Forever Changes: e-Books and the public library

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Some background...

E-Books are a very hot topic at the moment –but that's nothing new– they have been a hot topic for at least the past 15 years or so, and have seemingly always just been on the verge of taking off as a major force in publishing, surrounded by lots of stories predicting the end of the printed word and the death of the book.

As far as libraries are concerned, most of the focus during the early part of that period was on the world of academic, rather than public, libraries – and even much of that was about e-journals rather than *e*-Books.

Nevertheless, public library *e-Book* provision has been around for some time – for example, my own authority in Essex first got involved in *e*-Books over ten years ago, and we introduced an e-service as part of an externally-funded project in 2004… and there were others around the world doing similar things at the same time.

When we started the project, we wanted to find the answers to a number of questions, but mainly – was there an audience for *e*-Books? And, if so, was there any suitable content?

We found that the answer to the first question was – yes, there was an audience. In fact, there were quite a few different ones, including people who had problems using standard print material, and people who couldn't get to the library for some reason, whether they were housebound or working all day. And, of course, people who simply enjoy reading, regardless of format…

The question about content, however, was less easy to answer – we were looking for material that public library users would *want* to read – preferably, the same commercially-produced, mainstream titles that they would normally read in print.

This was quite difficult to begin with, but we found two suppliers – Overdrive and ebrary – both based in the USA, and gradually more and more titles by popular authors became available. Eventually, in 2009 – and to the surprise of many –one of the biggest selling books that year – Dan Brown's 'The Lost Symbol' – became available as an *e*-Book to public library users on the same day as the print version.

However, in retrospect, this now seems like a kind of 'golden age', as the situation – in the UK and the USA at least – has altered considerably over the past 3 years or so.

More recently...

This change has coincided with a huge increase in the take-up of *e*-Books over the past couple of years, and their widespread acceptance by the general public as a viable – and in some cases preferable – alternative to the printed book.

This in turn is clearly closely linked to the introduction of the current generation of *e*-Book reading devices, most of which use 'e-ink' technology.

Fairly quickly, the Kindle has become a household word, while the even larger audiences for iPads and smart phones have also discovered the joys of e-Reading.

In other words, unlike 10 years ago, it's now a big consumer business, and is clearly in the process of transforming the book world…

A change of position

Not surprisingly, that's led many mainstream publishers to review their position with public libraries in relation to e-lending.

In fact, until recently, some publishers seem to have been unaware that libraries had actually been at the forefront in promoting *e*-Books.

This lack of awareness may seem surprising, but – again, in the UK and USA at least – suppliers of downloadable e-Books have not, for the most part, been the publishers themselves. Companies like Overdrive are third party 'aggregators', and they also provide the platform and supporting software required to get the *e*-Book from the library catalogue to the library user's device.

And so, because most publishers hadn't been directly involved in supplying libraries, some of them were somewhat surprised to find, when *e*-Books and *e*-Readers began to take off in a big way, that e-lending by libraries was already well–established, and possibly posed a threat their income.

This concern increased further last year following the agreement between OverDrive and Amazon to make Overdrive material compatible with the Kindle.

As a result, we have seen publishers react in different ways:
– Some have been happy to carry on as before.
– Some have refused to sell *e*-Books to public libraries at all.
– Others have tried to find a model that they are comfortable with – such as
  – Raising the price – Random House effectively tripled the price of their *e*-Books for libraries this year.
  – Limiting the range of material (such as 'no bestsellers' or 'no backstock titles')
  – Limiting the number of loans – for example, once Harper Collins titles have been lent 26 times, the library has to buy another copy.

– Limiting the time period – for example, Harry Potter titles finally became available as *e-Books* last year, but their files expire after 5 years and again, the library has to buy more copies.

(Both of these last 2 approaches are ways of addressing the fact that *e*-Books don't wear out…)

Perhaps more importantly, there is also a view shared by many publishers and booksellers that libraries should not provide remote access to *e*-Books at all, and that public library users should have to come to the library to 'borrow' e-material just as they do for print.

Downloads

However, all of these approaches assume that libraries are using the download model. This is certainly the best known and most popular approach – and the market leader, Overdrive, currently provides downloads to over 18,000 libraries around the world.

This is because the download model has many benefits – not the least of which is that it corresponds to what the public generally understand *e*-Books to be all about: you have a device, you download a file on to it, and you read it.

It also closely replicates the traditional lending library: one copy is lent to one person for a limited period, after which it then becomes available for another borrower. If a library wants to provide more copies to meet demand, it buys more…

However, it also has some limitations.

One is that it doesn't make very good use of the technology – at least from the library point of view…

For example, many members of the public simply don't understand how you can have a waiting list for an *e*-Book – surely you just make another copy of the file?

Not only that, but – the process can be very complicated: although everybody likes to think that their e-reading device is the best, and the only one available – the sheer number and range of devices, each with different formats and different ways of working, is currently both big and bewildering.

The Overdrive website support pages currently list over 50 different types of dedicated e-Reader, plus literally hundreds of portable devices such as iPhones and iPads – not to mention PCs, laptops and Apple Macs…

And if you add the complicating factor of Digital Rights Management (DRM) which is added to most library downloads, it becomes even more difficult to manage.

A different approach

So, against this background, it's perhaps not surprising that different approaches have been sought, by both libraries and publishers, to provide a method of *e*-Book lending that library users would find easier to use but which also provides more control for the publisher.

In fact, such a model has existed for a long time, and is commonly used in the academic world – on-line access. With this approach, *e*-Books are simply held on a database and read on-line rather than being downloaded.

This has a number of advantages over the download model – there is no need for a dedicated e-reading device, no complicated software to load, and (usually) all of the material is

available to everybody with a library card all of the time, so there are no waiting lists. As a result, one of the perennial stock management questions for librarians – how many copies do I need to buy? – is also resolved at a stroke…

Examples of this approach have been around for a long time – ebrary is perhaps the best known – but although ebrary does have a very useful public library collection, it is mainly higher level non-fiction and not the kind of best-seller material that many public library users are looking for.

However, three years ago, this model was adopted for use with more mainstream public library material in the form of Public Library Online.

Public Library Online

Public Library *Online* was originally called 'Bloomsbury Library Online', and as its original name makes clear, it was set up by a publisher rather than an aggregator. It changed its name to 'Public Library Online' when other publishers joined up soon after it started in 2009. It now offers titles not just from Bloomsbury but also from other major sources such as Faber, Canongate, and most recently Random House.

These titles include material from best-selling authors such as James Patterson and Joanna Trollope, and many other staple public library fiction writers, as well as non-fiction and children's books.

The model is very simple, with libraries signing up to annual subscriptions for 'shelves' of *e*-Books on specific themes, such as 'sport', 'biography', or 'paranormal romance', or aimed at particular audiences, such as teenagers. As there are no downloads, the *e*-Books can be accessed easily either in the library or remotely from any web-enabled device.

84   In addition to the *e*-Books themselves, many of the titles also have supporting material such as reviews, guides for reading groups, and video interviews with the author.

Benefits…

All of this suggests that the on-line access model, as used by Public Library Online, has many advantages for all concerned –

For the library and its users:
– An excellent selection of popular titles, written by bestselling authors.
– It's comparatively cheap to set up
– All *e*-Books are available to all borrowers, all of the time
– Simple technology, making the material available to anybody who has access to the internet and a library card.
– Additional support material, that is not available anywhere else.

And, for the publisher:
– Complete control of its content and the way it is used.

All of this possibly sounds too good to be true, and on-line access model clearly has a huge amount to offer public libraries looking to get involved in *e*-Books, whether now or in the future.

And some drawbacks...

However, although Public Library Online is popular, it also has to be said that the download model, for all of its disadvantages, is still more popular with the public at the moment.

The reason for this is very simple, and is entirely due to technology – or at least, today's technology.

As mentioned earlier, the rapid growth in take-up of *e*-Books over the past three years has been linked very closely to the growth in devices such as the Kindle and the Sony Reader. These devices are based on the download way of working and –crucially– most of them have either no, or else very limited – access to the internet.

As a result, people with these devices are not able to use them to read on-line access *e*-Books, and so generally don't recognise them as *e*-Books.

And –unfortunately– even people who use iPads or iPhones are currently unable to read Public Library *Online* material as 'Flash' software is required at the moment, although it hoped to resolve that soon.

The way ahead

So, to summarise, there is something of a paradox at the moment in the relationship between *e*-Books and libraries.
– As *e*-Books have become more popular and accepted, libraries have become less able to provide them.
– Publishers are concerned about making their material available to libraries as downloads, and are generally reducing availability in that format.
– However, they are much happier with the concept of on-line access as it offers them more control over the material and the way it is used.
– On–line access is a much simpler technology, and can be used without the need for any special e-Reading device.
– Unfortunately, however, for the increasingly large number of people who own such devices, whether a Kindle or something similar, an *e*-Book is something you download on to that device, and anything else simply isn't an *e*-Book for them.

This is clearly a basic marketing problem for libraries – in theory, the on-line access model seems to be the perfect way to provide *e*-Books to library users, but in practice, it doesn't match most library users' perception of what an *e*-Book actually is, at least at present.

However, looking ahead, it maybe that this problem will resolve itself as e-Reading devices develop further. As more of them become web-enabled, they will be able to deal with both on-line access and downloadable *e*-Books.

In that way, the benefits of the Public Library Online model would become available to users of both *e*-Book readers and more versatile devices such as iPads and smart phones, in a way which meets all the needs of publishers and libraries alike.