E-Book in libraries: Some early experiences and reactions
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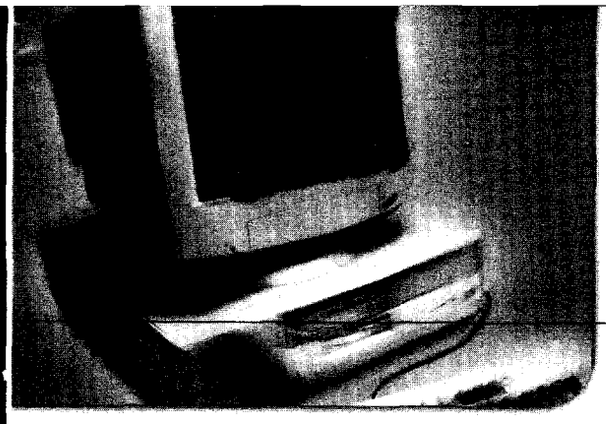

Leading Libraries

E-Books in Libraries: Some Early Experiences and Reactions

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Like many other librarians across the country, I've noted increasing mention of e-books in the library literature since 1998. I've read lots about e-books, e.g., Stephanie Ardito's excellent article in this very magazine ["Electronic Books: To 'E' or No to 'E,' April 2000, pp. 28-39, http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/apr00/ardito.htm]. But I've not seen or heard much about what happens when libraries actually start using them. So I decided to do a little investigating and see what lessons we could learn from libraries integrating e-books into their collections.

Although e-book technology has been ready since the early '90s, it didn't take off until recently. Reasons vary, but perhaps the biggest obstacle to adopting to e-books is the conviction of most readers that there's nothing wrong with old-fashioned books. Given that belief and the hefty price tag for both the hardware and the software for digital versions of books, only the wealthy and technologically enamored started signing up. Most people could not imagine themselves lying on the beach reading their trash novel or even reading in bed using a laptop or PalmPilot. Computer screen technology had to get a lot better and a lot cheaper before most people would even begin to entertain the notion of e-book reading. In 1999, downloads of e-books added up to a mere 1 percent of the $12 billion spent buying books online, according to Forrester Research, a Cambridge, Massachusetts, company tracking technology trends [Terrell, Kenneth; *U.S. News & World Report,* 01/31/2000, Vol. 128 Issue 4, p. 58]. So I guess most people feel the same as I did about cuddling up with a good e-book.

Nevertheless, things have begun changing, making e-books a much more palatable option. In August 1998, netLibrary [http://www.netlibrary.com] was founded. This privately held company has attracted funding from a wide array of sources, venture capitalists, as well as Internet and media companies such as McGraw-Hill. In the 2 years since its founding, netLibrary has worked to provide an end-to-end solution that includes everything from digital conversion to distribution. netLibrary has focused on helping librarians make it easier for their patrons to use e-books. As we went to press, netLibrary had filed for an Initial Public Offering (IPO) with the Securities and Exchange Commission for $82 million. The filing indicated netLibrary would spend the money on acquiring rights to more book titles for conversion, as well as other corporate purposes. Its new NASDAQ symbol is EBKS.

In September 1999, NIST (National Institute for Science and Technology) held its second annual conference on e-books [http://www.itl.nist.gov/div895/ebook99]. As you would expect, conference attendees included such e-book companies as 24/7, Rocket Books, and netLibrary, but also drew librarians such as Cindy Hill of Sun Microsystems, who was interested in learning about e-books for potential inclusion with library content. Cindy attended the conference because a previous manager had asked her to follow developments on e-content, which the manager thought might have great potential at Sun Microsystems. Cindy highly recommended the conference, feeling she got her money's worth from the last one. The 3rd Annual conference by NIST was held September 25-27, 2000.

Sun Shines on netLibrary

At last year's conference, netLibrary and Cindy Hill began discussions which led to the Sun Library's choosing netLibrary to work on integrating e-books into the Sun Library offerings. Many e-book vendors are very interested in working with corporate libraries, especially technologically focused ones like Sun Microsystems. Cindy chose to work with netLibrary for many reasons. netLibrary was the most eager to work with Sun Microsystems and could deal with Sun's UNIX platform. netLibrary had the biggest content among the e-book vendors surveyed.(netLibrary claims to be the biggest provider of e-book content by far, having over 25,000 books as of August 2000.) Sun Microsystems wanted to have technical library materials delivered on its

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PalmPilots as well as on its computers. netLibrary promises to "help you convert your content to multiple platforms." netLibrary has back list as well as front list titles available from publishers.

Several other factors about netLibrary also appealed to Sun. For one thing, netLibrary handles issues of digital rights management to ensure copyright protection. With netLibrary, Sun is not locked into a single format. You can view netLibrary e-books online, download them to your desktop, even view them with GlassBook Reader or hand-held computers such as Palm and Handspring. netLibrary pledges that as more digital distribution channels become available, its flexible format will allow users to take advantage of those new and emerging technologies. In addition, netLibrary was willing to work with SIRSI, Sun Library's integrated library system vendor [http://www.sirsi.com]. Sun's major book vendor, fatbrain.com [http://fatbrain.com], and netLibrary already work together to sell each other's content, making it easy to link from the new Sun Library Web page. EBSCO Publishing, an aggregator and distributor of published digital content, and netLibrary already had a deal to distribute e-books, again making it easy to link e-books and full-text journal article content at Sun. netLibrary was willing to work with Sun Microsystems to potentially make Sun's documentation available on e-books for employees.

Before delivering any content to employees, Sun's Library decided to do focus group surveys and beta testing using the engineering and competitive analysis communities at Sun Microsystems. The call for volunteers received a very high response rate, and two focus groups led by facilitators were held at Sun facilities in Massachusetts and California. What they found was not necessarily what they were expecting to find. Most of those who participated in the focus groups wanted to use e-books as a reference tool. They wanted to search across a book, look deep into the content to get the answers they needed, and then send the book back. If they wanted or needed the book on an ongoing basis, they could or would want to order a physical copy of it.

netLibrary pledges that as more digital distribution channels become available, its **flexible format will allow users to take advantage** of those new and **emerging technologies**.

Christy Confetti Higgins, who has the title of information specialist/Web technologist at the Sun Microsystems Library, works closely with netLibrary to customize the Sun Library Web page that debuted in September 2000. The Library has striven to make the online catalog the single dominant resource or central nervous system for access to the entire collection. The Web site allows employees to find potentially relevant answers wherever the answers appear — in an e-book; hard-copy book, journal article; internal documentation, or a book they must purchase. netLibrary works with SIRSI, Sun's integrated online library system vendor, and other ILS providers (notably, epixtech, Follett, and Innovative Interfaces Inc.) to link the e-content within the integrated catalog. Library users can check out and/or print electronic versions of the material using the library's catalog. E-books are integrating easily into the Sun infrastructure.

netLibrary also benefits from working with Sun Microsystems. Sun helps netLibrary develop a virtual library resource solution. netLibrary will provide the infrastructure and complete back-end, integrate with SIRSI to view content online, and deliver the content to Sun's virtual work force of 45,000, including handling the digital rights content. Focus group responses make it clear that Sun employees are enthusiastic and happily looking forward to having e-books available to them from whatever platform they choose.

Discussions with Bruce Greiner and Brian Bell of netLibrary made it clear that they view their participation with Sun Microsystems as more like a strategic partner than as just a customer. The pair will continue to work with Sun Library to provide wider and deeper breadth of content, but also view themselves as able to work with Human Resources and Training departments of corporations to help serve the need for e-content both internally and externally.

netLibrary currently has contracts with over 300 publishers. The large variety of publishers gives netLibrary special strength in areas of science and technology, business, management, and reference materials. netLibrary purchased Peanut Press [http://www.peanutpress.com] and made it a division. Peanut Press was the first technology-solution provider to offer contemporary fiction and nonfiction books, newspapers, and magazines for reading on hand-held computers.

netLibrary has also made significant agreements with jobbers such as Blackwell Book Services. If your library uses Blackwell's Collection Manager to purchase books, you can already see the option to purchase the electronic version of a book, just as you have the option to buy a hard- or soft-cover copy. netLibrary undoubtedly looks at all possible chan-

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nels of distribution. I expect to see additional booksellers and jobbers signing agreements with netLibrary. netLibrary is also an active vendor in the OCLC PromptCat service, which delivers cataloging records for any title supplied by participating vendors that has a monographic record in WorldCat (the OCLC Online Union Catalog).

Bell and Howell's Early English Digitals Too

Dr. David Evans, associate director of Kennesaw State University's Library, has been looking at digital technology for a while. When Bell & Howell Information and Learning (formerly UMI, someday ProQuest International) made *Early English Texts* available electronically, Evans jumped at the chance to purchase the electronic versions of these books, because a relatively young library such as his, a mere 40 years old, would never have been able to afford purchasing such rare books. Even if the books were available, he wouldn't have had the space to add that large a collection.

Early English Texts is a collection of early English literature, including nearly every English-language book published from the invention of printing in 1475 to 1700. This collection, begun in 1938 as UMI's first microfilm project, includes such famous works as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Culpeper's *The English Physician*, and Shakespeare's renowned *First Folio* edition of 1623. With the acquisition of the digital version of these publications, the library got a greater collection of materials then they could have afforded in hard copy. Evans' library also had experimented with Rocket Books, but the Rocket standard page doesn't conform to the original print books standard pages, making citation and reference tracking difficult for scholars. Rocket Books were also not exportable and had to have its Rocket device checked out as well in order for patrons to use them.

netLibrary e-books are not tied to one mode or standard for delivery and its model is more like a library's. The library owns one copy and sets the loan period. The library always maintains control of the item, because if the library checks out an e-book to a patron for 2 days, at the end of that period of time, the patron's access to the book is programmed to disappear, making itself available for the next patron.

Dr. Evans believes that librarians will have to change their ways of doing business. From the management point of view, he finds that e-books speed up delivery to patrons, eliminate the extra time or money required to order, process, handle, and make books ready for circulation, never get lost, and have any copyright issues taken care of by netLibrary. Access to netLibrary is through a secure page and the library offers training and demonstrations to the students. Materials will be available from Sun's own online catalog once the migration to Endeavor is completed.

Kennesaw State University concentrated its e-book acquisitions on the three distance-education programs at the University — Nursing, Executive MBA, and the Graduate Education program. The Library involved the deans, department chairs, and faculty connected to those distance programs. The Library tied e-book acquisitions closely to the curriculum in those distance programs, which could provide distance-learning students access to books without ever having to come into the library physically. The Library shies away from popular type reading material and finds that most e-books are limited to 1999 and 2000 publication dates. This is fine for the Nursing program, for which maintaining the most current technology books is critical.

Dr. Evans also realized that one other group of e-books could serve the staff in charge of the technology at Kennesaw State University. Many of the manuals the technical support staff likes to use, such as those from O'Reilly Publishing, are available through netLibrary, making it easy for the library to provide 24/7 access through computers or PalmPilots. The technology people are very excited to have their favorite manuals available to them whenever they need to consult them.

Your Turn?

I know that many academic libraries are using, considering, and/or negotiating for e-books. I suspect e-book usage for university students, as for Sun Microsystems engineers, will be driven by the need both students and engineers have to search quickly through massive quantities of information to find the precise answer to their problems. Whether looking for a specific technical specification or answering a question on a homework assignment for a class, the ability to quickly get to the precise answers is what differentiates e-books from the hard-copy version and makes e-books a viable and attractive alternative. I believe the ability to find precise answers to questions or problems will initially drive the success and acceptance of e-books. People will for the most part not be reading the full texts online initially, so much as for the ability to search precise portions of e-books and quickly find needed answers.

Over time, improved screen technology will likely make reading online for pleasure and leisure a more attractive and viable option. It is clear that we are at the very early stages of e-book acceptance, but as the digital generation, to whom reading and getting information online is already second nature, continues to enter and fill colleges, reading online will become the norm for many. *

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