

E-books and user assumptions

E-books, in all their forms, are now a core element of library collections, but even as they become a larger part of the publishing world and library holdings, users face new realities that they did not expect. Many are unable to deal with e-books in the way creators envision. There are issues of many kinds related to technology, readability, access, borrowing, and the level of knowledge about special features. Undergirding these is a subtle issue that is becoming more obvious as e-books evolve, namely, user assumptions and perceptions about e-books. The author discusses these issues based on various studies and on her experience with students, both in her credit courses and in the general library, and proposes that we rethink the fundamental concept of an e-book.



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Introduction

After many years of promise, e-books are on the rise. Vendor statistics attest to their growing popularity. Cleto, of Springer, explained that only 15% of the company's content consists of e-books, but that that 15% generates 30% of the company's total usage.¹ At California State University, East Bay, which lists in its catalog over 30,000 e-books acquired through subscriptions from ebrary, Safari and NetLibrary, statistics also display growth. In 2006, the combined number of full-text views was 27,405; in 2007, the figure rose to 37,107; and in 2008, the figure was 52,126.²

Some general reasons for increased use are: the growing number of available e-books, the purchase of e-book packages by consortia, the greater presence of MARC records for e-books in the library catalog, the expanding number of distance learning programs and courses, the emerging familiarity of devices that display e-books, from Kindle to the now-ubiquitous mobile phone/device, and the spread of wireless networks.

At California State University, East Bay, there are added challenges. Students often work full or part time while attending university, have family responsibilities, and predominantly commute. In addition, the university is on the quarter system, that is, four quarters a year with ten weeks of classes followed by a week of exams and a break week. As a result, there is a need for speed and anytime, anywhere access. In contrast to that, there are still students with slow computers and dial-up access, adding another layer of complication.

Studies of e-book use

Vendors, such as ebrary and Springer, have conducted several studies. While useful, they are not random studies and do not represent a broad set of users, disciplines, or library types. In the ebrary study,³ Italy (2,707 respondents) and the United States (2,143) predominated. Engineering was the primary discipline (1,983 respondents), with architecture (525), business (439), computer and information science (401), and nursing (187) following. Springer also conducted an international study,⁴ but it included only research universities and only six of them. In addition, Springer's collection is focused on science, technology and medicine (STM), making it less applicable to general universities, such as 'Cal State East Bay'.

In 2009, however, the Primary Research Group published a survey of American college students' use of library e-book collections,⁵ a stratified, representative probability study of randomly selected full-time students at approximately 250 US public four-year colleges, private four-year colleges, and public and private two-year colleges. The total sample size was 407 and typically, responses reflect between 60 and 250 survey participants with a general average of about 100. The survey did not specify what types of e-books were included, e.g., whether an e-book was 'reference' in nature, supplementary to a course, or just general in nature. It is assumed that the term was used generically and would include any e-book considered by the respondents.

It should be noted, however, that respondents would be unlikely to consider e-textbooks in conjunction with libraries. US libraries do not usually make textbooks (print or e-versions) available to students, unless individual professors provide personal print copies for the reserve collection. There are three major reasons for this. First, there would be a conflict with the university bookstore, cutting into its revenue opportunities. Second, due to the wide selection in textbooks chosen by faculty, the number needed and the subsequent cost is beyond library budgets. Third, libraries have traditionally provided extensive supplementary materials for courses, rather than textbooks, as students are expected to read widely and beyond the course text. That mission could change, however, and the current explorations of e-textbooks in higher education libraries in the United Kingdom, as described in a first report issued earlier in 2009⁶, may provide helpful suggestions. In Appendix 3 of that report, there is reference to the high cost of US textbooks and the steps being taken to address this by the government, by faculty who make their textbooks freely available online, and by students who seek free options through websites, although there are likely to be copyright challenges in this last case.

With this background, let us consider some user-focused elements in each study. Ebrary asked: *"How important are the following features to e-books?"*⁷ The top five features included searching, anytime access, off-campus access, ability for more than one student to use an e-book at the same time, and downloading to laptop. These features, however, could apply to any electronic resource. Of the 19 categories, only a few could potentially be considered more related to 'e-books', when you think about how other e-resources, primarily journal articles, are provided. These include highlighting, annotating, book reviews, ability to share notes, collaborative tools, personal bookshelves and shared bookshelves. The majority of these features were at the lower end of the importance list, and, technically, these features could be added to electronic journal articles, if vendors were urged to do so.

The Springer survey compared the advantages and disadvantages of print and e-books. User comments reflected some of the same emphases as the responses to the ebrary question. *"The primary advantages of eBooks for end users revolve around convenience and information access. Users said that*

*they value the ability to access eBooks anytime and anywhere and appreciate that access is fast and easy. Full-text searching was also named as a top eBook advantage."*⁸ Again, these features are equally applicable to any e-resource.

The Primary Research Group study, however, provided some different results. The study measured: awareness of e-books and frequency of use, ease/difficulty of access and use, whether the student received training from a librarian, and the usefulness of the collection as a reference and research tool.

*"Close to a third of the students in the sample were not sure what an e-book was and another 9.5% believed that their library did not have an e-book collection. 27.25% said that their library had an e-book collection, but that they never used them. 27% of the students ... said that they used the e-book collection occasionally and 4% said that they were frequent users of their library's e-book collection."*⁹

The study correlated students' income level and grades with the answers. *"Students from lower income backgrounds were somewhat less aware of e-books than were students from wealthier backgrounds."*¹⁰ There was also less awareness of e-books among those with lower grades.

If students were familiar with e-books, they found them relatively easy to use. 30.42% of them received some training from a librarian. In terms of usefulness, 3.69% found the e-collection very useful; 21.31% found it useful, 24.43% found it somewhat useful, 17.05% found it slightly useful; and 33.52% said it was not useful. Students from middle-upper and upper income families and students with better grades tend to consider e-books more useful. It was also stated that *"No student with a full time job found them useful, very useful or even somewhat useful."*¹¹ How does that correlate with the need for speed and anytime, anywhere access requested so often by working students at my university?

E-book assumptions and perceptions at Cal State East Bay

"Where can I find this book?" I have been asked this question more than once. When I discover that the item is an e-book, I explain how to connect to and use it, but the question is revealing. A 'book' is a concept in users' minds and, after centuries of existence, a cultural icon as well. Users have pre-

conceived ideas about a 'book'. They expect it to behave in a certain way and they look for the same characteristics whether the book is in print or electronic form.

A good example is the next question: "How do I check it out?" On some platforms and in some libraries, 'checking it out' is how access and use of e-books are structured, but not on all platforms and not in all libraries. Why is check-out necessary? If students hit the simultaneous user limit, a message box will pop up.

These examples are specific to Cal State East Bay and, as users become more familiar with e-books, may disappear, but they show the current level of confusion surrounding e-books. From a broader perspective, the results from the Primary Research Group study suggest that users at Cal State East Bay are not unique when one third of the respondents were not sure what an e-book was, and an additional nine-and-a-half percent weren't sure if their library had any.

In many ways, the term 'e-book' is its own impediment. It reflects the way we approach technology. First, we automate what we know. Second, the technology becomes established. Third, we begin to see new possibilities, create new approaches, and shift away from the original concept. E-books are in their early stages. There are some 'different' e-books, incorporating video clips, hyperlinks, etc., and e-books that are experimental, such as the examples in the Institute for the Future of the Book¹², but the bulk of e-books today are simply print books in e-format.

The e-book label and many of its elements are actually skeuomorphs, a term that is becoming popular in digital humanities. Adapted from the world of architecture and ornamentation, a skeuomorph carries remnants of its previous existence as it evolves into its new self. It is similar to a molting snake. E-books have not yet cast off their print skins, and this colors many issues.

Issues

While some issues exist solely because of this effort to replicate the print world and despite the fact that we often compare print and e-books, there are improvements. Reading an e-book is likely to get easier with each new version of an e-book reader or each improvement in a computer screen (for those students who cannot afford an e-book reader).

Sooner or later, readers and computer screens should be able to accommodate long-term reading. These devices will probably also adapt more readily than a print book to accessibility for the visually impaired, permitting changes in color of background and typeface, variable changes in font size, voice activation, and other features not possible in the print environment.

Permission to print and download is relaxing, depending on what vendors can negotiate in terms of copyright. Policies vary from vendor to vendor, but liberal policies are preferable because users generally want to print or download information to use in their papers. Springer has recently launched 'MyCopy', a black and white print-on-demand feature, which may reduce on-site printing. Other vendors will no doubt follow, as on-demand titles are on the rise and growing more familiar to users. In fact, the number of on-demand titles outstripped the number of traditional books in 2008, implying that print on demand is growing more familiar to users.¹³

Variations from vendor to vendor are common. Springer offers PDF format, while Safari, ebrary and NetLibrary offer proprietary platforms. Users are confused by this, particularly the proprietary formats, where they sometimes have problems just opening the book. I usually try to explain these variations through the analogy of an automobile. While some features are standard and located in the same place in each vehicle (at least within a given country – we don't go into right- and left-hand drive), companies compete, so there is no incentive to standardize. Fortunately, the previous need to download a plug-in for a proprietary platform is going away – a big improvement.

Special features are also getting better (the virtue of competition). Most of my users, however, are oblivious. This is unfortunate because many of these features are useful. In addition to highlighting and annotating, two 'traditional' features, there are now links to citation tools like RefWorks and EndNote and networking features that link words with other online resources. "Just give me the print" is the usual request, possibly because users just want the content and because print is familiar and readable.

What users also want is inter-library loan or, perhaps more accurately, inter-library access. In 2007, Gee¹⁴ discussed the issues that require libraries to deny requests. Now, not every e-book comes in a package, and vendors are negotiating

hard to open up this feature, even if the e-book does come in a package. If we can allow inter-library access to an e-article, we ought to be able to do the same for an e-chapter. If we loan a print book, we should be able to provide reading access to an e-book, even if downloading and printing are restricted. Yes, I compare the print and e-worlds, too, although there are differences in this case. Due to the potential of re-distribution, there needs to be a limit on the amount that can be downloaded and printed. The logical limit is by chapter.

Issues, however, remain and new issues arise. Subscription e-books can still disappear, which users find disconcerting. Our users with slow computers and dial-up access must come to the library to use an e-book, which seems like a contradiction. As books begin to incorporate links to publisher platforms with 'access keys', so suited to the individual user, the library is challenged to provide the access code while maintaining the publisher-required security. As e-books move from replicating the traditional print format to something less static, the issue of streaming e-books will grow. "Job security for twenty lifetimes", as a colleague of mine once said.

Moving forward

Many of these issues are as applicable to other forms of e-content as they are to e-books. After all, why is a 'serials' group publishing a supplement on e-'books'? When it comes to packages, the process is essentially the same as it is for databases. E-book, e-journal? Users don't care; in fact, they never cared, and many only understood book vs. journal in the print world because of the difference in their physical structures. What they want is relevant content.

Another question is whether the e-book (or, indeed, an e-journal volume/issue) will continue to be published as a single unit. There are a few examples where articles are published as they are completed, although they are generally compiled into an issue sooner or later. It is not yet a common practice, however, and there is no need to compile them into a single issue. In fact, there is no need for a volume number or an issue number if there is a digital object identifier (DOI) present, and it is likely that volume and issue numbers will eventually disappear. The important consideration is that issuing individual pieces as soon as they are

ready improves currency. There is the perspective that an e-chapter is part of a constructed whole, as opposed to an e-article, which is generally independent, but users often use only the chapter relevant to their immediate information need or assigned by their professor. There is a parallel to iTunes, where individual tracks are downloaded as opposed to a Compact Disk. In that case, users mix and match and create their own combinations. A good example of this individuation in the case of e-books is the UKSG's *The E-Resources Management Handbook*¹⁵ where individual chapters are building an extensive 'book' over a number of years, but why is it a 'handbook'? It could just as easily be a growing series of pieces (articles, chapters, essays, information bites) on e-resources management. Who knows? Perhaps we'll return to analytics one day.

Formats are blending; content is simply content. Vendors provide 'mixed' content in databases and on platforms: articles, book chapters, websites. In the growing world of information bites, let us focus on e-resource and e-content and drop terms like e-book and e-journal. It would enable us to view these individual pieces on their own merit without the labels that root them in skeuomorphic traditions. If pieces need linking, we can accomplish this through tagging or allow our users to tag them in ways that suit their purposes. Terms that include 'book' and 'journal' have served their usefulness in the e-world and are now limiting our ability to think differently about this content. We need to shuck these skins and move on.

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