

THE TRIALS OF TECHNOLOGY

THE BRISBANE EBOOK READER TRIAL AND FOCUS GROUP

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Electronic books represent a newly available digital resource to extend the range of options public libraries can offer their patrons. The growing number of ebook trials in public libraries around the world is a good indication of the interest they have generated. In this chapter we have analysed an in-depth study of usage issues for participants as they arose in a specific ebook trial, survey and focus group session held at Toowong Public Library in Brisbane, Australia between March and July 2001. We wanted to find as many real world examples of usage as possible and observe what value users placed on their experience with ebook readers. In each of these case studies we have considered the following question: 'What actually happens when a library decides to loan hand-held electronic readers to its patrons?'

The research on the Brisbane ebook experience is based on data provided in an extended taped interview with the collections coordinator, responsible for implementing the ebook strategy. The data also includes a written survey filled in by more than forty participants at the time they returned the ebook readers and a focus group of twelve patrons who had participated in the trial. The collected data provides a unique insight into how patrons respond to ebooks and hand-held ebook readers in public libraries. The detailed case study should also supplement the limited information available to all those involved as developers and distributors of ebook technology.

In Australia, the Shorelink ebook project in New South Wales and the trial in progress in the Toowoomba library group, expand and reflect on the rich data we derived from the initial case study at Toowong.

We have placed the experience of the Brisbane public library system with ebooks in an international context. In the United States and Europe we review some of the innovative ebook trials and the implementation and distribution options these libraries are experimenting with or selecting. These reports serve to confirm or, in some cases, extend the findings that emerged from the Toowong library data.

The chapter concludes with a review of some partnering opportunities between libraries and ebook vendors for mutually beneficial pricing and distribution models and why these proposals are being given increasing consideration by librarians.

An ebook is a digital representation of a written work that can be read using either a hardware or software based 'ebook reader'. An e-Text is a digital representation of a written work that can include video, audio, text and graphics and may facilitate interaction by the reader, allowing the reader to directly question and contribute to the discussion (Bellamy et al, 2001:124). Ebook readers can be used for any kind of content that is moving from print to electronic form including newspapers and popular general circulation weekly magazines.

When libraries refer to 'ebooks' it is usually to specialized ebook reading devices such as the Rocket eBook. Some librarians have expressed a preference for moving the focus from ebooks as a *product* to etext as the *process*. Etext and its development is where these librarians saw the long-term benefits for libraries and their patrons (State Library of Victoria forum, 3rd August, 2001).

ENGAGING WITH EBOOK TECHNOLOGY: 'A WHOLE NEW WAY OF READING'

The number of libraries participating in ebook trials since 1999 is growing. In the United States according to Chris Rippel's Skyways cite, more than 50 libraries in 23 states are currently circulating ebooks. In Canada while only 8% of responding libraries circulate ebooks, 67% of those who do not currently, plan to do so in the future. (Director of Technology and Development, Windsor, Ontario Public Library August, 2001) Outside North America, documented ebook trials have taken place in public libraries in Denmark, Norway and Australia.

Why are not-for-profit public libraries engaging with a technology that was designed for individuals to buy rather than for communities to use? Websites from these libraries provide clues as to why the decision to trial ebook services is a recurring phenomenon.

In Canada, Richmond Public Library, British Columbia, was one of the first to offer ebooks to their customers in 1999. Their excellent website offers extensive information about ebooks, and a question and answer section which includes the following:

Question :

Why is the Library getting into this new format? Wouldn't the library be better off just sticking with regular books?

Answer :

Technology is radically changing the world we live in and this is especially evident in the world of the public library. It is important that the library experiment with cutting edge services and products and be in on the ground floor as they develop, so that we can continue to provide the best service to our customers. And what better place to showcase this new technology than at the public library? Besides, with ebooks, the Library can offer access to far more books than we could ever fit on our actual shelves.

Richmond's answer to the question why libraries are getting into this new format indicates some of its attractions for libraries seen as a local resource – better service provision, staying in touch with the community and its needs, providing a 'showcase' for the new technology and enabling the library to increase its holdings economically.

Linking public institutions and new technology also provides a significant public relations advantage for both libraries and their governing bodies. Another public library in Canada provides a prime example of this win/win situation:

On April 26, 2000 the Windsor Public Library (WPL) became the first library in Ontario to demonstrate electronic books in a launch timed to coincide with Canada Book Day celebrations. On July 12, 2000 the Library's Rocket eBooks™ began to circulate to the public for a seven day loan period. On Friday, October 20, 2000 Helen Johns, then Ontario's Minister of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation, named the Windsor Public Library winner of the Minister's Award for Innovation in the 2000 Public Library Service Awards for the ebook project.

Within three months of the launch of its ebook circulation project, WPL had won a major award for innovation as well as public acknowledgement of its achievement. As we will see in our

major Australian case study, the link to technological innovation provides libraries with an important public relations advantage.

In accepting the award for innovation, Windsor Public Library's CEO, Steve Salmons, acknowledged another reason for the enthusiasm many libraries exhibit for introducing ebooks.

This is exactly the kind of cutting-edge technology that we want to make available to our customers...The Electronic Books project is one of our most exciting innovations. It opens up a whole new way of reading for our customers and holds great promise for the future.

The role of the public library in opening up possibilities for library patrons is reiterated in the following anecdote of a U.S. librarian from Columbus, Ohio. Stephen Wood confesses to being skeptical about ebook readers until he used one himself:

The reason I believe circulating these units is so important is so that people have an opportunity to see what this new technology is all about. They need to be aware of what is coming down the pike. This certainly worked for me. I was at a meeting in Columbus, Ohio, in December 1999 when I saw my first Rocket eBook. Of course I had heard about ebook readers but I hadn't been really impressed with the whole concept because, I think, I didn't truly understand what they were all about. But when I saw one, and had the opportunity to see how it works, I realized that (a) I had to own one of my own, and (b) I had an obligation to expose my community to them as well. (Wood, 2001).

The need to expose their community to ebooks recurs as part of the rationale informing the Brisbane and Shorelink ebook reader trials. The sense of obligation to readers and the importance of efficient and effective delivery of information to all patrons is strongly and universally sustained as a librarian's definition of his/her professional role.

Libraries pioneering the introduction of ebooks consistently gain positive publicity and widened recognition of their role in the community. In the Australian context, our major case study reviews an initiative that successfully integrated an ebook trial with Brisbane City Council's promotion and launch of its smart city concept (see the eBrisbane *themes of livability* website)

The Shorelink libraries in Sydney, began their pilot study and survey of ebook readers in August 2001. They represent another group whose work is totally reliant on funding resulting from a successful application for government support. In the United States valuable findings emerged from a study of cooperating agencies in

Rochester, New York, who proceeded to study electronic books in October 1999 also based on the award of a publicly funded grant.

These examples suggest that public libraries wanting to purchase ebook readers and set up ebook pilot studies generally have had to rely on seed funding and grants. However, in the longer term, ebooks may actually offer cheaper and more flexible options for acquisitions than a purely paper-based option. Chris Rippel presents this argument on his Skyways site:

For librarians, ebooks offer for one purchase price regular print, large print, and, eventually, an audiobook. This would save money for librarians wanting the same title in these three versions... As ebook displays become better and the percentage of library patrons comfortable with either form increases, librarians may discover that purchasing one ebook providing adequate reading experiences in regular and large print and audio makes more financial sense than buying two paper books and an audiobook.

We have introduced some of the reasons why public libraries are engaging with ebook technology even though it was not designed for communities to use and how they are finding the means to do so. We now turn to a case study of one library's very recent experience with ebooks.

EBOOKS AT TOOWONG LIBRARY BRISBANE QUEENSLAND

Brisbane is the state capital of Queensland and home to Australia's largest public library service. Four million people a year visit the 32 branches of Brisbane library, borrowing nine million items. At Toowong, a branch of Brisbane Library, hand-held readers were loaned out to interested patrons from March 2001. On return of the devices patrons were asked to fill in an evaluation form. Volunteers who had used ebook readers took part in a focus group held at the library in July. Toowong public library's experience contributes significantly to current, user-based data for evaluating the role of ebooks in libraries.

Responses from patrons have been presented with minimal editing to retain the 'flavour' of their responses. The case study also incorporates data gathered from an extended interview recorded with the Collections Librarian from Brisbane who administered the ebook (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Interview with Fiona Emberton, Brisbane Libraries

A recorded focus group discussion, in which the researchers and library staff participated, provided additional data. Users in a focus group also contributed to the research with a number of unique and divergent insights into their experience in using the hand held readers.

It is important to locate the Toowong ebook trial within the Brisbane City Council's 2010 vision. Fiona Emberton, Coordinator Collections at Brisbane City library was very aware of the context of the trial:

Being a smart e-city is really crucial to our overall council strategy and vision. Therefore we saw it as not only an important part of librarianship happening but it really did align us with the corporate strategy.

When Brisbane City Council (BCC) and Telstra announced their partnership to deliver a new online facility on 29 November 2000, they described it as an Australian first, designed to enable greater access and better services to the community and give local business the 'information edge'. Brisbane's Lord Mayor, Cr Jim Soorley described ourbrisbane.com as the first initiative of its scale and kind in Australia.

The Council provides a range of services and facilities to meet the diverse needs of the community. Libraries are very much part of these community services and mindful of this role, provides eLibCat

– a 24 hour online library service for searching the catalogue, available in Chinese as well as English language, online databases and an email reference service.

The ebooks were introduced at the new Toowong Library as both the Manager, Sandra Lyn, Community Information, and elib Services were keen to make this library a showcase for technology. It fitted well with the meeting room equipped with laptops for training, the provision of cable television and the flat screens throughout the library.

INTENTIONS AND SCOPE OF THE EBOOK TRIAL

The intentions of the trial were to gain a high profile for library services; to further the Smart City agenda; and also to gather data about this medium. By locating itself within the smart city concept, Brisbane Library Services utilised the ebook trial to demonstrate its support for specific aspects of Council strategy and vision such as:

- Representing a way of actively embracing new technologies
- Enabling greater access and better services to the community
- Tackling the ‘digital divide’
- Providing access and support for all users to the latest technologies.
- Enhancing the capacity to market Brisbane as a Smart City to the world

As part of the library’s marketing plan for the ebook project, politicians were briefed on the new technology. ‘The ebooks captured the imagination of our senior managers and councillors which has ensured good media coverage’.

The ebook and ebook reader pilot also integrated with Brisbane Library’s policy of actively pursuing all options to deliver to a range of people with different needs. This entailed a data collection strategy to ensure the library kept abreast of developments and also keeping a ‘watching brief’ on new formats such as ebooks. Once a promising new format such as ebooks was identified, the library saw the potential for maximizing its user-friendly features for target groups such as youth and older people. The ebook reader was seen as a way of increasing accessibility to the library’s resources with multi-lingual and other possibilities.



Figure 2: Toowong Library Entrance

The Collections Services Coordinator, articulated the modern library's mission: 'our business is the joy of reading, the access to information and education – learning for life.' Libraries should no longer be seen as places where you have to be quiet, very formal with lots of negatives – fines, don't talk, don't eat.

It's about not making people feel a library is different from other places they go to...changing people's perceptions...We really want to be where the people are...getting better positions in shopping malls.

THE TOOWONG BRANCH LIBRARY, BRISBANE

The Toowong branch library is prominently situated in a modern shopping mall in the Brisbane suburbs. The library used to process 90,000 loans. This has grown to around 336,000 loans per annum.

Toowong has a new following – we have extended our market. People don't have to come and find us.

Like most public libraries, Brisbane library has DVDs, books on tape, books on CDs, magazines, and signed readers.

New graduates coming into the library profession, situate their function and that of libraries at a remove from their traditional role in the community, both physically and psychologically. As libraries and the profession change, they seek alternative delivery and funding model:

Whereas in the past, libraries may have been quite inward-looking, now partnering with online bookshops and other agencies is part of this new model of active engagement...[for Brisbane public libraries]...we need to do clever things with consortia buying.

With a shrinking budget and the diminishing purchasing power of the Australian dollar, library funding is reaching critical levels.

We've got to be clever – we can't just keep asking for more money.

Public libraries operate in an environment where their funding is fully stretched and under constant scrutiny. In Australia, many libraries experience the frustrations of tight budgets limiting their acquisitions. Fulfilling patrons' requests for publications then becomes fraught with difficulties partly because of these financial constraints and partly because many texts move very quickly to back lists, and become difficult for libraries to get hold of.

Print on demand is one delivery model being given some consideration as a possible solution to both of these access problems. Print on demand requires digital files printed and bound as required at point of sale by machines – now in prototype – which within minutes will inexpensively make single copies that are indistinguishable from books made in factories (see Epstein, in *New York Review of Books*, July 2001).

Fiona Emberton was aware of established publishers such as Hodder and Harper and Collins and their arrangements with companies such as Lightningsource who offer on their website:

...complete digital fulfillment, including file conversion, content management and storage, digital rights management, and secure eBook delivery.

Print on demand enables individuals to print chapters from selected texts for their own compilation. Brisbane library saw the print on demand model as a way of accessing backlist items for their patrons. With backlist items rapidly going out of print, they are increasingly difficult for collections to source. Holding the backlist references electronically, would make them readily accessible. This represents an especially attractive option for Australian librarians who have always had problems with the costs and delays of the traditional ordering process from overseas publishing houses.

Ebooks 'invisibility' to patrons browsing in the library was mentioned as a problem in our interview with Fiona Emberton, Collections Coordinator. The participants in the focus group also

mentioned Ebook 'invisibility' as a potential drawback. With their blank covers, ebooks provide nothing to display. On-line printable mini-posters including some text information would help. Publishers could make materials available for displaying ebook titles as they do for their paper titles. In the meantime, Toowong and various other libraries have put their own ebook marketing strategies in place. In the United States, Algonquin (Illinois) Public Library District took the following steps:

We publicized Ebooks by releasing a notice to various newspapers and library journals, and were also featured by a local newspaper and cable channel. We have posters located at strategic locations in our library, and an ebook is prominently displayed at the Reference Desk. The display unit usually generates many questions, which lead to the checkout of one of the readers (see Chris Rippel's Skyways site for further details).

The Brisbane Library Service recognises the need to market their products in new ways to stay relevant:

We are trying to repackage the information to make it suitable for target markets...make ourselves really needed by the community, make sure that people see the library as the first stop.

The success of an innovation such as ebook technology relies on marketing for its implementation. Enthusiastic well-informed staff ready to assist patrons in a public library can be an important factor where new technology is the issue. Offering hands on experience with the ebook readers to staff prior to their circulation to patrons was a simple but important step in building acceptance and confidence in library staff handling patron queries. Other examples of staff in libraries sharing their knowledge and experience include that of Algonquin Public Library in Illinois, in the United States. Algonquin not only assists its own patrons, it provides a genuine public service for all communities interested in ebook technology. Their website includes a Frequently Asked Questions section which describes purchasing and marketing options for libraries considering investing in ebooks as well as reader's responses. The site is now a well-known international resource for other libraries (see Rippel, Skyways site).

Public libraries should be offering people the freedom to read and freedom in accessing information.

We have to make sure we can get the information to as many people as want it in whatever form they want it.

Electronic books and readers are clearly integrated in Brisbane library's understanding of their mission.

We just see the handheld readers as part of our bigger strategy which will involve net libraries.

The library already has a web-based catalogue that mediates all library services products, including online databases, catalogued URL's and services including reservation, renewals and online registration. If library services were to continue to serve a meaningful role in the community they had to move with the times. For the community where people lead increasingly more complex lives, a 24x7 library service is important.

We are very mindful of the markets we are not servicing.

To ensure public awareness of the ebook trial, prior to the launch – which was planned to coincide with the March opening of the library – advertising was placed on the outside of the Toowong building during the construction period – ‘*Coming soon – ebooks at Toowong Library*’. All rate notices were accompanied by a glossy colour brochure containing a pictorial on the ebooks with a photo of the reader (Figure 3).



Figure 3: The eBook Reader

In addition, small articles in local newspapers explained ebooks and their availability starting in March from the Toowong Library.

Public talks on ebooks were planned, including information on books available from a home PC.

METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE OF THE EBOOK TRIAL

Initially, Brisbane Library started working with American libraries in New York State following a professional development visit to the United States by Christine McKenzie, Manager – Library Services. Libraries in North Carolina were running ebook trials only a few months prior to the Brisbane initiative.

Two other factors came together around this time, providing added impetus for the trial. One such impetus was the unexpected arrival of ten ebook readers. The Electronic Services Librarian at Toowoomba City Library, Sue Hutley, had submitted one of two winning proposals to an eBookNet.com international competition. Her winning submission was a proposal for the formation of a regional discussion group with nine other South-East Queensland libraries, aimed at offering support and advice on how to successfully expand the use of ebook technology.

The ten Rocket ebook readers from eBookNet.com were given to 10 libraries around the area to show to the librarians and to familiarise them with the technology. Library services from Brisbane, Gold Coast, Logan, Ipswich, Maroochy, Pine Rivers, Redlands, Caboolture and Caloundra were each presented with an ebook at Toowoomba City Council on 16 November.

So we got to play with the technology.' Fiona recalled. 'We introduced as many staff to the Rocket and REBs as soon as possible, allowing hands on experience. We started working with them piggybacked on them, not just show-casing [them] but taking them to our customers.'

In addition to the availability of the ebook readers, there was one other factor providing a stimulus to go ahead. March 2001 saw the opening of the state-of-the-art Toowong library. Toowong provided an excellent venue for the start of the first ebook trial and focus group. The March opening imposed a deadline on the launch date of the trial. The decision was made to put all the ebook readers and computers linked to the readers in the one library.

One personal computer [PC] was linked to each ebook reader – a requirement enforced by the publishers who provided the content for the ebook readers. Toowong library had to comply with this requirement in order to proceed with the ebook trial. The publishers

had introduced an encryption process to ensure that books could not be used illegally. This cumbersome procedure made it very difficult to move books between machines or personal computers. Steven Pal, from Peter Pal Library Supply, provided invaluable help and support to ensure that the devices were delivered and loaded with titles for the March opening (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Computers in Toowong Library

In the case of the REB, it was necessary to set up a different PC for each reader so that books could be purchased for that particular reader. *‘This has caused great headaches for all libraries who have used Rocket/REBs,’* Fiona told us. For security reasons, the ebook readers were kept in a locked cupboard when not in use. Ebooks were not on display and, for copyright reasons, ebook covers are plain and do not provide any information about the content.

Due to the publishers’ concerns about illegal usage of the devices, patrons who borrowed the ebook readers could not download additional texts nor did they have any choice in the content. *‘It was just to give them a flavour.’*

Brisbane Library staff remained realistic about the limitations of ebook readers and the technology that currently supports them. Despite these limitations, the library decided to go ahead with the trial because of its potential contribution to other library strategies for increasing accessibility with large print, the MP3 files and the

back-light. Twenty REBs were made available for loan from Toowong branch library preloaded with a mix of popular titles. The loan period was two weeks at a time with overdue charges and debt recovery procedures stricter than for mainstream stock.

FIELD TEST OF DEVICES

Texts put on the readers were not selected by genre, but instead, a mixed but restricted range of titles were on offer. *'We tried to go for what would appeal to the widest market.'* The library would have liked to use texts from local publishers but this turned out to be too difficult to implement. There were no children's texts, nor books in other languages included in the trial for the same reason. Another possible criterion – selecting etexts for the ereaders to support special needs within the reader community – was also excluded as not practicable at this stage. For example, the sight-impaired would benefit from the selectability of font size on ebook readers. Adjustable font size was a feature of the ebook readers available to patrons. However, other current features would have been less appropriate to people with special needs *'because ebooks involve scrolling and it is not possible to jump from chapter to chapter'*.

Participation in the Toowong ebook reader project entailed strict conditions for borrowers. This was due to the library's insurance requirements as a publicly funded body. Books and readers had to be signed for on check out and then counter-signed on return. Borrowers were required to accept responsibility in writing for the insured items for up to \$1000. One patron described her reaction:

It made me a bit nervous. [I] wondered if I could read it on the balcony. Every item was the same... leave your driver's licence, countersigned when you return it. It would just be too nerve-wracking for me to take it anywhere at the moment.

The responsibility for the readers weighed on the participants: 'I couldn't afford to pay \$1000 if I lose it. How many people could?'

Despite these demanding borrowing conditions, the ebook readers did go out on loan and were used by a number of patrons.



Figure 5: Security for the ebook Reader

EVALUATION OF DEVICES: USER SURVEYS (5 QUESTIONS)

Over 40 patrons filled in the evaluation forms on returning the ebook readers from their two-week loans. The questionnaire printed on the back of the user guide and titled Customer Comments, asked patrons were asked to assist the library in evaluating the new technology.

Question 1: Did you have any difficulty using the reader?

Whilst many took the opportunity to write lengthy comment very few patrons answered yes to this question. Two reported battery problems with their device with one patron unable to use the device after two days. One felt her eye muscles were more tired with this form of reading. Another respondent was frustrated because *'there is no way of knowing how long the book is I am going to read'*.

Question 2: What did you like about reading with this technology?

Librarians who implement ebook trials generally recall the frustrations faced in the implementation process. They generally express surprise at the consistently positive comments from users of ebooks and ebook readers. Toowong patrons when returning their readers, responded warmly to ebooks on their evaluation sheets. More than 80% of users saw the ebook trial as a positive experience.

The feature of the ebook readers the Toowong respondents liked most was the back-light which offered the convenience of being able to read in the dark.

Typical comments from Toowong ebook readers were:

Great for reading in bed with the lights out!

I can read in bed and not disturb my husband.

I don't have to alter reading position for late night reading.

Many were surprised at how easy it was to use.

I was surprised how easy it was to read –not like a computer screen on which it is uncomfortable reading large amounts of text.

Convenient, clear, easy to use.

It's pretty simple.

Easy to display the next or preceding pages.

Easy to hold.

In the United States, the Batavia (Illinois) Public Library received a grant to circulate Rocket eBooks to teenagers. Patrons were asked to respond to the question: *Please tell us whether you liked reading the eBook?* Although the survey at Batavia only took place several months after the trial, *'the response was an overwhelming "YES"*. Batavia Public Library also confirmed the finding from the Brisbane focus group on the popularity of the back lighting on ebook readers.

Based on informal talks with patrons, we have found that 4 out of 5 are happy with the electronic format and the content – fiction, non-fiction, science fiction and mystery. They like the default display fonts (small or large print) and the display light, which allows reading in a dimly lit area.

Some of the Toowong respondents were very open about the pleasure they got from being *'with it'*. Comments under this heading include: *'Something new'* or *'I like new gadgets'* or *'Novelty value'*. Taking an ebook reader out in a public setting gave users a sense of being special – a buzz. Fiona Emberton gave her own tongue-in-cheek description of an outing with an ebook reader:

I took one out the first night we got one and sat in a café thinking I look just like it. Had my mobile phone on the table, my cappuccino and I was reading an electronic book. I thought I was just *it*.

Patrons liked the portability of the reader and several commented positively on the adjustable font size: *'easier to read with poor vision as the font can be enlarged'*. The dictionary was a very popular feature for its accessibility and immediacy. Compactness

was commented on in two responses: – ‘*number of books in a smaller space*’ and ‘*being able to have four books in one package*’.

One patron wrote in this section: ‘*search for text, book mark, easy to skim a book*’. Others said they completed reading a book in a shorter time span. One respondent wrote: ‘*It was the children who most wanted to check out the ebook so we took what was available title-wise.*’ Some responses took on the flavour of unsolicited testimonials! A female respondent who put herself in the 66+category wrote:

The ebook can hold several titles, is physically smaller and lighter than most hardback books, causes minimum disturbance to others when reading in bed and retains the place without using any bookmark.

Another in the 18–25 age group wrote:

I loved that you could read at night and not need a light, it was also easy to hold and scroll pages. Very easy to read – some music would be great. This is the only improvement I can think of apart from a wider selection of novels.

Question 3: Did You Read A Complete Book? If Not, Why Not?

Just under half of the respondents replied ‘yes’ to this question. Several who did not finish a book wrote that time was the problem with the two week loan period mentioned in this connection several times. One only wanted to see the technology and another just borrowed it in the library. Three respondents gave dislike of the technology as the reason for not finishing a book on the reader. One respondent used the space for this question to enter the following query: ‘*Could we please have a synopsis of the contents of the books on offer including author?*’.

Question 4: What type of material would you be most likely to read or consult on an ebook?

Leisure reading was by far the most preferred option with how-to books and reference running way behind in equal second. Other reading material listed by respondents ranged from shares to new age publications.

Question 5: Given the option, in what format would you want to read your next book?

Here the response was 50/50 with three respondents adding a third option – both! One participant wrote, ‘There is scope for both in my life.’

One complained, 'There is not enough selection on the ebook, the borrowing system is cumbersome.' Another wrote, '[It] depends on the content, not the medium.'

THE TOOWONG PUBLIC LIBRARY FOCUS GROUP

The participants in the focus group responded to advertisements placed by the collections librarian. These advertisements asked for volunteers to discuss their use of the twenty ebook readers available for loan to all Brisbane library patrons at the Toowong branch. Twelve patrons attended the session. Most of them were retired and all were mature adults

The group included a librarian who worked with online training programs and several who did not want to get 'left behind' and were curious about the new technology. One participant had already had two ebooks published.

The group discussed their reading experience and what it meant for them. Reading, as they saw it, can represent comfort, an escape from the problems of everyday life (see also Manguel, 1996). The experience of reading offered the individual both a private space and a shared world. One participant remarked on the impact social changes had had on reading practices:

In the past, people would have had so much in common [in their reading]. Now there are so many niches and genres...you don't have that [shared experience] today. We have a lot more, but we don't have that sense of community.

They knew expectations of reading were changing:

Could be a generational thing. We may be the last of the print generation. Kids now expect multimedia, hypertext. They want to sit down and do something.

Others made considered comments on the problems in marketing ebooks:

The problem is that there are so many ebooks coming out from so many publishers. The problem is that on the Internet so many things are available free, so few buyers and people are conditioned to getting things for free. Ebooks you're told aren't free, easily available and cheap and that's a problem.

One participant was concerned that:

... most of the books coming out are multimedia books so there will be music and moving pictures. It concerns me that they may be more

about multimedia than content. The written word may turn into comic books.

Another member of the group mused:

Is it print we are concerned with or content? It's the way of expressing the written word. The persistence of content and what it means is what we want to hang onto.

In some respects, the group's responses mirrored the turbulent and confusing state of play in the ebook business world. Asked to consider what people might reasonably pay for ebooks if they were displayed and marketed in the same way as traditional books on paper was clearly one question for the too-hard basket.

However, on many other issues, strong views did emerge from the focus group that indicate clear preferences and expectations from library patrons using ebook readers.

What did patrons enjoy when they used the ebook readers?

Despite the restrictions on choice and usage one participant mentioned the content as a plus for her:

I enjoyed the ebook. There seems to be some lifestyle thing in each of them.

A popular feature was the increased level of control over reading conditions that the technology provided:

I like that you can vary the contrast and the brightness and the font size. I found that was incredibly good.

Increased control offered ebook users not only independence but value:

You have to go upmarket to get quality paper. Like paperbacks, it depends how much you pay the quality of the paper and the print size. Whereas with this in the daylight you just vary the contrast to suit your eyes.

Some people speculated about the advantages of portability:

I can see the possibilities when you go on holidays and you've got your 5000 books with you.

Others thought of those with special needs:

It will be wonderful for disabled people who have just that little bit of function and can't turn the pages.

A librarian in the group said that users on returning their reader had reported that the side support made the device comfortable.

Whilst the focus group participants enjoyed many aspects of the ebook experience some had said they would be happier with the option of a double screen and with colour.

Two participants had a lively discussion about whether new or used books offered more pleasure to the reader. One who preferred new books found the pristine untouched aspect of ebooks particularly attractive:

It doesn't look like it's been used. You think you're the only person who has read it... you're reading your own book. I really like buying my own books. Other people mark the page... food dropped onto them... that really turns me off. New books actually smell lovely. My husband loves second hand bookshops but I really don't like the second hand books because they smell old. The pleasure of new books...

High on the list of dislikes was the lack of choice of available texts. Examples of such comments in the focus group included the following quotations:

The big problem is the choice of material.

It was the lack of material available.

I want to read all sorts of books not just Agatha Christie's... I want to have huge amounts of information, be able to access it.

There would have to be more utility of the information... wider range of texts.

I would like a wider range of content.

Others missed the way a paper-based text allows the reader to see how far they are into the book:

You don't really know where you are with this. I know there is a bookmark but I like to know how much there is.

I couldn't tell how long the book was. I was reading other books. I was wondering how long is this book. Is this 200 or 800 pages?

For copyright reasons, ebooks have plain covers. One participant made some suggestions here:

What I'd like to see is like the kind of blurb you get on the covers of a hard copy so you can assess quickly whether its interesting or not and something about the author too.

In the debate about the joys of new versus used books, the participant who preferred used books felt that ebooks had raised her expectations of a shared reading experience:

I really like books that have been used... and like talking about books. I like Amazon with the comments from other readers. I was half-hoping that ebooks would have comments from readers...an environment where students can share... a library catalogue.

Others were disappointed in their expectations for different reasons:

I was expecting a system where people bought their own devices and downloaded onto it.

It would be good if we could send it down the phone line anytime people wanted it.

These patrons had touched intuitively on a problem that seems to have an obvious solution. Whilst the technology has not yet been implemented to allow for books-on-demand down the pipe-line, it may be essential to the survival of the technology:

The best potential for improving libraries and promoting ebooks would be an ebook technology that transfers libraries' ebook titles into patrons' ebook readers. This capability may be necessary for circulating numerous ebooks because few libraries can afford buying readers for all patrons (Rippel, Skyways site).

Toowong library staff envisioned ebook readers as a step along the road to better and more accessible text delivery methods. Recognition that ebook readers may only represent an interim solution can actually support the case for libraries engaging with them. It could be (and has been) argued on equity grounds that libraries should distribute readers *until* ebook standards, digital rights management software and wide distribution of ebook readers provides these capabilities to all.

Other dislikes or issues identified by Toowong library patrons included physical discomfort when using ebook readers:

I find reading an ebook in bed makes my eyes more tired than reading an ordinary book.

Some found adjusting the font size problematic:

But you can't make the print very large. My mum has trouble reading and she might try it if it was bigger.'

I found the font size on one was too big and on the other too small. Like Goldilocks.

Others expressed concern about the price:

The gizmo is irrelevant. Problem is the way of charging for it.

I like reading ebooks, but I worry about the price.

Battery problems were mentioned:

Last book I used ran out of charge – wasn't the first time, Fiona told me.

Another added:

[I'd] had it for a week and it was dead.

Patrons liked jumping from area to area rather than only being able to scroll up and down. They were not so happy with the speed

of dialling up, the need to charge batteries, and the weight of the ereader. They disliked the hype attached to the ereaders and the ebooks – ‘*Things pretending to be better... but not [being so]*’.

All in all, the librarians were surprised and encouraged by the interest level and enthusiasm shown for the ebook amongst the patrons who volunteered to take part in the focus group as well as the larger group of borrowers.

ISSUES FOR LIBRARIANS:THE DREAM LIST

The librarians at Toowong had a dream list of a world where:

- all books are available in electronic form providing a full range of texts to select from
- books never go out of print
- short print runs and ‘not available in Australia’ notices no longer exist
- books are less expensive but publishers and authors can still profit
- customers can borrow books which would magically return to us when the loan period expires
- book theft and defacement are no longer an issue
- librarians could send new customers batches of new books according to their personal profile
- customers could borrow chapters rather than whole books or whole series
- libraries could have interactive books that talk to you and have video and hyperlinks

Many librarians would settle for such a world – one where books are immortal, instantly accessible 24 hours a day with interactive options. A world where all stock management issues are solved, costs are sorted out to the satisfaction of authors, publishers and librarians and books are available in sections and in places that suit all users at all times.

Interactivity is something that librarians see as important to designing good reading sites. For example, customer suggestions and comments are a popular feature of the Amazon.com site, providing a best practice model that can be adapted to library usage. Brisbane library is intending to start online book clubs and video streaming soon, trying to engage more deeply with authors they have already encountered.

What were the dreams of the patrons?

In the focus group at Toowong, participants also mentioned interactivity as something that is increasingly expected by younger readers. Focus group participants recognised that a shared reading experience based on a community of interests no longer exists. The 'shared reading space' needs to be re-created possibly with Amazon.com style reviews. At present ebooks don't cater very satisfactorily to this 'dream'. A librarian who took part in the focus group at Toowong commented:

That's where the technology isn't keeping pace with what the consumer wants and what e-publishing can give us.

A business model that allows text to be sent down the phone line anytime was another expectation of ebook technology ahead of what the consumer is currently being offered.

EBOOK READER DESIGN AND LIBRARY USAGE

As more and more libraries take steps to introduce their patrons to ebooks, it is becoming increasingly evident that libraries represent a market that has not yet become visible to manufacturers of the technology. Stephen Wood, Director of Cleveland Heights-University Heights Public Library (2001) puts the situation in these terms:

Electronic books follow the normal bookstore model of buy one, read one. Libraries, on the other hand, support their long-standing model of buy one, read many. Business models designed to profit from this new technology make perfectly good sense, but they completely ignore, perhaps intentionally, the lending model under which libraries have functioned for many, many years.

As a result, the current ebook model is not well adapted for library use. Because ebooks were not designed for libraries, they do not have a platform to lend but to buy. Consequently, you have the paradox that whilst users may be served better by a multi-function device, in a lending situation a purpose built end-reader is more appropriate.

Susan Gibbons, the Electronic Book Project Director at the University of Rochester, found one of the most difficult obstacles for libraries was the payment method:

Electronic books are steeped in the world of e-commerce, which is aimed at credit card users. We discovered that without a credit card, it is

next to impossible to purchase ebooks and ebook readers. Unfortunately, as is common with many public institutions, the Monroe County Library System, which financially administered the project, did not have a credit card. After several months of unanswered purchase orders, the project's director volunteered her own personal credit card for use in an effort to move the project forward. Every month she collected receipts from each of the field-test libraries, correlated and reconciled them to her credit card statements and submitted the receipts for reimbursement – an administrative and accounting nightmare! (Gibbons, 2001).

Librarians are well aware that it is individuals not institutions who are the intended users of these devices. Currently few ebook producers are aware of the specific needs of libraries for purchasing and circulating ebooks – an issue that has been publicized by United States library organizations (see the Skyways website <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/central/ebooks/index.html>). As a result, most ebook hardware is not available in forms easily used by libraries. Public libraries are presenting themselves in a number of professional fora as a potentially significant but overlooked clientele. They are publicising the consequences of their invisibility as customers for digital content providers, many of whom do not seem to understand their societal role and view current library circulation policies as a threat to profits.

Library usage also revealed just how unstable ebooks and ebook readers were as a new technology. These developments included mirage-like product launch dates, and the withdrawal of rights on some items as the trial was about to begin.

The launch date for the ebook trial was planned to coincide with the March opening of the Toowong library – a deadline that was almost missed. In the weeks before the launch, the withdrawal of the Rocket and its promised replacement by the REB readers with constantly changing release dates provided the librarians with some heart-stopping moments.

Recalling these traumas, Fiona told the focus group: *'We were very happy just to present it to you.'*

CULTURAL ISSUES

Ebooks and ebook readers are imported into Australia from the United States. In addressing a meeting for Queensland librarians held just before the Toowong trial, Fiona Emberton referred to

some of the cultural differences impacting on ebook usage in the two countries:

It has to be remembered that the US experience has significant differences to the expected Australian models, as bandwidth capability is much greater in the US, as is their wealth for the actual books themselves (16 November, 2000: Services for Public Libraries, Toowoomba City Library minutes).

Public libraries seek to deliver local people timely and relevant reading materials for their information and recreation. The scarcity of Australian titles, and the largely American nature of the content on offer, presents a problem for this important aspect of their role in the community. Many of the titles and authors available to readers are unknown to the Australian market and conversely, some bestsellers here are not yet available in ebook format.

So exactly what are libraries loading onto their ebook readers? Most tend to offer texts from either the classics or best sellers available from a limited range of American publishers. In Denmark, Arhus Kommunes Biblioteker in Jutland offers texts for download on local history from Aarhus County.¹

Another translation between countries that appears to require considerable adaptation is that of loan procedures. Based on reports from Toowong librarians and the trial underway at Toowoomba, importing ebook materials into the Australian library systems from United States sources proves to be anything but a frictionless process.

Whilst we have outlined a number of obstacles libraries had to overcome in importing ebook technology and software from the United States, one distinctively Australian cultural problem that ebooks did help overcome was the tyranny of distance. Text in electronic format is a particularly attractive feature of ebooks for Australian acquisitions librarians:

In Australia you have to order your books well in advance or miss out on a whole title and therefore when you are dealing with a company that can either deliver in print or in electronic form it's a wonderful opportunity for us.

¹ see <http://www.eteket.dk/>

THREE AUSTRALIAN COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES

In Australia, apart from the ebook project at Toowong Public Library in Brisbane, a number of other ebook initiatives are under way in public libraries. In this chapter we also provide an extended review of an ebook trial currently underway at Shorelink Library Network in New South Wales as well as referring to the ebook trial in Rochester, New York in 1999. The Rochester project represents a particularly interesting implementation comprising academic, school and public libraries. Finally, we include information provided by a librarian who implemented an ebook project beginning in 1999 in Glencoe Public Library, Illinois. The report on Glencoe's experience with ebooks and ebook readers and the outcomes provides interesting contrasts with those from other trials.

Willoughby City Library (Shorelink)

Willoughby City Library is part of the Shorelink Library Network, servicing Sydney's affluent North Shore. Introducing ebook readers requires a substantial outlay for a small number of devices, and therefore they are an expensive budgetary item for public libraries. The Shorelink Library Network applied for a Library Development Grant (NSW) in 2000 and successfully gained funding of \$60,370 to contribute to an ebook pilot/research project.

The project aimed to:

- Introduce and promote an emerging technology to library patrons.
- Purchase and assess appropriate hardware, software, ebooks readers and ebook titles.
- Conduct appropriate surveys and compile statistical data to measure ebook usage.
- Produce a pilot study report with general applicability to other library services.

In their application, the Shorelink Library Network emphasised the speed with which Ebook technology has crept into the book-buyer's marketplace and the implications of Ebooks as a resource for librarians.

Shorelink presented a number of ebook features as benefits for libraries:

- Ebooks allow patrons to borrow several titles on a reader the size and weight of one standard book.

- Ebooks can be adapted from standard font size to large print and built-in soundcard features mean that in the future, ebook titles can also be talking books. This flexibility has the potential to bridge many gaps in equitable access for patrons – libraries currently purchase separate formats for the needs of different user groups.
- Ebooks represent good value for money in that their ‘virtual’ nature removes the risk of damage or destruction. Acquisition is instantaneously achieved via immediate downloading from content on the Internet.
- Some authors are only releasing books in an electronic form, and e-publishers are increasingly commissioning works for exclusive release in ebook form. Providers of ebook readers make over 7000 titles available free, including many journals and newspapers.
- Ebooks are not available to people without personal computer or ebook reader access. The dissemination of ebook titles by libraries ensures access to these works throughout the community.

Shorelink’s pilot project investigates library patrons’ readiness to accept the technology and their level of satisfaction with the format. The project will trial both models of ebooks; electronic download to library patron’s PCs and lending handheld devices with books already loaded. The ebook readers will be launched in September 2001.

In sum, ebooks were expected to provide Shorelink libraries with the following benefits:

- A compact format that is indestructible.
- A compact format that offers instantaneously, enhancements to the library’s traditional stock including audio and font manipulation features
- Increased accessibility to a new range of publications and new technology for the library community.

These expectations mirror those discussed in our Toowong case study, and provide a strong indication that Australian public libraries see the provision of ebooks and readers as a means of extending their current service provisions.

The Shorelink Field Trial

Each of the five Shorelink Network libraries received 3 SoftBook Readers loaded with 10 – 12 titles. Richmond library in British Columbia, Canada has used SoftBook Readers and NetLibrary since 1999 and have a very well set out website at <http://www.yourlibrary.ca/rplinfo/ebooks.html>. This website has provided a useful model for some aspects of Shorelink's pilot project.

The five libraries have approximately 36 titles available for loan at each branch on their hand-held readers. As part of the project, the libraries also offer access to NetLibrary so patrons can download ebooks directly onto their computers at home. All patrons using ebooks will be asked to fill in a survey form to assist the library with feedback and evaluation. The ebooks will be loaned for a three week period with no renewal. Ebooks will only be lent to patrons over the age of 16. A loan agreement must be signed when the ebook is borrowed and a checklist will be used at issues and returns to ensure that all components are returned intact. The project website is expected to be live from August 10th, 2001.

The representative in each library responsible for the ereaders has independently selected the titles for loading on the readers. Library representatives include staff from collection development, children's services, and other areas. The Willoughby representative is the manager of the outreach team.

Willoughby selected three genres for titles to put on the readers – crime and mystery, best-selling non-fiction and best-selling fiction. The decision to go with genres was informed by discussions with Pam Saunders, from Plenty Public Library in Victoria. Pam reviewed ebook usage in United States libraries where she found genres to be the most commonly preferred format. The other four libraries in the Shorelink Network have decided to follow other formats.

Ebooks are catalogued as an entity with added title entries for each book on the reader. This allows access by format as well as by title. Shorelink Libraries selected South Australian supplier for their ebook readers with subsequent choice of titles from those available for selection from Barnes and Noble and Gemstar.

Toowoomba City Library

Currently, the Toowoomba City Library in Queensland, Australia, is field-testing eBook reading devices for groups with special needs. Toowoomba has purchased a collection of 15 hand-held eBook readers including RCA REB 1100s and 1200s, and Franklin eBookman readers. They intend to analyse the use and lending of eBook technology to their customers, with special emphasis on groups with special needs including large print readers and marginalised customers. An eBook Readers Club and newsletter is being established for Toowoomba City Library customers who borrow and use the eBooks readers. The library's website provides regular updates on the project. These updates provide other libraries with valuable insights into the ebook implementation process. The website currently reports that hand held readers did not arrive as expected at Toowoomba and start of the project has been consequently delayed (reported 31st July, 2001), <http://libserv.toowoomba.qld.gov.au/ebook/index.html>)

TWO COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES FROM THE UNITED STATES

Rochester, New York, United States: Preparation For The Trial And Focus Group

Participants

The cooperating agencies of the Monroe County Library System, Monroe 2 Board of Cooperative Education Services School Library System and the Rochester Regional Library Council (all located in the Rochester, New York region) were awarded a Library Services and Technology Act grant to study electronic books and to analyse the feasibility of using ebooks in academic, school and public libraries in 1999.

Preparation

After outlining the expectations and obligations, a call was made for volunteer libraries to act as field testers and from the volunteers six libraries were chosen. These represented academic libraries, public libraries from different socio-economic areas and two high schools - one rural/suburban and the other science and technology focused. The project's expert panel was comprised of the project director, a

representative from each field-test library, an acquisitions librarian and an automation specialist.

Field Test Procedures

Each library received five electronic book readers – two Soft books and three Rockets

Ebook readers were circulated to library staff before patrons to ensure comfort with the technology. Each library created its own circulation policies and procedures in accordance with its current policies and tailored to its unique patron base. Every patron and librarian who used an ebook reader was asked to complete an *Electronic Book Evaluation Survey*. Focus groups of patrons, librarians and educators were formed to supplement the survey data. The majority of patrons from all types of libraries reacted positively to the ebook technology. This conclusion was supported by the following findings:

- Within two weeks of their availability, more than six months' worth of patron holds were placed on all ten of the public library readers.
- No one reported any eyestrain. The back lit screens with large font text made ebook readers very patron-friendly.
- All of the thirty readers remained in working order and nothing was lost despite expectations that readers would be damaged and peripherals such as the small stylus would be lost.
- Few patrons reported any difficulties using the readers and were able to solve their problems in all but one case by consulting the Quick Start guide.
- The most common complaint was that the readers were too large and heavy.
- A complaint that came in a distant second was the short battery life particularly the Soft Book.
- Electronic book readers are not library-friendly and require much accommodation in order to integrate the format.

The Glencoe Library, Illinois U.S.A.

Glencoe Public Library currently holds two eBook readers (one Rocket Book and one Softbook) and a number of books for each reader. These are available for one-week loan to Glencoe residents age 18 and over. The library also has access to NetLibrary.

Teri Hennes, who is responsible for both adult services and for collection development at Glencoe, provided the following information on the library's experience with ebooks and ebook readers. Glencoe's experience is particularly interesting, as demand for ebook readers at the library has dropped off since 1999. Three possible reasons for this outcome are:

- The lowered price for readers has made them more affordable for individuals.
- Availability of electronic texts in a number of other formats.
- Reading from a screen is not enjoyable for patrons.

Teri Hennes reported:

We introduced ebooks in the summer of 1999 with 2 readers (1 RocketBook and 1 SoftBook) and a handful of texts. The SoftBook was selected specifically because it allowed library patrons to manage the available texts from any analogue telephone line. The RocketBook was selected because of ease of use and greater brand recognition. Since then we have purchased additional titles for each reader, but have not purchased more readers.

Our intention was never to establish a large collection of ebooks but to allow patrons to try the new technology without personally making the substantial investment (US \$400-\$600+) required.

We rolled out these products with a good deal of publicity and experienced an initial flurry of interest. Each time one of the readers was checked out we included a brief user survey form in the carrying case and asking patrons to tell us how they liked using the reader. Most returned the surveys. In general, users indicated that they had been able to use the devices and had found it interesting, but few expressed enthusiasm. In response to the question 'Do you think you would use a device like this eBook reader for some of your reading of A) newspapers; B) magazines; C) books for pleasure reading; D) books for school or work; or E) not if I can help it,' the most frequently chosen response was E.

Demand for use of our readers has been low for over a year. We believe several factors contribute to this. Prices for the readers have dropped by at least 50% – we think many of the people who were very interested in using them have now purchased them. Ebooks are now available in several formats, so some patrons are using laptops or Palm Pilots to read ebooks. Patron feedback also leads us to believe that many people just don't enjoy reading on a little screen.

We're very glad we bought these – we think we succeeded in meeting our goal. We continue to circulate them to the few people who are interested.

EVALUATING EBOOKS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES: THE ADVANTAGES

The librarians who were involved in ebook trials saw a number of advantages in making ebooks and ebook readers available to patrons. These included:

- Bed, Bath and Beach usability is one test whether ebooks are sustainable for multi-purpose activities. Librarians felt that ebooks already pass this test. One librarian said: *‘They can even be used as a torch.’*
- The functionality, the hyperlinks and the print on demand make the ebook perfect for delivery of information and education.

BRINGING DEAD BOOKS BACK TO LIFE

Many books go out of print no matter how much the patron might want to read them, making it very hard for libraries to obtain them. A lot of these ‘dead’ books on the backlist are being made accessible once again by ebook publishing.

Whereas a bookshop may have one or two books by well known authors, the strength of libraries is ‘you can get all the Stephen Kings including the backlist and on large print and on books on tape. That’s the great thing about public libraries.’ (Fiona Emberton, Toowong Library, Brisbane, July 2001). Ebooks supplement this traditional role of libraries.

The ebook readers did present some professional development opportunities for staff at Toowong. Whilst Brisbane staff did not see the hand-held readers and ebooks as a long-term solution, the trial enabled all kinds of synergies to develop such as staff writing MTP files, even video clips.

EVALUATING EBOOKS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES: THE PROBLEMS:

The problems that librarians saw in offering ebooks and ebook readers to their patrons included:

- The material available for ebook readers is restricted by subject matter, language and age range. Brisbane Library found the available selection of published texts for ebook readers very limited and in many respects not compatible with the

preferences of their community. Responses to these content problems have been varied and often very innovative. Fairfield Public Library in the United States for example, decided that most of the titles on its two Rocket eBooks should be children's classics. The Aarhus County libraries in Denmark have texts on local history available on their ebooks.

- At this stage of development, selection of titles is managed for the patron. Although there are other problems, one reason why self-selection is not available to patrons is because the available content is so limited. Lack of choice was the most consistently mentioned criticism of ebooks in the Brisbane library focus group. This is a problem that, by itself, could lead to a drop in circulation of ebook readers over time unless addressed.

THE CURRENT EBOOK MODEL DOES NOT ENABLE BULK PURCHASES FOR LIBRARY

The current ebook model is not well adapted for library use. Ebooks were not designed for libraries they do not have a platform to lend but to buy. Or, as Fiona Emberton put it:

NetLibrary is the nearest thing we have to a model. It would be lovely if we could have a little collection on a webpage and people could just dial it down and pull it down through a hand-held device cradle but its not a goer.

Surveys of public library patrons in Australia and the United States consistently show that ebook readers find hand-held readers more comfortable and allow more mobility for pleasure reading than ebooks on PCs and laptops. Yet there appears to be no system in place for bulk purchase of readers for libraries. Such a system would enable public libraries to purchase significant numbers of Ebook readers for their patrons.

Adding to the frustrations of libraries is the release of popular ebook titles in restrictive formats that work only on one particular reading device and cannot be transferred from one device to another. This is a problem that will only be resolved once there is a standard ebook format.

THE CURRENT EBOOK MODEL SITS UNEASILY WITH STANDARD LIBRARY OPERATING METHODS

In the United States, the six libraries in Rochester, New York who volunteered to field-test ebook readers found 'we were surprised by some of the impediments that we encountered'. Susan Gibbons (2001) provides graphic accounts of the major obstacles each library had to face when implementing the field test that made the experience in many respects 'an administrative and accounting nightmare'. Obstacles included mandatory use of a credit card as payment method, specific downloading requirements for the SoftBook ebooks, registration requirements for the Rocket ebooks and cataloging issues. All of these problems were based on the manufacturers' assumption that intended use of the devices was individual rather than institutional.

THE CURRENT EBOOK MODEL SITS UNEASILY WITH A LENDING MODEL

Fiona Emberton did not see ebooks at this stage of their development as providing any savings to Toowong library:

We don't really benefit money wise. With NetLibrary, the negotiations are tough... new pricing models.

The problems Fiona refers to with the model as well as the budget, point to a recurring issue. Publishers do not see that libraries represent a huge market for ebooks. Ebook producers need to be made aware of the potential of libraries to introduce ebooks to customers. If producers marketed to libraries instead of individuals they would become aware of their very different needs for purchasing and circulating ebooks.

For example, most ebook hardware is not available in forms easily used by libraries. Libraries need inexpensive, one-piece, hand-held ebook readers on which any 10 of a library's ebook titles can be loaded. At present, Windsor Public Library in Ontario provides a camera case to hold the instructions, the list of titles on the book and the five separate pieces (reader, stylus, screen cloth, AC adaptor, zippered container) needed to use Rocket Ebooks. The AC adaptor doesn't fit in the container provided by Rocket so public libraries feel obliged to use their own funds to purchase additional bags to

hold everything. All these parts are easy for patrons to lose and take time for staff to inventory during check-in.

THE CURRENT EBOOK MODEL SITS UNEASILY WITHIN LIBRARY CIRCULATION MODELS

Publishers, worry over Napster-style piracy possibilities. Gemstar, a manufacturer of ebook readers for RCA, claim that publishers stand to 'lose \$1.5 billion through ebook piracy by 2005'. Consequently most manufacturers hesitate to release files that are easy to download onto competing ebook devices and are easy for libraries to circulate. At the Indianapolis-Marion County [IMC] Public Library in the United States Mike Williams and his colleagues won 10 Rocket eBooks in the same international competition as Sue Hutley at Toowoomba Library in Queensland. IMC's enthusiastic proposal for the focused use of ebooks in their new branch library has been subject to delays whilst the librarians feel the heat of the legal wrangles:

I love the technology of electronic books, but I have been pretty discouraged of late by the obstacles presented by encryption, rights, and royalties issues, the solutions to which all seem problematic for traditional library circulation models (Information provided by M.H. at IMC, August 1, 2001).

In response to this impasse, interim solutions to IP related problems are beginning to appear. Richard Curtis, a New York literary agent and author advocate has been active in the milestone case of Random House suing RosettaBooks, a new ebook publisher, claiming infringement of its book publishing rights. Curtis is also the founding president of E-Rights, an Electronic Book Clearinghouse. E-Rights assist authors recover the rights to their out-of-print books, convert those books to ebook, print-on-demand formats, and then make them available for sale. Agencies such as E-rights may represent partnering possibilities for libraries addressing the vexed problem of locating back copies of texts by popular authors.

In Denmark, the Aarhus community libraries appear to have taken a pro-active approach to the IP issue. According to the Aarhus website, the library negotiates e-text rights or licences directly with local authors for at least some of the library's electronic

publications. Aarhus municipal libraries, with some 173,000 users, describe their IT policy as follows:

Citizens shall have access to value-enriched net-based information, and it shall to an increasing extent be directed towards the demands of the individual user. The virtual library shall give users access from their home to relevant information on the Internet. The criteria are quality, comprehensiveness and news value.

Aarhus includes an authors net accessible directly from the library web page. 'E-tekst' (the name of the website) went live on November 2, 2000. It is described as:

A collaboration between Public Libraries in Aarhus County on developing a common website about ebooks and purchasing ebookreaders for all the county libraries.

The site operates on the following basis:

Please note that copying from one digital media to another is illegal in Denmark due to the Copyright Law, therefore one must have a licence from the author to do so. We have already gotten some licenses – they are marked with 'OK', and therefore free to download. The texts in the category E-texts – that is: Texts for Aarhus County and: Texts from E-Forlag, are also free to download. The ebooks or etexts are downloadable from the site if agreement for the licence has been negotiated with the author.

COST

There is no doubt that cost is another factor limiting the number of ebook readers being sold to public libraries. Currently, the Maricopa County Library District in Phoenix, Arizona has the largest number of hand-held electronic readers in circulation. This district had 100 Rocket eBook Pro readers in four of their 12 locations with two locations having 35 ebook readers and two with 15 readers. Most public libraries appear to have fewer than 10 ebook readers and some purchase only one for staff to familiarize themselves with the technology. Inexpensive hand-held readers would be more affordable to buy, repair and replace. One possibility may be to allow libraries to lease or a trade-in option for both the readers and the texts. Librarians also need to be made aware that since most patrons do not check out more than 10 titles at once, libraries should not be paying for costly readers with memory for hundreds of titles.

PURCHASING EBOOKS FOR LIBRARIES

Compared to print publications, purchasing systems for ebooks are of the poor relation variety. Centralised distribution through designated vendors would certainly improve access. Librarians would then be able to quickly identify and purchase ebooks. The traditional way of purchasing books by monthly billing and standing orders should also apply to ebooks that currently require credit card payment. This is an issue for many public institutions, graphically illustrated in the case of the ebook trial in Rochester, New York (Gibbons, 2001). The actual pricing of ebooks is also problematic. Whereas vendors sell libraries popular hardback at 40% discount (in the U.S.), ebook titles are currently sold at list price – a policy that effectively prevents ebooks from being competitive.

AN UNSTABLE TECHNOLOGY

The librarian implementing the ebook trial in Brisbane, described the problems as ‘like walking through mud.’ Trying to keep hold of the companies ‘when launch dates were just mirages’ was one issue. Other problems included rights being withdrawn at just the moment the library had made the decision to go with a particular option. Even loading the texts onto the readers was more complicated than expected.

We were congratulated on our tenacity. [We] learned the basics of how to lend materials but we had to adapt that to Australia.

The website for the current Toowoomba public libraries ebook trial, reveals the same continuing frustrations as technology problems delay the start of the project.

THE FUTURE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Many librarians are attracted to ebooks for their potential rather than their current capacities. ‘For recreational purposes we are still at the stage where paper is better [than ebook readers] other than the fact you can carry 5 or 10 [texts] in it at once.’ Ebooks are an exciting option if they can increase a librarian’s capacity to deliver timely and relevant information to patrons. As libraries further embrace the digital world by providing access to ebook content they are faced with the increasing tension between the industry and the

library perspective. Whereas a manufacturer of ebooks puts top priority on defining a market, the librarian has to take the user perspective and consider how effectively the technology will work for patrons. Whether public libraries in the web-based information age can define a distinctive role for themselves and what that role might be is becoming a pressing question.

TRANSACTION PORTALS – OR CONTROLLED SHARING

The library's mission is very different from the bookseller's mission. The fundamental library transaction is really 'controlled sharing' – something that is not well accommodated in the emerging transaction models for ebooks. While there are partial solutions around such as netLibrary and dedicated ebook readers, the experience of Toowong library and many others clearly show that available solutions are far from being fully integrated with library systems. Windsor Library is currently engaging with this issue under the title: *What outcomes can we expect in the short and long term for libraries engaging in new technology outcomes?*

(This information draws directly on workshop slides provided by the Director of Technology and Development Windsor, Ontario, Canada, Public Library to be published on their web site: <http://www.windsorpubliclibrary.com/ebook/>).

INFORMATION PORTALS

Starting in September 1999 a number of Research Librarians and OCLC hosted a meeting designated as a Strategic Issues Forum for Academic Library Directors in Keystone, Colorado where a consensus emerged that in the World Wide Web environment the library world is in danger of abandoning its constituency to commercial information services (Campbell, 2000). Whilst this issue is particularly pertinent to academic libraries the concerns that led to the suggestion of an information portal different from that currently offered by commercial providers resonates with many of the issues faced by public libraries also dealing with ebook providers and firms such as netlibrarycom.

There are significant differences between what libraries need and what commercial portals and search engines provide. In general terms it needs to be recognised that:

- Commercial portals were established on different values and principles than those espoused by the library community.
- Commercial portals pursue different goals and purposes than libraries.

Serious concern exists amongst librarians about the lack of depth of information on specific subjects and the questionable accuracy and quality of the information provided by commercial portals. Whilst this is of particular concern to research collections, the changing role of libraries presents some more immediately relevant issues for public libraries. Campbell argues that all librarians need to be aware of the fact that as people's activities become increasingly web-based, and occupations migrate significant portions of their business to the web environment, agencies that wish to survive let alone thrive are busily developing new web architectures. Whilst these developments may be perceived as a threat to their survival, libraries can also seize the opportunity to heighten their visibility by providing a service for which they are uniquely suited.

As information professionals, librarians can exercise a leadership role in designing and developing a portal for libraries that is functional, dependable and provides academically credible access to the Web. Such a portal would act to discover and promulgate best practices and foster the extension of web based services into areas such as document delivery, provision of specialized supporting materials, experimental shared work spaces and activities supporting alternative publishing:

The idea is to create a real information commons, bringing together for the first time in the web environment, high-quality specialized content, commercial sources of data, viable search engines, and virtual human and machine based assistance. It will also create an extraordinary and exciting new future for the research library community that draws on the best from its past adapted in form and function for the future (Campbell, 2000).

The model of the scholar's portal recognises that unlike commercial portals, libraries seek to address community needs on the basis of sharing, borrowing and recycling facilities that are traditionally offered to patrons on a non-paying basis. Within this public library model patrons are offered ebooks and ebook reading devices as a value-adding opportunity providing increased access to the library's contents. The idea of an information portal draws on these fundamental differences between libraries and commercially

based information.coms. The library trials of ebooks serves to highlight the uneasy fit between these two models.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In many communities, public libraries have taken on the role of access providers to ebook technology. In all the countries where ebooks are popular public library systems are well established. Libraries provide a community-based circulation model cushioning the financial and personal risk-taking of individuals who might hesitate at becoming early adopters of technology. Libraries also provide a unique and trusted forum for sharing and collecting information about the pros and cons of a new technology such as the ebook reader.

In pilot ebook trials at these libraries patrons expressed clear and strong views on their expectations and what they, as users, saw to be important issues for the viability of ebooks. These included a consensus that there should be increased choice and variety of reading content. Some also missed a shared reading environment with access to comments from other readers.

Nearly all readers of ebooks commented on their enjoyment of the backlight and the convenience it represented. They liked the increased control over lighting, contrast and font size that ebook readers provided and the unmarked copy also added to their sense of experiencing a customized reading environment. Many respondents expressed surprise and delight at the ease of use they experienced with ebook readers. The important role of public libraries in introducing a cross section of the community to new technology becomes clearly evident with this finding especially amongst the mature adults who were keen to take part in the Toowong trial and focus group. Public libraries are uniquely suited to offering digital resources beyond the scope of commercial information services.

The case study of ebook usage at Toowong library in Brisbane provides a snapshot of the responses from a small group of users of hand-held devices borrowed from a public library and supplements the limited information gathered from users of ebook readers in a library setting. Across all the ebook trials we review in this chapter, the positive response of patrons who trialed the ebook readers emerged as a consistent finding. For many of the users, ebook

technology did not emerge as a substitute for paper-based texts. Instead ebooks and the ebook readers were seen to be adding value and variety to their reading experience.

The librarians we have observed engaging in ebook trials are early adopters of the technology, prepared to take risks – ‘a very tenacious bunch’. The changing nature of their profession requires more direct and more frequent interactions with commercial providers. For many of these disciplinary leaders such interactions are generating a sense of urgency. Librarians are beginning to put pressure on their professional associations to define and adopt a more prominent, assertive role vis a vis commercial content providers.

Recent publications by prominent librarians (see Marentette, 2001, Gibbons, 2001:74, Campbell, 2001) moot a variety of partnering opportunities between libraries and ebook vendors for mutually beneficial pricing and distribution models. Many of the new vendors view current library circulation policies as a threat to profits. Paradoxically, this situation opens up the potential for libraries to partner with ebook vendors with a better understanding of their role. In this context we have reviewed two separate suggested models for portals. Each of these portals is presented in the literature as an integral part of a proposal for a new partnering model.

Whether ebook technology will attract sufficient numbers of users to become commercially viable may well be linked to how their role in the community evolves. If libraries succeed in familiarizing the public with a technology that most patrons found surprisingly attractive – even at this early stage of distribution – we are likely to see a network effect develop. A network effect exists where a connection to a network or group of users becomes more and more valuable so that it creates self-reinforcing effects (Shapiro and Varian, 1999). As enough people or customers become users of ebook readers the accumulated ‘momentum’ may eventually become irreversible and the innovation become generally accepted.

Until clear signs emerge regarding the future of the ebook and the ebook reader, such a scenario must remain speculative. What the information we have gathered here from libraries and their patrons provides is a clearer and deeper understanding of the user perspective. It is our hope that such an understanding will serve

policy development leading to a best practice model for the book industry.

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