

E-book: the new serial?

A delegate's view of the UKSG seminar on e-books – business models, usage and marketing, held at the British Library, London, 9 November 2005

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When asked to write a piece for *Serials* about this UKSG seminar, I was told I could be controversial and critical in my opinion, but I'm far too nice for that (I think). I was also asked to keep it fairly brief, as some of the papers appear in full on the following pages, so forgive me if I say "I've heard that song before" and concentrate on just a few of the presentations.

I found *Andrew Wheatcroft's* opening session enlightening yet bewildering as we were taken on a whistle-stop tour through the changes in publishing history. The overall message seems to be that nothing is new in the publishing industry. E-books are just another new format by which publishers deliver content to their customers, in the same way that Caxton or Gutenberg used the dangerously new-fangled printing press technology to deliver content to the masses. It is, and always has been, about progress and utilizing new technologies. Anyone remember the handwritten manuscript? I wondered to myself what J K Rowling's sales (and bank balance) would look like nowadays if every copy of Harry Potter had to be copied out and illustrated by hand!

It is estimated that by 2020 the percentage of UK book output available in electronic form will have risen to 80%, and that 39% of output will only be available in electronic format. (*Article based on this paper published in full in this issue.*)

It certainly was an informative opening volley, though I think that the rapid pace meant that several delegates fell at the first hurdle. And so it was on to *Jill Taylor-Roe* to look at acquiring e-books for academic libraries. How familiar her comments were regarding increased student numbers, increased student expectations, more international students, more distance-learning students, and the inevitable issue of running out of physical space in the library buildings. I could empathize with her struggle to supply sufficient materials for the right loan periods, and in the right formats, to meet all customer needs. We all have PGCE students who spend the majority of their time in

schools, clinicians and health workers who spend their days in hospitals, alongside many 'non-traditional' students who work full time and study in the evenings and at weekends, not to mention the affiliated programmes being run with universities on the other side of the world. How can we possibly supply them with the books they need, when they want them? 'More print copies' is no longer a satisfactory answer! Limiting loan periods or making copies reference-only is not what customers want. But, are e-books the panacea that we have been looking for? The selection is still limited, especially for textbooks, though reference works and encyclopaedias offer some space savings to the hard-pressed academic library. Recent packages from publishers such as Taylor & Francis, NetLibrary, Books@Ovid, EEBO and ECCO have offered some small consolation, but what we really want are more textbooks, more interactive books, and more multi-user licences! And reliable usage data, so we can measure if we are really getting what we hoped we had paid for! (*Article based on Jill's paper will be published in full in the next issue.*)

Jill's contribution was followed by 'E-books – reinventing the wheel?' by *Warren Holder* of the University of Toronto – *article based on this paper published in full in this issue.*

Lunch was the usual array of corporate sandwiches and savouries with questionable fillings, and the wine turned out to be only apple and cranberry juice masquerading as white and red wine, but I came away from Jill's session feeling vindicated. All the gripes and moans I have received from colleagues seem to be universally shared. Mind you, I think that a headful of wine would have finished off most of the delegates as the afternoon sessions started on time – or should that be TIME (Test bed for Interoperable Metadata for E-books)?

I was in the fortunate position of having previous knowledge of the project gained at an earlier project workshop, but *Hugh Look* and *Godfrey Rust*, the Laurel and Hardy of interoperable metadata,

bravely performed their double-act to the more subdued post-lunch crowd.

Addressing librarians' complaints about the lack of consistent metadata for e-books, the project aims to create a standardized catalogue of bibliographic records. The project team have worked closely with various players within the e-books field, from libraries to publishers, and have realized that none of the existing metadata standards fully meets all the requirements of the e-books community.

The secret of this project is that it does exactly what it says on the tin. The metadata is 'interoperable'. Publishers and others will be able to populate the catalogue with metadata in their preferred format (MARC, ONIX, LOM, Dublin Core, etc.) and specially-written mapping protocols will allow them to be stored in a single intermediate format and retrieved in any other format, e.g. a publisher can add an ONIX record to the database which a library can then download in MARC format.

The test bed includes 1,900 records, many supplied by publishers such as Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Taylor & Francis and OCLC NetLibrary. Though only at test bed stage, and subject to the inevitable proviso that the eventual output can only be as good as the records being added to the database, the project offers the potential to be a wonderful federated cataloguing tool for e-book users. Even 'weak' transforms could create basic output records. Think of the time savings in being able to download bibliographic records for e-books rather than having to catalogue them individually yourself!

Linda Bennett then focused our minds on the marketing of e-books – *article based on this paper published in full in this issue.*

The other session that really struck me was *Peter Shepherd's* session on COUNTER standards for usage statistics. A draft Code of Practice for e-books and reference works was published in February 2005. Usage metrics are less clearly defined than for e-journals, e.g. by their very nature books

are individual and there is less comparison between them than between journals, and the unit of access may include an entire book, a chapter, a page, a paragraph. There are also questions regarding who should count a full-text request – the publisher? the aggregator? – to which the only answer can be: the service that actually provides the full text to the end-user. Further work is required, e.g. HTML and PDF formats are counted separately, but some interfaces route the user through HTML to get to the PDF so it could get counted twice, but we now have the basics for usable metrics. (*Article based on this paper published in full in this issue.*)

Having attended other e-book and journal seminars, I did wonder whether we had trodden any new ground or whether we had simply aired the same old arguments that we aired 5–10 years ago over e-journals. E-books are still a relatively new market for most people, so inevitably publishers still want to protect their revenue and aren't prepared to bargain. It's the big deal or nothing, my dear! Academic libraries still want the core texts electronically, for reasons too obvious for me to need to write them down, but they are still the big revenue spinners for the major publishers. Usage data is still inconsistent, and therefore unreliable. Librarians and publishers are scared of the pay-per-view model, for differing reasons. What if they aren't heavily used? What if it they are too heavily used? Does all of this sound familiar?

In the question session at the end, *Joanne Yeomans* of CERN asked why we are still talking about the same old models. Why aren't we taking the opportunity to radically reinvent purchasing models? And this was a thought that had been occupying me for most of the day.

By the end of the day, my brain was crying out for refreshment so I retired to the nearest local hostelry with some of our commercial colleagues (names withheld for professional and legal reasons!) for a pint or two of something cool and refreshing, and that had no e-content at all! Some things you just can't re-package and re-present!