

Infinite riches in a little room: how can we manage, market and modernize the e-books phenomenon?

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E-books are not new but they are part of a sea-change in academic delivery that is altering both publishing and the way that teaching and learning are carried out. Publishers appear alarmed by this and have tended to cling to print as if producing publications in one format were their main purpose. This paper argues strongly that it is not. E-resources have migrated from being on the fringe of academia to establishing themselves as mainstream, and publishers seem barely aware of the resulting shift in resource requirements. If they do not become more alert to this, they are in grave danger of being by-passed. At the same time, librarians and academics should acknowledge that there is a very important role for publishers to play, that academia would be much the poorer without their services, and that, inevitably, there is a fair price to be attached to these.



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"Queen Anne is dead!"

I thought that this was a well known expression, but have discovered that it is much more local to my native Lincolnshire than I had supposed. It was frequently used by my grandmother, the queen bee of gossip in Spalding, the market town in which I grew up, and it simply means that something that is being presented as news is old hat.

Talking about e-books may not be old hat; but talking about them as if they are new certainly is. Last week, I had separate conversations with a librarian and a publisher, both of whom are present at this meeting, and both of whom, like me, have been working with and talking about e-books for the past five years. The librarian said, "I'm sick of talking about the different e-book platforms and charging structures, and having to explain them to people who can't be bothered to find out for themselves." The publisher said, "What is your message going to be for publishers? Produce more e-books? Because you can say that in ten seconds!" Unlike many of my previous presentations on e-books, this one is not primarily a discussion about platforms and pricing models; but if you are interested in obtaining more detailed information

about them, I have just completed an e-books manual for the Publishers Association which will be available very shortly; and although I hope that I do have a message for both publishers and librarians, it is not just about producing more of the same.

I have taken the concept of marketing e-books in its broadest sense, as it applies to both publishers and librarians; and in this context, 'promoting' is perhaps a more accurate word to use. It was the key word selected for the project that I led for the JISC in 2003: 'Promoting the Uptake of E-Books in Higher and Further Education'. Whether you prefer 'marketing' or 'promoting', it is about making e-books both visible and attractive to their user communities. Given the nature of the product, this means more than producing some nice leaflets and advertisements (though these have their place, too).

The JISC project involved a cast of hundreds, if not thousands, many of whom were librarians and publishers working together in groups. Although everyone was very amicable and very co-operative, and worked very diligently, there was a sub-text running through the work that they

did. This consisted of two underlying perceptions, and I think that together these are responsible for the fact that e-books have not 'taken' in the way that e-journals have. For librarians, the underlying perception was *'Publishers are out to squeeze every last penny from us. E-books will be a good way of getting more for our money. They should be cheaper than print or free.'* For publishers, the underlying perception was *'E-books will be the thin end of the wedge if we don't set out to marginalize them. Essentially, we are about printed publications. We will either ignore e-books or tinker around the edges with them.'*

What both groups did not acknowledge, or at least did not articulate fully, was that the nature of publishing was changing in radical and potentially alarming ways, with results that they could not predict. And here I emphasize the word **publishing**. In the very non-PC 1970s, when I started out as a young library supplier, it was immediately made clear to me that whereas booksellers were mere tradespeople, publishers were aristocrats. The two clear manifestations of their aristocracy were a) that they did not sully their hands with actually selling books, except by dealing through people like me and b) that they were most definitely not printers. They were creators. Their role was conceptual and qualitative.

Times have changed; and it is with a certain sense of irony that I have found many publishers clinging on for dear life to print, as if publishing and printing were Siamese twins. This is doubly unfortunate, not only because it is likely to result in the narrowing down of potential opportunities and a failure to spot potential threats, but also because it undermines understanding, even among information professionals, of what publishing is about. Two questions urgently need to be asked:

- What constitutes the core role of the publisher?
- What is a fair value to set upon the publisher's work?

I ask you to keep these questions in the back of your minds. I shall return to them later.

(Briefly) back to the JISC report

In 2003, a number of significant barriers to marketing and promoting e-books were identified by librarians and publishers. Unsurprisingly, some of

the items on their lists were the same and some differed. The librarians' list was as follows:

- unpopular pricing models, especially the one book, one user model
- making e-books visible professionally: cataloguing, metadata and cross-referencing issues
- publisher embargoes on high-demand titles, especially textbooks
- American bias of the titles offered, especially where the US version was not suitable for a British readership
- currency – i.e. either not being able to obtain the latest edition of a book in e-format, or publishers imposing a six-month delay between the print and e-editions
- the quality of the electronic text; functionality limitations
- fears about aggregator solvency
- ease of navigation of aggregators' and publishers' databases
- provision of meaningful statistics, especially of usage
- difficulty of allowing access to all legitimate users in a simple, uncomplicated way
- the 'armchair reader' syndrome: i.e. the perception that reading is a leisure activity, and that electronic publications are a non-starter, because reading them will never be as pleasurable as reading print books.

The publishers' list was as follows:

- digital rights management (DRM) issues
- author royalties: how much to pay and how to pay authors fairly
- pricing models and how they stacked up in terms of return on investment
- VAT
- fears of 'cannibalization' of print sales; uncertainty therefore of which titles to make available, and what to do about textbooks in particular
- how to address cataloguing, metadata and cross-referencing issues
- text quality and functionality
- aggregator solvency
- ability to acquire accurate statistics, of payments due as well as usage
- the 'armchair reader' syndrome.

Two years on, many of these issues have been wholly or partially resolved. It should be acknowledged that the leading e-book aggregators, as well as a small but important number of publishers well

known for actively promoting e-books, and some influential librarians who have supported them with advice and by trialling modified products and new products, have worked hard to dispel the difficulties. Before we look at some of their achievements, it is also important to recognize that publishers now have a greater choice of routes to market for e-books. They can use one or a combination of the following, depending on the amounts of money that they are able or willing to invest, and the volume of titles that they are able or willing to make available as e-books:

- sell via one or more aggregators
- sell via one or more library suppliers
- sell via one or more digital warehouses
- sell via one or more retailers
- sell via a public body, such as the JISC
- sell via a customized transactional web site, such as eBookstore
- develop and sell through the publisher's own proprietary platform
- take advantage of special initiatives, such as the Universal Digital Textbook Initiative and Holtzbrinck's e-book repository for publishers.

How some of the barriers to promoting and marketing e-books have been addressed

In the first place, all the main aggregators have worked very hard to obtain appropriate content from publishers; and most operate some form of user group, or collect feedback more informally from users in order to match new developments to their needs. All are also working on screen quality. The following is a selection of other, more individual refinements:

netLibrary

- has produced a particularly accessible and informative range of leaflets, etc. for use in academic libraries
- has reviewed its models and is trying to make them more flexible
- has taken on board that the future is about e-content, not just about e-books, and is now developing a range of digital products.

ebrary

- was little known in the UK two years ago. Librarians now look more favourably on the 'all you can eat' model after experimenting with it
- has developed powerful cross-searching tools

- is also developing e-content rather than just e-books.

eBooks.com / EBL

- has tried the hardest to find a variety of access models that both charge librarians and pay publishers fairly. Some of these – e.g. chapter-by-chapter sales – are not widely used at the moment, but the flexibility offered by the three main models seems to me to be most in tune with what academics and librarians are looking for, and I think that extensive advantage will be taken of them in the future.

Cataloguing and metadata

Nielsen BookData and Bowker are now listing e-books and creating proper bibliographic records for them. Both companies now offer a DOI service. CrossRef offers publishers a business infrastructure for linking with other content providers, using DOI-based technology. Oxford Scholarship Online is an example of an e-book platform with a powerful cross-referencing capability.

Access

Access has been improved by many e-book suppliers through subscribing to Athens. Although this does not provide a perfect service – occasionally, libraries still report that overseas students returning to their homes during university vacations sometimes experience access difficulties – on the whole it provides the simple, one-stop solution that librarians require. Some libraries are now also experimenting with Shibboleth.

Functionality

The kind of all-singing, all-dancing e-book functionality that everyone imagined when e-books first appeared has still to be realized, largely because publishers are still reluctant to make the necessary investment. However, some platforms offer much more than straightforward PDFs of the print version. Knovel is perhaps the most advanced of these.

Librarians' best practice criteria

In 2003, when most academic libraries still thought that e-books were new and strange, and some were not buying them at all, I tried to identify a simple code of best practice for librarians wishing to promote them to their users. This consisted of five 'tests' for the library:

- its librarians did not criticize academics or students for limited awareness of / enthusiasm about e-books

- e-books were put on the library's catalogue
- an organized attempt at e-book training sessions was made, preferably distinguishing between the needs of different user groups
- an attempt was made by the librarians to work with academics to identify suitable e-books to adopt
- an attempt was made to analyse and adjust user needs according to information provided by the e-book usage statistics.

Six libraries were found that fulfilled these criteria (though there may have been more: I did not visit every HEI library in the country!). Today, however, these criteria seem pitifully basic when compared to the teaching and learning initiatives that are being developed in some universities, and how librarians are supporting them.

VLEs and MLEs

Blackboard and WebCT (which I understand have just merged) are the best-known of these. There is also a number of lesser-known brands, and some universities have developed proprietary systems. Although they have been around for a while, both publishers and librarians have been sceptical about them, because they were being used as add-on facilities, rather than as part of an integrated teaching and learning programme. However, this is changing now.

Drivers for change

The Association for Learning Technology (ALT) is a national group of academics that has its base in Oxford and explores and promotes learning through online technologies. The ALT-C Conference is held annually, and this year took place in Manchester in September. Its theme was 'Exploring the frontiers of e-learning: borders, outposts and migration', and I attended on behalf of the Publishers Association. The conference was attended by more than 500 academics and librarians from all over the world, and online service providers such as Blackboard, Microsoft and ProQuest had exhibition stands there. Interestingly, it was supported by only one 'traditional' academic publisher – Taylor & Francis.

You are probably aware of ALT-C, and may think the conference is just a gathering of geeks pushing out the farther reaches of learning technologies, whose ideas will never find favour with the majority, and in particular will not succeed in replacing print as the main vehicle of learning. Having attended the conference, I can say that in

my experience this was not the case. Most of the presenters were 'ordinary' lecturers and librarians who showed no signs of either advanced technical know-how or unusual eccentricity. There is another reason besides this for thinking that the work of ALT should be taken seriously by publishers, which I will come to shortly. In the meantime, one of the speakers provided an answer to the still thorny question of the 'armchair reader' syndrome as it relates to HEIs:

*"...we tend to think of reading as an 'arm chair' activity ... [but] ... the reality for most academics [and by extension their students] is that reading is a desk-based activity."*¹

The key thing that I learnt from the conference, however, is that what the academics there wanted was not e-books or e-journals or e-'proceedings', or any other discrete 'e' – it was e-content.

This brings me to the second point about why ALT and its activities should be taken seriously – the way that teaching and learning methods are being addressed in universities now:

- most universities now have a pro-vice-chancellor or senior figure whose role is to establish a teaching and learning strategy
- he or she is often supported by a teaching and learning committee (which is likely to include people of the ALT-C persuasion, rather than the 'Luddite' academics who comfortably stick to print)
 - result: often, organized advocacy of 'blended learning'
 - result: often, use of VLEs as an integrated part of the curriculum
 - result: sometimes, appointment of learning technologists to help academics to develop content for VLEs.

What is happening in libraries to support this

- Some HEI libraries already have an 'e-preferred' resources policy.
- The role of the librarian is changing:
 - librarians are adopting a more interactive role: they are no longer just the keepers of resources, but the promoters of them
 - they are actively engaged in demonstrating online resources to undergraduates in lectures ['interstitial teaching']

- they are actively engaged in helping post-graduates and academics to carry out research using online resources.

Help with e-content now needed by academics and librarians

[I took most of these points from the paper by Bruce Ingraham, already quoted, because he provides a very comprehensive list: but these needs recurred again and again during presentations at the ALT-C Conference.] Finding, and arranging and promoting all the online materials that are being developed internally at universities, and collating them with the ones that are available commercially, presents academics and librarians with some difficult and time-consuming problems. They need to be able to:

- understand the available formats and which ones are best for which purposes
- manage the quality of content and design
- understand the best text fonts and layout to use for effective readability and accessibility
- find an effective management system in which to store content
- find an effective national and international rights management system
- find effective cataloguing and access systems
- set up a sufficiently powerful metadata mechanism.

Isn't this what publishers are supposed to do?

I return to my earlier questions:

- What constitutes the core role of the publisher?
- What is a fair value to set upon the publisher's work?

Because unless the answers to these questions can be established, and unless publishers get themselves into the new teaching and learning resources loop, their particular wheel is likely to be reinvented; and probably in such a way that much of the sifting of material, quality assessment and promotional

work that publishers currently do is going to fall on the shoulders of librarians. Taking the worst-case scenario for publishers, it may be that librarians will miss publishers very badly indeed once they are gone!

Publishers and librarians, librarians and publishers

- In e-publishing, as in other types of publishing, many of their goals are the same.
- Putting a value on the work of the publisher is crucial: the economics have to be right for both librarians and publishers.
- Continuing to work together to produce the right products for the end-user is key.
- When it comes to marketing and promotion, working together is essential, because e-books and e-content require sophisticated integrated promotional materials, not just leaflets and 'glossies'.
- Print is not dead; but it is not the only format; in the future, it may not be the most important one.

And even for Caxton, it was always about content.

Reference

1. Ingraham, B. *et al.*, *Academic print in digital formats*. ALT-C 2005 Research Proceedings.

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