

STM eBooks: Librarian Perspectives on the First 5 years



The Springer eBooks 5th Anniversary

Foreword

For the 5th anniversary of the launch of the Springer eBook Collection, the publisher consulted five key partners across the academic, corporate and government sectors for their thoughts about the eBook evolution – past, present and future.

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- ▶ **Sarah Thompson**, Content Acquisition Librarian, York University

This paper, written for librarians, publishers and aggregators – regardless of where they are in the eBook life cycle – explores the shared challenges and opportunities that eBooks present to key stakeholders.

Working together through advisory groups, summits and regular interactive communication, eBook content suppliers and consumers can drive innovations for the benefit of every partner in the digital publishing activities.

Springer views these relationships as essential to the success of their eBook offerings.

Executive Overview

eBooks have evolved considerably over the last five years, beyond the more mature, but less dynamic eJournals space. They are now poised at an intersection of library, technology and research trends that afford great opportunities and challenges, for both the library and publisher communities.

Similar to the formative years of STM eJournals adoption, eBook uptake shows both promise and challenges: promise as an efficient source for research, and challenges as stakeholders grasp how best to manage this relatively new content format.

In their sixth year, eBooks are entering an Age of Experimentation. Stakeholders must learn how to flourish despite the dizzying pace of the technologies that support the eBook format. Experimentation with evidence-based and patron-driven usage is one example of how the community is exploring best practices. Indeed, as publishers, aggregators and librarians collaborate to address the most vexing eBook challenges, the community will enter a “contest for eyeballs.” This will drive market demand for best-in-class eBook platforms that support simple discoverability and access.

For eBook publishers, aggregators and consumers alike, the year 2012 is likely to be a watershed. Stakeholders now have an unprecedented opportunity to contribute in a substantive way to the community dialogue surrounding eBooks, and to help influence the direction of the eBook evolution.



In Their Infancy: eBooks Helped Librarians and Researchers Work Smarter, But...

Without question, the eBook evolution has been aided by the lessons learned in the conversion from print to eJournals.

“When eJournals started, we were clueless,” says Nola Heyns, Eli Lilly and Company. “We didn’t know how they should work and now we’ve learned a lot. eBooks don’t have the same slow path to follow.”

Take features, for instance. eBooks can rapidly deploy innovations from the eJournals world, including research-valuable supplementary materials and chapter-level abstracting and indexing.

And as eBooks have matured, so has the technology – including search, discoverability and the sophisticated highly-interactive content.

Features such as the ability to store notes and add highlighting and links is very attractive to researchers and others who are already engaged with eBooks. “Also, the interactive features, like video clips and the ability to download data to their own spreadsheets – people are very happy with that,” she says.

Helen B. Josephine of Stanford, adds, “We work with real-world engineers all the time. [For an eBook to have] the formula for how this bridge should stand up in high winds along with a video of how it actually would stand up in high winds is a great way to integrate both types of learning.”

Unfortunately, these types of features are platform-specific, and platform functionality across vendors is far from standardized.

Naturally, users expect the same functionality across all platforms. They don’t necessarily understand why one site will allow them to take notes while another one won’t. Simplified, broad access is also important. Users don’t like to be told they have limited access, and complex sign-on models can be frustrating.

Content formats are also a challenge.

“PDF is a very bad format for technical books. Even in HTML, formulas and technical drawings aren’t very readable on mobile devices,” says Zofia E. Brinkman Dzwig, Delft University of Technology. “If you put a normal book on a Kindle, it’s fine. But if you put a technical book on it, it will be slow,” she says. “With the coming of the iPad it is better, and with the ePub format it will be even better.” Early adopter publishers, such as Springer, are already addressing this change, preparing ePub books for their platforms.

From 1998 to 2008, there was an 898.3 percent increase in the number of eBooks in academic libraries.¹ This upward trend continues to climb, according to Bousfield, with eBook update growing at an average rate of 5 to 10%.²

This has resulted in many libraries adding fewer titles to their print collections, focusing their budgets on eBook acquisitions.

“If we can get a digital version, we always do,” says Brinkman Dzwig.

Most libraries do not buy both print and electronic copies as they still find it too costly and unnecessary as some publishers, including Springer, offer unlimited concurrent access to eBooks.

This growth in electronic content has broadened librarians’ “long-tail” approach to facilitating access to high-quality, relevant content on platforms like SpringerLink that integrate search results across content types.

“It is important that whenever users search a particular topic, it returns not only book information but also other related information such as book, chapter and journal article concurrently,” says Nakamoto.

► *You can find everything – all kinds of documents on one platform. People can easily find the piece of information [they need.]*

► Zofia E. Brinkman Dzwig

► *We’ve really just started thinking about what the eBook is like. It certainly has much more potential than being just a replicated e-version of what’s on the shelf.*

► Helen B. Josephine

► *People expect a rosy future, but we are still in the early days.*

► David Bousfield, Outsell

¹Trends in Academic Libraries, 1998-2008, prepared by Denise M. Davis for the American Library Association, 2011

²Scientific, Technical & Medical Information: 2010 Final Market Size and Share Report © Outsell, Inc., page 20, David Bousfield

eBooks Today: As Many Questions as There Are Answers

► *eBooks offer greater opportunity for didactic content but discoverability is still a problem.*

► *David Bousfield, Outsell*

► *7 It's vulnerable. Before, libraries were really possessing something. You could locate it and it was yours. Now, we don't store anything in our own library. It's just access to a platform of someone else.* ► *Zofia E. Brinkman Dzwig*

With respect to discoverability, users want to spend less time trying to understand the different information access points and more time accessing and interacting with the information. "We hardly understand the differences, and the user is completely confused by it," says Brinkman Dzwig.

Ong agrees: "[The search interface] is simple for them to find unexpected publications that they come across, although I must say that the way the search possibilities work, it's not very practical. It's confusing and I'm supposed to know [it] better than others."

"You can't afford an old-fashioned catalog system anymore and you really need to because people are used to very good discoverability and accessibility of everything," adds Brinkman Dzwig. "[Patrons] don't know what they miss because they think, 'Well, what I don't see, it's not there.' But it's not true, of course."

"Publishers [need to] get users to more content – quickly," says Bousfield. "There will be a 'war for eyeballs' in particular fields as attention spans grow shorter and more content becomes available."

Publishers now offer pay-per-view, patron-driven acquisition, personal print-on-demand, such as Springer's MyCopy, and, in some cases, DRM-free delivery models. This variety has greatly aided the usage of eBooks and their growing place in library collections.

Is Patron Driven Acquisition (PDA) an Answer?

More recently, several institutions have been testing Patron Driven Acquisitions (PDA) models, where the purchase of an eBook is triggered by usage. Still in its formative stages, PDA models vary widely across publisher and aggregator platforms. In partnership with several libraries evaluating PDA models, Springer is exploring how best to deliver this alternative to traditional acquisition methods. Early findings confirm that PDA models show potential, but are not without their growing pains:

"A genuine PDA model would allow us to buy only those titles actually needed and used by our patrons," says Rick Anderson, Associate Dean for Scholarly Resources & Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

Sarah Thompson, Content Acquisition Librarian, York University, adds: "If a library were to spend the money it had set aside earlier than anticipated and had to withdraw access, the expectations of its user community could be severely disappointed, especially if access were lost at a key time such as the main dissertation-writing period."

PDA has been met with mixed preferences across the globe and the popularity of the model largely depends on budgets available, differing preferences on the need for central control and more general influences such as geographic location.

Even as business models proliferate, archives are becoming increasingly important, helping assuage the often-articulated concern about eBook access in perpetuity.

Ong says, "As a library, you're always so proud if you can still produce classic books which have been published 50 or 60 years ago, and they're still legible and usable. Once in a while I feel very concerned about the availability of eBooks in the future."

JSTOR, Project Muse, CLOCKSS and Portico are all viewed as playing a crucial role in maintaining eBook availability long-term.



eBooks Tomorrow: A Bright, If Uncertain, Future

As the rate of scholarly publishing outpaces library budgets, forcing librarians to do more with less, it is important for library staff to measure the institutional value of eBooks. eBook ROI metrics can and should include cost and usage data, but also the value extended to researchers, and by extension researcher discoveries which become a credit to the institution.

Apart from the obvious and already well-documented hard-cost savings, eBook ROI also accounts for helping the end user focus on his field of expertise, instead of how to find a particular piece of information. “It’s not reading the people are doing. It’s finding information. You hardly read a technical book from the beginning to the end,” observes Brinkman Dzwig.

Given the specificity of eBook research, libraries are also seizing point-of-request opportunities to enhance eBook ROI.

“We’ve had a couple situations where an eBook was needed for an internal course,” says Heyns. “We contacted the publisher, asked to purchase access for a title and not the collection. If they have it as an eBook, they tend to work out an agreement with us.”

A critical aspect of ROI also focuses on the librarians’ own understanding that, as eBooks evolve, so do librarians’ roles as information literacy experts.

“I think the library as a location will be different,” says Heyns. “We won’t be the place for books, but we can have a different function. It’s not that we won’t have a role. The role will be different. And we’ve already gone that way.”

“We are becoming more of an interface between the publisher and the patron. Only, [the patrons] don’t notice,” says Ong.

One way librarians are effectively helping their end users take notice is through advocacy to publishers and aggregators about the issues preventing more rapid eBook uptake.

Discoverability is certainly one of them. Metadata must become more consistent and readily available to help aid discovery. Librarians would like to see more tags and more consistent presentation of authors, subjects, call numbers and tables of contents.

“Our metadata unit actually does a lot of work in reviewing the records before we load them to make sure that there’s enough information in the record, or that it’s in a format that’s acceptable for cross-searching,” says Josephine.

“There are reasons why people go to retailers such as Amazon to look for books, and some of that is the ability to be recommended books and get reviews,” she adds. “I think library catalogs are moving more into that arena. But to do that we’ll need more metadata from publishers. We see cataloging moving more toward that ‘consumer marketplace look,’ with information recommended and made available along with the book.”

Platform parity and ease of access are major issues. Users want less time spent learning about the different ways to access information and more time actually interacting with the information.

This can be very confusing at times as different platforms have different levels of DRM, even if the content is identical. Publishers will typically offer one set of DRM policies, whilst eBook aggregators will offer another. The library is often called upon to explain the differences when access across platforms is expected to be the same.

“We hardly understand the [platform] differences, and the user is completely confused by it,” says Brinkman Dzwig.

► *The conversion [to eBooks] is going faster than I had thought a few years ago. But we haven’t been buying many more because of the problems.* ► Ay-Ling Ong

► *Pricing probably can’t be maintained at current levels. A meltdown may be coming, akin to converting print to digital advertising.* ► David Bousfield, Outsell

► *Things change very quickly. Every year is different. Every half-year is different. We’re not going to tell them anymore what they need to read. We are not the boss anymore.* ► Zofia E. Brinkman Dzwig

“Platforms should become format agnostic. And eBook access models are so complex. This one you have to go here and create your own password. That one can IP authenticate you. I wish it were simpler,” says Heyns. “eBook content providers need to follow the journal model. Book publishers are behind in terms of where they should be.”

Indeed, publishers like Springer, that have taken a largely DRM-free and ILL rights-included approach to eBooks, will be well-positioned to advocate on behalf of libraries in the discussion of reducing usability barriers for eBooks.

While platform issues remain a source of frustration, licensing terms are becoming a source of relief. In the experimental stage of eBook uptake, licensing terms have actually become more flexible, with additional usage models being tested and launched regularly.

“Our goal is to become a bookless library with exclusive access to online content in all disciplines in all formats,” says Josephine. “It’s a big 10-year goal and we are rapidly approaching the ability to provide that to our users. We couldn’t even be here thinking about doing this without the cooperation with the publishers indefinitely.”

Value-added, interactive eBook features represent another high-priority area in need of industry-wide standardization. For example, note-taking, highlighting, linking to additional content and the ability to share title-specific information with others are all popular features. Unfortunately, they are also features found on only a few select platforms.

Tangentially related to this is the issue of eBook format quality and optimization for tablets, e-readers and other mobile devices. Though it’s certainly no easy task, the lowest common denominator eBook format must be identified to fit within the parameters of ever-changing technological advances.

The challenges are as simple as the ergonomics of screen viewing and as complex as the very manner in which eBooks are developed.

“Apparently it’s difficult to convert the files to ePub. So if we get PDFs and your tablet is a small one, we would have to move the cursor from left to right and back again, because the file is too wide,” explains Ong.

Taking this into account, as well as the likely trend of publishers introducing units other than the chapter to enable access at the most granular level, Bousfield says “Authors [must] think differently about how to write for eBooks.”

And so they are. At Stanford, notes Josephine, a faculty member in the School of Design is working with students on an idea for what he calls a “bookazine.”

“It would be an app to run on any smartphone or tablet, and would combine both editorial content as well as outbound links to current information, photos and video clips.” Using a travel-themed eBook as an example, Josephine adds, “You could get information about a country that you’re visiting as well as any reviews or information from people who have been there. It’s adding that social networking element.”

“That really kind of changes the whole concept of a book into something that’s part editorial, part curated, with the rest being made up of added content, depending on the needs of the reader,” she says.

Enhanced COUNTER-compliant usage statistics related to eBooks will likely be a driving force behind all these initiatives.

“Increased availability and study of metrics by librarians will help them negotiate costs,” says Bousfield. “After all, flat is the new good. Budgets haven’t rebounded.”

Echoing this sentiment, Ong adds: “I hope to be able to offer more for approximately the same cost.”

Brinkman Dzwig concurs: “It’s difficult to make long term commitments nowadays. I don’t believe in the just in case policy anymore. [The] emphasis [is] on just in time purchasing.”

Conclusions

The evolution of eBooks over the last five years has taken a simple electronic format of a print book and created a feature-rich, discoverable, interactive and portable information tool with a clear return on investment.

Publishers, aggregators and librarians will work to resolve several of the existing barriers to eBook engagement, including access, discoverability and usability. There will be an increased emphasis on usage stats, which will precipitate more flexible access and pricing models.

- ▶ eBooks will continue to evolve and grow to include more elements that the print format cannot support. Supplementary material, common in eJournals and amongst early-adopter eBook publishers will become more widely available.
- ▶ The industry as a whole will need to work towards standards; of metadata, usage statistics and, to some extent, user interfaces. Usage statistics and reports, in a standardized format such as COUNTER, help librarians better understand patrons' needs and plan for future collection development. As eBooks have less uniform content levels, like the standard journal article, reports will need to evolve to provide librarians with granular information on which eBooks are being used and how they are being used.
- ▶ Tablets, e-readers and other mobile devices will become more commonplace within the STM community. The proliferation and technological strides of such devices will effectively "raise the bar" in terms of how librarians expect publishers and aggregators to support information delivery in these formats. DRM-free access and ePub formatting are just two recent examples of how mobile device popularity and usage are shaping the eBook evolution.

As the varied STM audience drives eBook usage, the challenges facing publishers, aggregators and librarians are formidable. With an increasingly e-savvy end user population expecting 24/7, hassle-free access to high-quality material, all on an ever-expanding menu of content delivery systems, the need for stakeholder collaboration and policy development is a necessary and urgent next step.

This paper, which articulates several of the challenges facing eBook stakeholders within the STM community, is just one source of discussion that can help create meaningful dialogue about how to move the industry forward.

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