Improving Library Services with E-Books

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THE E-BOOK REVOLUTION

Improving Library Services with E-Books

IN ADDITION TO ACCESS ANYTIME AND ANYWHERE, E-BOOKS OFFER A RANGE OF BENEFITS TO READERS AND LIBRARIES ALIKE—AND MORE BENEFITS ARE LIKELY IN THE YEARS AHEAD.

BY SUE POLANKA, MLS

Last month, during a family trip to Yellowstone National Park, my 9-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 application, I was able to touch, search, and tell: 160 feet high, and proximity to 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 of my solution was that I easily found the information at an altitude of 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.”

Growing Popularity

According to the Association of American Publishers, e-book net sales totaled nearly $70 million in January 2011, an increase of 115 percent over the previous year. The AAP’s press release (Biba 2011) stated, “E-book sales have increased annually and significantly in all nine years of tracking the category.”

Surveys conducted by Library Journal (2011) found that 94 percent of academic libraries and 72 percent of public libraries offered e-books last year.

Despite the growing popularity of e-books, special libraries appear to lag behind other types of libraries in acquiring them. Library Journal conducted a survey of special libraries in September 2010 to measure current and projected e-book availability in libraries, user preferences in terms of access and subjects, and library purchasing terms and influences. The results of this survey have not been published, but I was allowed access to a copy and found that of the 122 respondents, 44 percent offered no e-books and 11 percent offered 25 or fewer titles. When libraries without e-books were asked to estimate the time frame for such purchases, a little more than half responded that they had no plans to purchase e-books, while 35 percent said they expected to do so in the next 12-24 months.

Notwithstanding this slow adoption rate, nearly three-fifths of special libraries do offer e-books, and almost one in five hold 1,000 titles or more. Of the libraries that do offer e-books, the average number of titles is 1,100. This is promising news for special libraries’ users, as there are many ways e-books

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can improve services.

**Access anywhere, anytime.** Libraries and information centers do not need a physical presence in a 24/7 environment. With a growing share of e-books and other library content living in the cloud (i.e., stored on servers and accessed through a digital network), the demands of maintaining physical materials and space are declining. Now, librarians can focus on building collections and providing services.

Library users benefit, too, because e-books can’t be lost, stolen, shelved incorrectly, or have chapters or pages pulled from the binding. All content is available regardless of whether others may be using it at the same time (assuming you purchase unlimited access). It is now possible for users to carry the entire contents of the library in their pocket or purse. With a Web-enabled device, the user is at the center of his or her universe of information.

Extending library content beyond a physical structure and fixed hours of operation provides enormous value for our users. The proliferation of mobile devices, 4G networks, and Wi-Fi hotspots streamlines the process, making it more convenient for users to access information on an as-needed basis. Executives in Wi-Fi-enabled airplanes already access electronic data for last-minute reports or presentations. Trial lawyers verify legal citations with laptops or tablet devices in courthouses rather than in their own law libraries. Doctors prescribe medications and answer patients’ questions about side effects by accessing the full text of medical reference books on their mobile devices.

**Full-text searching.** When libraries purchase book content electronically, their users have the capability to search the full text of book chapters, image captions, and charts and graphs. This text is all searchable and discoverable within a single e-book, across multiple titles or publishers, and across a variety of disciplines, a process previously limited to journals and indexing and abstracting services.

A 2010 survey conducted by the University of California Libraries identified users’ ability to search within and across e-book content as the primary advantage of e-books. Traditional online catalogs only search the MARC records for books, but the full-text capabilities of e-book platforms open up additional opportunities for content discovery. As a result, the significance of book chapters increases in a full-text environment.

Many e-book platforms display search results by book chapter rather than book title, bringing chapter-level content to the forefront. Specific platforms, such as iFactor’s PubFactory, allow users to customize books by collating chapters from various other publications, while platforms like EBL offer course reserve systems for books or chapters.

**Virtual reference services.** In addition to providing content anytime and anywhere, e-books greatly enhance our increasingly essential virtual reference services. With more library users working from home, traveling, moving every few years to different locations, or stationed abroad, virtual reference services are becoming a lifeline. These services are supported by e-books and other electronic content.

Using virtual reference services, librarians can successfully answer questions and provide content to users by sending persistent URLs for the title, chapter, or page of a book, e-mailing articles from encyclopedias, downloading book chapters to a shared network drive, and copying and pasting text. Many librarians use video sharing software like Jing to demonstrate complicated searches or features in online products and make them understandable to remote users. Such software provides visual opportunities for library instruction in a virtual environment.

**Just-in-time content.** Another way e-books improve our services is by providing just-in-time content. There is no waiting for shipping—titles can be purchased and received instantly.

In the last five years, acquiring e-books through patron-driven acquisition (PDA) has become more prevalent. PDA is a business model that promotes a just-in-time library collection, as titles are not purchased until they are used. In this model, librarians pre-select titles based on the 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—by the number of minutes a title is viewed, the number of pages viewed, or when printing, downloading, or copying occurs.

An option available in most PDA models is a short-term loan or lease program. Under this option, libraries borrow e-book content for a specified number of days and pay a percentage of the list price for that use. Subsequent uses are charged the same percentage; if use reaches a negotiated threshold, the title is purchased.

Using PDA and short-term loan options guarantees the use of purchased content and enables libraries to spend their limited collection funds more effectively. Michael Levine-Clark (2010) demonstrated the value of the latter benefit in a study of the circulation of printed books selected by librarians at the University of Denver. He found that 40 percent of such books never circulate and 25 percent circulate only once. He concluded that librarians need to reconsider which books are purchased, suggesting that the final decision be made by the user through PDA models.

Ron Berry and Doug Way from Grand Valley State University in Michigan studied the impact of short-term loans on their collection. In 2009, they accessed 2,100 titles from EBL through short-term loan at 5 to 10 percent of the list price. They spent an average of $10 on each use. Had they purchased these titles, the cost would have been $156,000; instead, they spent just over $20,000. Considering that most of the titles were used only one time, this resulted in the same content for less money, freeing up $136,000 for other titles (Polanka 2010).

**Sharing content across the organization.** For some special libraries, the user population is dispersed across the globe or may include several locations.
in the same city. E-books allow these libraries to share content across multiple locations.

For example, the U.S. Department of State has negotiated licenses for e-books on behalf of U.S. embassies around the world. Hundreds of U.S. Embassy Information Resource Centers, American Corners, and Binational Centers access the content through the Department of State’s site, eLibrary USA. Purchasing content in this manner saves the individual embassies time and money and provides greater access to users around the world.

**Discovery.** No matter how many licenses a library negotiates or how many e-titles a library offers its users, e-books will not be successful in libraries and information centers unless they are discoverable. An obvious way to promote e-books is through MARC records in the online catalog or through 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 their title or chapters; some encyclopedias have them for articles. Embedding these URLs in the online catalog, discovery service, and content management system makes it easier to put content in front of users. Libraries that subscribe to EBSCOhost databases can search their collection by title, author, subject, or keyword, regardless of whether the title is an e-book or a print title. Some titles may be discoverable in online reports, intranets, Websites, and research guides. Libraries can order, license, or search for specific e-books or chapters, and add links to the library’s catalog.

E-mailing or texting the persistent URLs to users is another viable discovery option. This can be done through targeted e-mails highlighting a specific theme or topic or as a general announcement of new content for the entire organization.

Libraries can also use quick response (QR) codes within their physical or online environment or in other physical locations in the organization. QR codes are two-dimensional barcodes that can be read using a QR code reader. QR codes have embedded URLs or text and can help promote the discovery of digital content by leading users to a specific title or chapter of an e-book or to a collection of e-books.

**Unlimited Potential**

Despite their 40-year history, e-books are still relatively young and have room to grow and improve. One such improvement is the enhanced e-book, which has audio and video capabilities, embedded links and interactive features.

Imagine a biography of a musician that serenades you while you read the text, allows you to listen to one line of a musical score played by an instrument of your choosing, and lets you hear the musician explain the inspiration for the work. Or imagine the traditional county water report, transformed to include dynamic tables and charts of population data for the region. Images and audio would accompany the report, offering a visual perspective on precipitation, water storage, drainage, and the flow of water under the earth’s surface to aquifers and natural springs.

In addition to multimedia features, translation or other text altering processes could also become commonplace. Multinational corporate information centers could translate company reports at the touch of a button. Such company reports might also include video clips of the corporate headquarters or an audio message from the CEO. A library that serves employees or students with disabilities could use text to speech, braille, closed captions, or other formats instantaneously. School librarians might share the same story using video, images, or sound effects in different languages, depending on students’ needs.

The devices we use to access e-books and other digital content will also change dramatically in the future. 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 command buttons that are large enough for my pointer finger, and be accompanied by an adjustable holographic screen for easy navigation and reading.

I’ll take this dream device on family vacations and business trips. I’ll use it to access library content, search the virtual world, analyze data, deliver presentations, take photos and videos, play games and music, and control the settings on my home security systems and other gadgets while away. Armed with my dream device, searchable digital content, and instant online reference services, I’ll be able to answer my son’s increasingly sophisticated questions for years to come. But until the device becomes a reality, I’ll keep my smartphone, a little gadget with access to the big universe of information available from my library and beyond.

**REFERENCES**


