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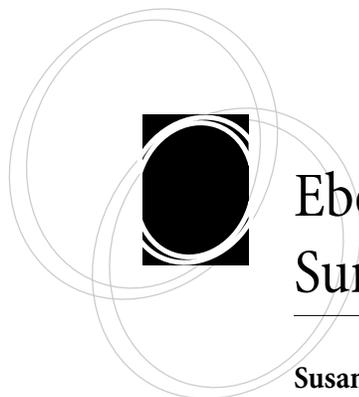
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Ebooks: Some Concerns and Surprises

Susan Gibbons

Many librarians believe that the publication of Stephen King's *Riding the Bullet* will be a turning point in the history of libraries. Until its publication, electronic books represented an alternative to paper-based books, not a replacement for them. But the success of King's ebook-only novella demonstrated that a title could be a bestseller without the author ever putting ink to paper, and many more ebook-only titles are in the works. Should libraries further embrace the digital world by providing access to ebook content or continue to focus their often scarce resources on their more traditional collections?

Many of those libraries that wish to include ebooks in their collections are hesitating, in part because of a number of assumptions concerning the reactions of patrons to this new technology. For instance, there is a general assumption that patrons would be dissatisfied with the low resolution of the ebook readers and the lack of color and pictures. Or, the fragile nature of the reader apparatus would lead to many damaged devices. Or, when given the option, people simply would rather read from the traditional ink-on-paper format than on the small screen of an ebook reader. Several libraries in the Rochester, New York, area were provided the opportunity to test these assumptions and discovered that, in many cases, these assumptions were not supported by the results.

Methodology

On October 1, 1999 the cooperating agencies of the Monroe County Library System, Monroe 2 Board of Cooperative Education Services School Library System, and the Rochester Regional Library Council (all located in the Rochester, New York, region) were awarded a Library Services and Technology Act grant to study electronic books. One of the grant's main goals is to analyze the feasibility of using ebooks in academic, school and public libraries. After outlining the expectations and obligations, a call was made for volunteer libraries to act as field testers. From the large pool of volunteers, six libraries were chosen. The project team chose the Rochester Institute of Technology and the University of Rochester to represent the academic libraries. They selected the public

libraries from the Town of Gates, a heavily blue-collar suburb of Rochester, and the Village of Fairport with a predominately white-collar patron-base, to represent the Monroe County Library System. The “rural-suburban” Spencerport High School and Jefferson Middle School, a science- and technology-focused institution located in the Rochester City School District, were chosen to represent the school libraries. The project’s expert panel was comprised of the project director, a representative from each field-test library, an acquisitions librarian, and an automation specialist. Together, they oversaw the grant’s objectives and developed the following field-test procedures:

- Each library would receive five electronic book readers (two SoftBooks and three Rockets).
- The ebook readers would be circulated first among library staff so that they could become comfortable with the technology before circulating it to patrons.
- Each library would create its own circulation policies and procedures in accordance with its current policies and tailored to its unique patron-base.
- Every patron and librarian who used an ebook reader would be asked to complete an *Electronic Book Evaluation Survey*.
- Focus groups of patrons, librarians, and educators would be formed to supplement the survey data.

At the start of the grant in the fall of 1999, there were only two portable, dedicated electronic book readers on the market: NuvoMedia’s Rocket eBook and the SoftBook Reader by SoftBook Inc. The Rocket weighs 22 ounces, has a monochrome screen of 4.5” x 3”, and has the capacity to hold approximately 3,200 pages. In order to download ebook titles, the Rocket requires Internet access, an IBM-compatible or Macintosh computer, and a serial port. Rocket eBook titles can only be purchased over the Internet from Barnesandnoble.com and Powells.com. The SoftBook Reader can download titles directly through an analog phone line, using the built-in 33.6 kbps modem. SoftBook Inc. is currently the only supplier of their ebook titles. The SoftBook Reader has a 6” x 8” grayscale screen, weighs 2.9 pounds, and can hold up to 4,000 pages at a time. Both readers have rechargeable batteries, backlit screens, and come with a stylus for marking and highlighting.

When purchased, an ebook title is encrypted so that it can only be read on a single, specific reader. A title cannot be transferred between readers, even those of the same make. For the over 200 ebook titles purchased by the project, the average price for a Rocket ebook was \$13.48 and \$12.14 for a SoftBook title. These are considerably lower than the titles’ average hardback list price of \$21.06. Although the SoftBook titles were cheaper than the Rocket titles 85 percent of the time, 34 percent of the Rocket ebooks were unavailable in the SoftBook format. The true price of an ebook, however, must also incorporate the cost of the reader, the computer and Internet connection needed for the Rocket and the significant amount of staff time required to load titles onto the readers, particularly SoftBook titles which must travel across phone lines on a 33.6 kbps modem.

Challenges

We knew that the ebook reader manufacturers did not consider libraries to be their target market. Therefore, we did not expect the integration of the electronic book format



into libraries to be an easy task. We were surprised, however, by some of the impediments that we encountered. One of the most difficult obstacles was payment method. Electronic books are steeped in the world of e-commerce, which is aimed at credit card users. We discovered that, without a credit card, it is next to impossible to purchase ebooks and ebook readers. Unfortunately, as is common with many public institutions, the Monroe County Library System, which financially administered the project, did not have a credit card. After several months of unanswered purchase orders, the project's director volunteered her own personal credit card for use in an effort to move the project forward. Every month she collected receipts from each of the field-test libraries, correlated and reconciled them to her credit card statements and submitted the receipts for reimbursement—an administrative and accounting nightmare!

The project's next challenge came from the realization that SoftBook ebooks could be downloaded only over analog phone lines, not digital lines. All of the project's field-test libraries had predominately digital phone lines, as do the majority of businesses and institutions. In most cases, a rogue analog phone line was found, although it was rarely in a convenient location. For instance, at Spencerport High School, the only remaining analog phone line was located in the janitor's closet. Since a title, such as Frank McCourt's *'Tis*, could take up to fifteen minutes to download over SoftBook's 33.6 kbps modem, the inconvenience was considerable. The University of Rochester initially considered loading their SoftBook Readers with periodicals, such as *New York Times* and *Time Magazine*, instead of monographs. However, when they realized that library staff members would have to take the readers home with them each evening and download the titles from their home analog phone lines, the librarians quickly opted for monographs.

The challenge of registering the Rocket eBook readers brought home the fact that individuals, not institutions, are the intended users of these devices. Each Rocket eBook must be registered on NuvoMedia's website with a unique combination of name and email address. Since each institution wanted all of the ebook-related email to go to a single staff member, the registration names had to be different. In one case, a librarian used a different spelling of her name with each registration, while other librarians created several "dummy" identities, such as Rocket E. Book. This caused further difficulties when it was discovered that to purchase an ebook title from Barnesandnoble.com, one's Barnesandnoble.com account email address is matched with the Rocket eBook's registration email address on file with NuvoMedia in order to encrypt the ebook for the proper reader. Since several readers were registered with the same email address, it was not possible to purchase titles from Barnesandnoble.com. Fortunately, Powells.com simply asks for the ebook reader's serial number and does not try to match account and registration information.

Only one of the field-test libraries, Rochester Institute of Technology, included their ebooks and readers in their on-line catalog. The ebook reader was cataloged as if it were a container for multiple items (the individual ebook titles). "Rocket eBook reader" or "SoftBook Reader" was the title (245 field), and the titles and authors of the six or seven individual works loaded onto the reader were listed in content notes (505 field). Any time a title was added or deleted from the reader, the cataloging record had to be adjusted accordingly. This meant that ebook titles purchased, but not currently loaded onto a

reader, were absent from the OPAC. Furthermore, it was not possible to determine the popularity of any individual title since all titles loaded onto a reader shared the same circulation statistics. The other libraries bypassed their catalogs and advertised the ebook titles on their websites or on flipcharts located near the circulation desks. Item records were created in order to check the ebook readers in and out.

Another difficulty arose from the very limited selection of ebook titles. The majority of ebooks can be classified as adult popular fiction or nonfiction, which are very appropriate for public libraries. With very few exceptions, there were no titles that were of interest and age appropriate for middle school students, particularly since there are no pictures or color integrated into the text. At the high school level, it was primarily the more mature, advanced readers who were attracted to the selection of ebook titles. The many Spanish-speaking students were disappointed in the complete absence of Spanish materials. At the academic libraries, it was the lack of more scholarly monographs that disappointed the patrons. Overall, however, the potential of electronic books as a teaching tool was not overlooked by the educators at both the secondary and higher education levels. Multimedia textbooks, texts hyperlinked to a bilingual dictionary to assist “English as a second language” students, and synchronized audio and text to aid with low reading comprehension are all possible classroom applications of ebooks. Unfortunately, mainstream popular fiction and nonfiction remain the main focus of ebooks.

The experiences of Roberta Burk and the Algonquin Area Public Library mirror many of those encountered by the libraries involved in this project, leading to the shared conclusions that ebook “manufacturer(s) had not considered the library market.”¹ Many of the emerging digital content providers can be included in this statement as well. In some cases, the oversight of libraries as a potential market derives from a lack of understanding about libraries and their societal role. This point was emphasized during a phone conversation with the vice president of a digital content provider. Noting that libraries were not mentioned in his company’s licensing agreement, he was asked whether it was possible for libraries to circulate his company’s digital content to patrons. His response: “No, that would be stealing profits from our company and the authors associated with us.” The new ebook format will likely result in the emergence of new library vendors. The bad news is that many of these new vendors are unfamiliar with libraries and view current library circulation policies as a threat to profits. The good news is that this situation opens up the potential for libraries to partner with ebook vendors in the creation of mutually beneficial pricing and distribution models.

Assumptions and Reality

The initial sixty user surveys so far collected indicate that the majority of patrons from all types of libraries reacted positively to the ebook technology. In fact, within only two weeks of their availability, more than six months worth of patron holds were placed on all ten of the public library readers. The survey results suggest that the popularity of the ebook is more than just curiosity. When asked in what format (ebook or paper) would they want to read their next book, 35 percent chose ebook, with an additional 23 percent stating no preference. Patrons cited the backlighting feature, the ability to carry several titles on a single device, and the larger font as reasons for their preference for



ebooks. The most common complaint about the readers was that they were too large and heavy. Forty-five percent of the SoftBook users and 20 percent of the patrons who used the lighter Rocket eBook readers indicated this. Complaints about the short battery life, particularly with the SoftBook, came in a distant second.

Stephen Sottong, a frequent critic of ebooks, stated that ebooks are not yet patron-friendly because "the best display technology can't beat print on paper."² The results of this study indicate just the opposite. No one reported any eyestrain, even though 67 percent indicated that they read one or more complete titles on the reader. Those who did not read a complete book did so because they either did not have enough time or were not sufficiently interested in the titles. A frequent comment on the surveys was that the large font and backlighting combined to make for a very pleasurable reading experience: "It's better for my eyes." When asked how the ebook readers could be improved, no one suggested better or easier to read display screens. The only suggested screen improvements were the addition of color and less glare in direct sunlight. Our initial assumption, shared by Stephen Sottong, was not supported. The backlit screens with large font text make ebook readers very patron-friendly.

Another expectation was that the readers would be damaged and peripherals, such as the small stylus, lost. After six months, all of the thirty readers remain in working order and nothing has been lost. Fears that the library would become a "Help Desk" for ebook readers have been unfounded, as well. Few patrons reported any difficulties using the readers, and in all but one case, the patrons were able to solve the problem by consulting the "Quick Start" guide.

Conclusions

Overall, the results of the ebook evaluation project have met few of our preconceived assumptions. We entered this project anticipating that our patrons would respond negatively to the technology. However, the initial results of the evaluation project suggest that lack of patron interest is not a valid reason for libraries to shy from the ebook format. What did surface as a justifiable rationale for hesitation is the current incompatibility of ebook readers to the needs of libraries. Electronic book readers are not library-friendly, and therefore require much accommodation in order to integrate the format. However, in order for a useful dialog between the ebook industry and libraries to occur, libraries must first evaluate the technology and assess its potential impact for library patrons. Only then can we articulate the unique needs of libraries to the ebook world.

The author is the Electronic Book Project Director LSTA Grant & Digital Initiatives Librarian University of Rochester October 2000.

Notes

1. Roberta Burk, "Don't Be Afraid of E-Books," *Library Journal*, April 15, 2000, 43.
2. Stephen Sottong, "Don't Power Up that E-book Just yet," *American Libraries*, May 1999, 50.