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E-Factor: How E-books Are Making an Impact in Libraries

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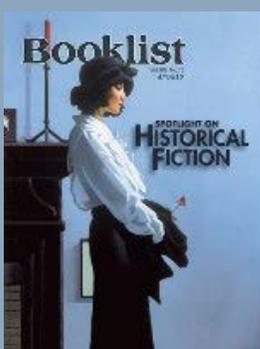
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Last summer, during a family trip to Yellowstone National Park, my nine-year-old son asked how high the water from Old Faithful was spraying and why it was so hot and steamy. Armed with my smartphone and the *Concise Encyclopedia Britannica* app, I was able to touch, search, and give him the answers: 160 feet and magma. Did I need an e-book app on a mobile device

to answer these questions for him? Probably not. A signpost or park ranger could have informed me, but the beauty lies in how I easily found the information at 7,359 feet in a remote area of Wyoming. That's why, when people ask me why they should invest in e-books, I respond with "24/7 access anywhere and no shelf required." E-books allow libraries to provide connections to content at the user's point of need, anywhere, day or night. This anytime access as well as just-in-time content, support for virtual reference, content sharing, and a future of opportunity are just some of the ways e-books improve library service.

The Growing Popularity of E-books

According to the [Association of American Publishers](#), e-book net sales reached nearly \$70 million in January 2011, an increase of 115 percent from the previous year. The American Library Association's [2011 Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study](#), released last June, found that "more than two-thirds (67 percent) of libraries offer access to e-books, up 12 percent from two years ago." In addition, [sales of e-book readers have tripled every year since 2006](#). Given the increased demand for e-books and e-reading technology, it's no surprise that public libraries are investing in downloadable e-book services.

Access—Anywhere, Anytime

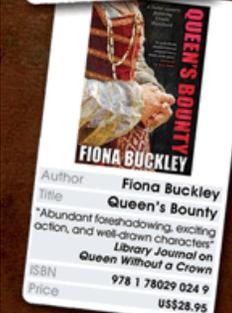
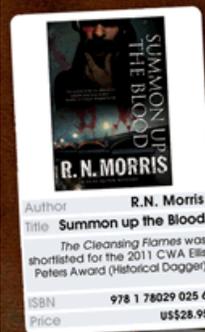
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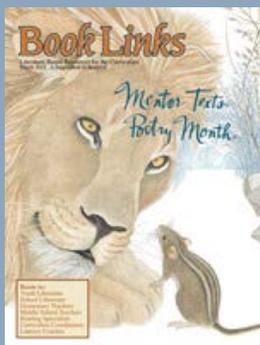
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Just-in-Time Content

Another way in which e-books improve our services is by providing just-in-time content. There is no waiting for shipping and processing. Titles can be purchased and made available instantly. When the hold list for the latest best-seller gets too long, additional digital copies can be purchased in minutes. Some libraries are using e-books to fulfill interlibrary loan requests rather than waiting for the print title to ship from distant locations. In the last five years, acquiring e-books through patron-driven acquisition (PDA) has become more prevalent in academic libraries and is catching on in the public environment. PDA is a business model that promotes the just-in-time library collection as titles are not purchased until they are used. In this model, librarians preselect titles based on the broad collection needs of the organization. The MARC records of these titles are added to the library catalog for discovery, but titles are not purchased until used. Such use is measured in different ways, including by the number of minutes a title is viewed, the number of pages viewed, or the volume of printing, downloading, or copying. Most of the major e-book aggregators (ebrary, EBSCO, Ingram, and OverDrive) offer PDA business models. Using PDA guarantees use of purchased content and spends limited collection funds more effectively.

Many public and school libraries have several locations in the same city. E-books allow the organization to share content across multiple locations. For example, a regional library system like the Dayton Metro Library can purchase a collection of e-books to share among its many branches. Purchasing content in this manner saves the individual locations time and money and provides greater—and equal—access to users.

Discovery

Although we reach users through virtual reference services, we also want users to be able to locate our e-books, even if they choose not to ask a librarian for help. In order for e-books to be successful in libraries and information centers, they must be discoverable. An obvious way to promote e-books is through MARC records in the online catalog or a broader discovery system like the EBSCO Discovery Service, Ex Libris' Primo Central, OCLC's WorldCat Local, or Serials Solutions' Summon. Most e-books have persistent urls or digital object identifiers (DOIs) for the title or chapter, and, for some encyclopedias, the article. Embedding these urls in the catalog, discovery service, content-management systems, intranets, websites, and research guides is an excellent way to put content in front of users. Libraries who subscribe to ProQuest and EBSCOhost databases can search their e-book content alongside journal content for even greater discovery.

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Unlimited Opportunities

Despite their 40 year history, e-books are young and have much room for growth and improvement. One such improvement is the enhanced e-book. Enhanced e-books, those with added audio, video, embedded links, and interactive features, are making their way into the market. Before long, these enhanced e-books will be the norm, extending an array of features and value-added services to users. Imagine a biography of a musician that serenades the reader throughout the text and offers the user an option to hear one line of a musical score in the instrument of their choice or to hear the voice of the musician explaining his or her inspiration for the work; or a county history book could include historic images from the local newspaper, links to census figures, and oral histories from residents.

In addition to multimedia features, translation or other text-altering processes could become commonplace. E-book content could easily be translated into multiple languages. The library who serves students with disabilities could instantaneously transfer text to speech, Braille, or other alternate formats. School librarians might share the same story in different reading levels or languages, depending on the students' needs.

The future will also bring improvements to the devices we use to access e-books and other digital content. They will be faster, smarter, and more compact. Who knows, they may even be built into our glasses. My dream device will be multifunctional, fit comfortably in my front pocket, have large enough command buttons for my pointer finger, and be accompanied by an adjustable size holographic screen for easy navigation and reading.

It is this device that I'll take on family vacations and business trips to access library content, search the virtual world, deliver presentations, take photos and videos, play games and music, and control the settings on my home security and other gadgets while away. Who knows, maybe I'll even start my car remotely while taxiing to the jet bridge. But until that day arrives, I'll stay armed with my smartphone, the little gadget with access to the big universe of information available from my library and beyond.

Sue Polanka is Head, Reference and Instruction, Wright State University Libraries.

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