing agreements. These terms can be highly unfavorable for libraries and may include lending limits and use restrictions. In February 2011, HarperCollins announced that all future e-book titles purchased by libraries could be loaned out a maximum of 26 times, at which point the book's license would expire. The library would then be required to repurchase the title or renew the license. Other publishers, including MacMillan and Simon & Schuster, do not allow libraries to lend e-book titles that they publish (Hadro).

Another challenge for libraries concerns digital rights management (DRM), which restricts the ways that e-book content may be used and shared. DRM, which exists on nearly all purchased e-books (Polanka 138) limits and/or prohibits sharing, downloading, printing, copying, saving, and other practices frequently utilized by libraries. DRM creates major problems for libraries who wish to loan or borrow items via interlibrary loans, as the right to access or share materials via ILL is rarely included in e-book licensing terms (Polanka 90).

The lack of standard e-book format also creates problems for libraries. Many formats and e-readers are incompatible, preventing patrons with certain devices from using e-books offered by the library. Currently, format incompatibility prevents Amazon Kindle owners from borrowing e-books from public libraries, although this is expected to change by the end of 2011 (Burns). Additionally, if a library changes vendors or formats, there is no guarantee that they will be able to transfer or access previously purchased e-books in other formats.

Another challenge is that patron demand often outpaces supply. Currently, the e-book selection in most libraries is relatively small (Rapp), especially when compared to print material selection (Boehret). Patrons generally want popular frontlist titles and the newest academic and reference texts. However, e-book editions of titles are often released up to six months after their print equivalents (Polanka 81). Additionally, not all titles are available in e-book format and not all publishers allow their e-books to be distributed in libraries. Finally, budget constraints may prevent libraries from keeping up with e-book demand.

Many patrons still prefer print books and may be hesitant or unwilling to convert to e-books. While some readers love the convenience and portability offered by e-books, others find them to be awkward and difficult to use. Searching for and downloading titles can be difficult. Checking out a single title may require a dozen or more steps, including patron logins at multiple sites and e-reading software downloads (Boehret). Further, while patrons can visually browse hundreds of print titles very quickly, e-book browsing is more cumbersome. Browsible categories are extremely broad and only a small number of titles are viewable on each page, requiring that users click through many pages of titles to see what the library offers.

Finally, e-books may contribute to a widening digital divide. If libraries increasingly purchase e-books rather than print, or purchase certain titles in e-book format only, patrons who

don't have access to a smartphone, e-reader, or home computer will be unable to borrow them. This directly conflicts with the notion of libraries as providers of free access to information for all, regardless of age, class, gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

### Benefits of Library E-book Use

While e-books present libraries with a number of challenges, they also offer many over print materials. One such advantage is that e-books increase access to materials. They can be accessed 24/7, so patrons can find and use materials outside of library hours. Users can access e-books regardless of proximity to a physical location. Those who are unable to visit the library, like the elderly and the homebound, will be able to access a much broader range of materials than those provided through traditional outreach methods. Finally, materials that patrons are conventionally prohibited from removing from the library, like rare maps, photos, and reference texts, can be borrowed in digitized format.

Electronic texts can include “extras” that aren't possible with print materials, offering patrons an enhanced reading experience. Readers can instantly look up definitions to unknown words. Via the text-to-speech function offered with most e-reading software, they can click on words and hear pronunciation. E-books often offer multi-language support, increasing accessibility for non-English-speaking patrons. Font size and text orientation can be adjusted, increasing access for the visually impaired. Finally, authors and publishers can produce “deluxe” editions of titles, embedding relevant links, video and other media directly in the e-book text.

Another advantage is that e-books offer significantly better search capabilities. While print materials-searching is limited to the information included in cataloging records and metadata, the contents of e-books can be explored in their entirety via full-text searching. This

may be especially useful for lengthy reference materials and academic texts that are cumbersome to search and navigate in print format. Full-text searching gives users broader access to the text contained in collection materials. This allows librarians to better assist patrons in information searches and may allow patrons to perform more effective searches on their own.

E-books take up no shelves or physical space, allowing libraries to expand their collections regardless of building size or space availability. This is particularly beneficial to small libraries and those whose print collection meets or exceeds its book storage capacity. Additionally, librarians never have to worry about reshelving electronic materials after they've been browsed or borrowed.

Finally, e-books will likely save libraries money in the long run. They will reduce space, storage, and warehousing costs. They are cheaper for publishers to produce, print, store, and transport so may be cheaper than print versions, allowing libraries to stretch budget dollars further. Electronic materials don't wear out- even with high use- and they don't get lost or stolen, so libraries won't need to repurchase books that have deteriorated or gone missing. Furthermore, they will reduce shipping costs for interlibrary loans once the logistics of e-book ILL are worked out.

### Suggestions for Developing an E-book Lending Service

Ultimately, libraries must tailor their e-book lending programs to suit their needs and the needs of their patrons. Budget constraints, the library's mission, and the reading habits of library patrons will all play a role in the development of the most effective e-book collection and lending program. However, all libraries should take into consideration the following suggestions when developing an e-book program:

- Create a working budget; ensure that the amount budgeted is enough to cover a variety of materials and subjects. Decide if funding will be reallocated from the print materials budget or will come from elsewhere. Long wait times for titles are likely to decrease patron satisfaction with the e-book program, so aim to maintain a four-to-one ratio of holds to total materials is recommended (Polanka 66).
- Carefully select materials to be added to the collection. Identify high-circulation subject areas and genres and purchase materials accordingly. Be aware of what types of materials patrons already search for or read online, as these will likely be popular in e-book format.
- Strike a balance between print and electronic books in the library's collection. Some patrons prefer print; others prefer e-books. Cater to both groups so as not to alienate users.
- Extol the virtues of e-books and encourage patrons to use the library's e-book collection.
- Train staff members how to download titles and use vendor software and e-readers. Ensure that they are able to instruct patrons on use.
- Offer instructional classes or other programming so patrons can learn how to use and download e-books. Create video tutorials and handouts to which patrons can refer.
- Create a marketing plan for the e-book collection, as many patrons are unaware that their library offers e-books for checkout (Rapp). Hang posters, place fliers at the circulation desk, and feature the e-book collection on the front page of the library's website.

- Keep titles current. Patrons want the same titles that they are able to find on the “new arrivals” shelf in the library.
- If possible, provide e-readers for patron use. This allows all users the opportunity to borrow e-books, even if they don’t own an e-reading device. Lending preloaded e-readers is also a great way to introduce patrons to e-reading.
- Keep usage statistics. As stated by Alice Crosetto in *No Shelf Required*, “librarians... need to justify the expense of e-books. Producing use data for... e-books... is of paramount importance...” (Polanka 126).
- Negotiate with publishers. Don’t agree to licensing terms that will harm the library or the success of the e-book program.
- Fight for an industry-wide standard for e-books. Don’t purchase items in proprietary formats.

### Conclusion: The Library’s Role in the Age of E-books

Libraries are more than just warehouses of books or providers of materials. They provide free access to a wealth of information and resources. They serve as community gathering places and host classes, programming, and events for all ages. They deliver computer and internet access to at no cost to users. They offer assistance on how to best use new technologies, including e-books and e-readers. Most importantly, they provide guidance on how to effectively navigate and evaluate information sources, in both electronic and print formats.

The need for these vital services will not disappear with the advent of new technologies. In fact, the expert guidance of information professionals may be needed more than ever as new technologies emerge and users must learn to navigate entire new categories of information.

However, in order to remain relevant in an increasingly digital information environment, libraries must embrace, rather than shy away from, shifts in technology.

Usage statistics and survey responses indicate that e-books are here to stay. If libraries cannot or will not supply the electronic texts that patrons demand, they will find them elsewhere. As noted by technology writer Eric Hellman, "...the introduction of ebooks presents additional opportunities for competition with and by libraries... The survival of libraries will depend on their ability to take advantage of ebook technologies to deliver new kinds of value..." (Hellman, 23). Libraries can and must demonstrate that e-books and other new technologies provide *greater*- not fewer- opportunities to get information into the hands of users.

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