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Resolving the Challenge of E-Books

Dracine Hodges, Cyndi Preston, and Marsha J. Hamilton

The authors identify the major issues associated with e-books and their expanding role in libraries, especially in patron-driven acquisitions. E-book access began when NetLibrary entered the patron-driven acquisitions arena in the late 1990s with a business model that raised concerns for some libraries and their patrons. Since then, other models and variations abound. Today the library community would prefer far greater uniformity across e-book publishers in areas such as simultaneous publishing, printing ability, access models, resource sharing use, and compatibility with handheld reading devices, among others. Libraries would acquire even more e-books, providing even more revenue for publishers, if these issues could be resolved.

Many libraries first experimented with acquiring e-books in the 1990s, following the Project Gutenberg example, when they digitized historic treasures from their own collections, including rare books, manuscripts, photographs, and sound recordings. Examples include the British Library's digitization of the only known manuscript of the epic poem *Beowulf* and the Library of Congress' *American Memory* project, a substantial digitized collection of American historical documents and media (Lebert 2009, chap. 1998). At about the same time, publishers began offering individual e-book titles for sale, including more recent imprints. The paradigm shift to patron-initiated e-book collection development occurred in 1998 when NetLibrary offered libraries three acquisitions methods: orders for individual titles or subject packages of e-books; a notification service for librarian selection; and the patron-driven acquisition model. The patron-driven acquisitions model allowed patrons to act as de facto collection development personnel. Patron use of e-books triggered purchases, bypassing mediation by a collection development librarian.

The original NetLibrary business model raised concerns for some libraries. A purchase was triggered after an e-book was accessed for the second time; the second view could consist of as little as viewing a single page, the equivalent of a patron browsing a print book and returning it to the shelf without checking it out. Some libraries were not willing to finance this level of e-book browsing. NetLibrary also adopted the model of a circulation period. The library established a check-out period, such as two weeks, during which the e-book was available only to the patron who had "borrowed" it. The book would only be available to others when the checkout period expired or the borrower went through a nonintuitive process to "return" the e-book. NetLibrary printing was limited to one page at a time to discourage copyright violation, a limitation that many patrons found highly restrictive. Patrons also disliked the need to create a NetLibrary account after authenticating in the local system or via IP address.

Some libraries participated in a NetLibrary patron-driven acquisitions program through a consortium. For example, The Ohio State University Libraries (OSUL) used its OhioLINK

membership to allow patrons to access NetLibrary titles. NetLibrary's business model quickly triggered more purchases than anticipated, so OSUL blocked patron purchase of additional titles. OhioLINK experimented with several short periods of NetLibrary patron-driven acquisitions but discontinued adding titles after 2004. NetLibrary was purchased by OCLC in 2002, becoming OCLC NetLibrary. It changed hands again in 2010 when it was acquired by EBSCO.

Complications in creating a sustainable business model delayed expansion of patron-initiated acquisitions programs in the 2000s. Worried that e-books would cut into hardcover sales, publishers searched for a model that would protect revenue streams. As aggregators, they depended on profit to stay in business and to develop new products, while libraries dealt with skyrocketing costs for e-journals and databases in a period of stable or shrinking budgets.

Pricing models were not the only concern. Availability was also an issue. Some publishers, like ABC-CLIO, adopted simultaneous publication for print and e-content, a move much appreciated by libraries, while other publishers embargoed e-books for three to 18 months after publication to protect print sales. Even when an e-book was made available for purchase, some publishers imposed an additional delay before e-books could be included in leased collections. Lack of uniformity across the publishing industry causes ongoing problems for aggregators and libraries alike. OCLC NetLibrary's attempt to adapt to nonstandard publishing practices could be seen in its purchase threshold being set at one, two, or three accesses depending on the publisher. Trying to explain to patrons these access and printing limitations across multiple e-book platforms continues to be a challenge for public service librarians. Libraries will be watching to see whether EBSCO Publishing responds to the demands of the growing e-book marketplace. Negotiating with publishers for the simultaneous release of titles in both print and e-book formats would be a good place to start.

As e-books rise in popularity, the case for simultaneous publication with print formats gains importance. Acquisitions librarians may be reminded of similar delayed publication controversies in the past for hardcover versus paperback editions and U.K. vs. U.S. editions. The same issues appear in the current print versus e-book simultaneous publication discussion. The supply of U.K. versus U.S. editions has been addressed by several vendor-based services such as Blackwell's Preferred Edition Service, in which libraries can impose price and release date parameters to their U.S. or U.K. approval profiles. Expanding on this model, some vendors and e-book aggregators like YBP market integrated e-book and print approval profiles so libraries can avoid duplication between formats or get e-books as the preferred format for titles with simultaneous publication. However, until simultaneous publication becomes common practice, preferred format services will have limited success.

Many publishers' current business models rely heavily on revenue generated by print sales; some are reluctant to adapt to the evolving e-book marketplace. According to that business model, the longer the hardcover edition is the sole source of content, the more money the publisher makes. After hardcover sales peak, a paperback edition often has its run. At some point the publisher releases the e-book, first for sale, and later by permission to include the e-book in leased collections. The timing of each release is based on a schedule that publishers hope will maximize profit. In the e-book versus print debate, this model becomes irrelevant because there is no cost differential between hardcover and e-book editions. The majority of e-books sell at the hardcover list price or higher, sometimes substantially higher, for multiple user options. Few libraries want to buy both the hardcover and the e-book; they cannot afford to buy the same content twice. So, should the library defer buying the title while only the hardcover is available in the hope that the

e-book will be released soon? Or buy the hardcover and forgo eventual purchase of the e-book, a format that many patrons now prefer?

Academic research librarians are discussing e-book–preferred policies for several reasons. First is the changing demographic of users, who increasingly expect to interact virtually with information and desire the convenience of remote 24/7 access. Many libraries also are faced with space and storage issues and their related costs. The cost of monographs in science, technology, and medicine climbed substantially in the 2000s. Leasing e-book packages or consortial purchasing of e-books helps address these factors. However, without simultaneous publication, libraries may not buy new print titles at all while they wait for the embargo to expire for the preferred e-book format. In this new environment, publishers run the risk that while waiting for the e-book release, a library may decide not to purchase their title at all.

The irony in the campaign for simultaneous e-book publication is that most publishers, including some smaller presses, have adopted digital publishing for the production and/or distribution of their print and electronic content. The transformation of the commercial marketplace has encouraged a growing number of publishers to adopt the epub standard, a digital file extension of an XML format for reflowable digital books and publications. Reflowable content can be sent to various display devices without the need for reformatting. According to the International Digital Publishing Forum Web site, a trade and standards association for the digital publishing industry, “This flexibility allows publishers to produce and send a single digital publication file through to distribution and offers consumers interoperability between software and hardware for unencrypted reflowable digital books and other publications” (International). This type of platform allows transfer of e-content to devices with e-reader applications, like the Amazon Kindle and Sony Reader, and smart phones such as the Apple iPhone. Dropping e-content embargoes and using the epub standard for delivery would create adaptable content for users who increasingly expect electronic access to new titles.

Some publishers have instituted retrodigitization projects to mine their backlist titles. There have been cases where noncirculating print titles have gained a second life as e-books. In addition to providing 24/7 access, e-books provide full-text searching. The discovery possibilities of e-books can, in turn, generate increased circulation for some print titles among readers who may identify content in the e-book but prefer to use the library’s print copy to read longer texts or for long-term research. This is an example of the e-book’s value as a gateway to existing print editions.

Numerous smaller presses have begun using digital publishing for the print-on-demand or publish-on-demand model in which copies of a book are not printed until an order is received. Providing the title in e-book format when it is originally published creates the opportunity to mirror this model in a patron-initiated environment through *use on demand*. Use takes the place of a traditional order when the patron interacts sufficiently with the e-book to trigger its purchase.

One still unresolved issue is that although chapters can usually be provided from e-books in fulfillment of an interlibrary loan requests, entire e-books cannot be lent. Libraries may also face restrictions if they wish to use e-books as course reserves. Finally, e-book aggregators’ current patron-driven acquisitions models and features are sufficiently different that it can be very difficult to compare them and choose the best option for a library’s patrons.

Publishers’ reluctance to experiment with new revenue streams and the budgetary crises in libraries remain intractable problems for expanding the choices and availability of e-books in libraries, especially through patron-initiated acquisition initiatives. However, format flexibility and adapting to the evolving needs and expectations of library customers and their patrons may

finally provide the tipping point in the balance between simultaneous publication of print and e-books. Today is a time of transition; libraries, publishers, and vendors are experimenting with a variety of options. This special issue presents many ideas in the evolving area of patron-driven acquisitions and brings us one step closer to resolving the challenge of including e-books in that effort.

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