Digital books

Making them work for publishers and libraries

by Dennis Dillon

New things are made familiar, and familiar things are made new.—Samuel Johnson[1]

The speed with which libraries are signing up with the Internet start-up company netLibrary speaks to the potential value libraries see in Web-based e-books.

When electronic formats first made their way into libraries, librarians were initially interested in electronic versions of reference indexes because of their greater ease of use and added functionality. Then came e-journals which made serious research more convenient for the library user and freed the library from having to worry about missing and damaged issues, as well providing relief from shrinking binding budgets.

But there was one member missing from the librarian's traditional print triumvirate of indexes, journals, and books—and that was an electronic version of the venerable monograph. You cannot create a digital library if you don't have digital versions of the very format that consumes most of the space in a physical library, and the very format that is the basis for everyone's idea of what a library should contain—books. A digital library needs digital books.

While librarians inherently recognize the potential value of e-books, this doesn't mean that we all agree on their proper role. It is not clear how library users will respond to e-books and whether e-books are equally appropriate for all fields and for all types of libraries. Nevertheless, all of us in the publisher/library information chain recognize that the Web has changed perceptions of how information may be shared and used. The Web has forced us to rethink our cherished certainties and to struggle with how we can translate our traditional roles into this new environment.

What librarians want from vendors

What do libraries want from vendors in this new environment? Libraries want everything, and they want it as cheaply as they can get it. This is to be expected. We would also like vendors to throw-in a new car and a Hawaiian vacation with every purchase, but this doesn't mean that we expect this wish to be fulfilled. The much publicized battles between librarians and publishers over the price of commercial journals, have made librarians a tad suspicious and even bit cranky when it comes to discussions with publishers.

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By and large, librarians have adopted a hard line because of the phenomenal price increases of the commercial journal publishers, and, to a lesser degree, because of the sudden opportunities for role redefinition presented by the Internet, and in the recesses of our collective minds because librarians are very aware of the potential redefinition of the nature and use of information in a networked age.

The growth of consortia and the solid philosophical front with which librarians have met the Internet age have also been major factors in opening what has been on the whole, a newly productive, balanced, and reasonable dialogue with library vendors.

Will e-books alter the nature of this dialogue? In the world of the printed book there has always been self-published authors and vanity presses. As traditional publishers are all too keenly aware, the opportunities for the self-publishing of e-books on the Web are even greater than in the print world. The bottom line, however, is that librarians would much rather deal with reliable professionals when it comes to purchasing e-books than purchase the same titles directly from authors, author's cooperatives, or any of their newly emerging surrogates, like fatbrain.com. In other words, publishers can expect librarians to be librarians, and for librarians to try to get the best deal they can on behalf of their customers, but they can also expect that librarians will be both practical and realistic.

Pricing models

While the traditional monographic pricing model of one price for one book, paid in advance, and conveying permanent rights of use to the purchaser, have worked well for centuries—it is only to be expected that the Web with its much greater functionality would raise questions about alternative pricing models.

Librarians can be expected to ask about short- and long-term leases, pay-per-view, rent-to-own, and about sharing access to a single e-book among many different libraries. Librarians will be thinking about the many different uses an e-book can be put to, and inquiring about pricing scenarios that meet this need.

In many ways it is helpful to think of an e-book on the Web not as not a book at all, but as a Web site. What is the proper price for access to an unchanging Web site in perpetuity, or for a day, or to be accessed by one reader at a time, or by a thousand readers at a time? What if the e-book/Web site is updated with related links, a reader forum, additional author comments and research, etc.? How should the e-book/Web site be priced then? Or what if the e-book/Web site follows the ITKnowledge model, where the library subscribes to an ever-changing group of titles in a particular field or discipline, in this case e-books about information technology?

These are obviously among the issues that will be worked out over the next few years, we look for the middle ground that meets the needs of authors, publishers, distributors, libraries, and readers.

The print pricing model, which allows libraries to choose the book titles they want and purchase those titles at a fair price, is a workable model that allows both libraries and publishers to adequately plan their budgets and cover their costs. It is to the advantage of libraries to cooperate with publishers (who aren't always well capitalized), authors, and distributors to experiment and find similar models that will work for everyone in the Web environment.

Those of us who occupy the existing links in the traditional chain of scholarly information need to find ways to transfer the inherent strengths, as well as the checks and balances of the traditional arrangement into the new environment. Ultimately it is to no one's advantage if the actions of libraries financially squeeze authors, publishers, and distributors; and it is not to the advantage of authors, publishers, and distributors to forgo the reliability and predictability of the library market for the uncertainties of selling scholarly materials directly to consumers.

It is within the power of both publishers and libraries to upset the current applecart as we move from a print-based monographic distribution paradigm to a Web-based model. But is this an applecart either party wants to turn over?

NetLibrary's initial pricing model, which provides access to one book by one user at a time with pricing, based on the traditional list price, is an intriguing and useful place at which we can all begin our experiments and discussions. This is a model we can all understand. However, there is an infinite number of pricing variations that can occupy a matrix stretched between one-time payments and ongoing subscriptions, or between other payment matrices based on usage, audience size, or even intended purpose to which the books will be put.

Finding the middle ground

The key to making e-books work for all of us in the traditional publisher/library market is to find the middle ground that meets all of our needs.

At first glance both the netLibrary and ITKnowledge pricing models seem to be ones that will allow all of us to move forward and gather initial information about whether these pricing approaches will work for all concerned parties, and whether they will meet all of our situations and needs. If these initial models present significant problems for one of us in the information chain, then the model can be modified.

Approval plan for e-books

At the University of Texas at Austin (UTA) we devote a great deal of time and energy to our print approval plans, and we have been happy with the results, which provide us with a predictable and reliable flow of core titles from a variety of publishers in those fields in which we are interested. We are intrigued by the possibility of extending the approval plan model into the e-book arena.

Librarian selectors in some of our subject fields have already said that they would like to receive only e-books and do not feel the need for any printed books, while librarian/selectors in some of our other fields are tak-

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ing a wait-and-see approach to the question of whether e-books will have any role at all in their area.

An approval plan concept for e-books based on the current netLibrary model would provide our library with both the flexibility and control to determine just where e-books provide our library with both the flexibility and control to determine just where e-books should fit into our future plans.

Since the University of Texas Board of Regents have firmly steered the university on the road toward distance education, the library is obviously aware of e-book needs in certain fields. As our regular library users have discovered e-books in our OPAC, they have also begun to ask questions about when we will have electronic versions of specific titles that currently exist only in print.

At UTA we are convinced that e-books are just as much a part of our future as are e-journals, electronic indexes, and the e-linking of citations and we are very much committed to working with publishers, distributors, approval plan vendors, and any other interested party to make e-books a part of the future.

"Transport of the mails, transport of the human voice, transport of flickering pictures, in this century as in others our highest accomplishments still have the single aim of bringing men together."—Antoine de Saint-Exupery[2]

Notes

1. Samuel Johnson, "Pope," in *Lives of the English Poets* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1905): 233.
2. Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *Wind, Sand and Stars* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939): 69. ∎

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