Complications in Access: eBook Issues in Academic Libraries

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Libraries have long been considered the information centers of our communities, whether they are in small towns, cities, universities, schools, or even hospitals. However, since the early 2000’s, the way society received information has vastly changed.[[1]](#footnote-1) EBooks, or electronic books, have added a new element to information storage—allowing users to read books on a different kind of platform. To provide better serve their patrons, many academic libraries include eBooks in their collections, but with the new technology, some complications have occurred, rendering use difficult for many patrons. These issues range from a lack of patron knowledge about library offerings, segregated catalogs, and DRM restrictions regarding simultaneous use, printing, and access on multiple platforms, among others.

The ultimate cause of these problems originates in the complicated relationship between libraries and publishers. Originally, libraries were able to lend their materials freely because of the first sale doctrine: once a title is purchased, it becomes the library’s property, and they are free to lend or sell their materials. Ebooks have complicated this option, because most publishers only license them, rather than allow full purchase. Although various publishers permit libraries to purchase texts, they usually cannot afford the high prices and are instead “tied to a subscription model rather than an outright purchase of the content.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Unfortunately, some publishing companies, such as “Macmillan and Simon and Schuster do not allow its eBooks title to be offered in libraries,” while other companies embargo the most popular eBooks for up to two years.[[3]](#footnote-3) With such a hurdle, libraries are unable to provide their patrons with the most requested materials. Further, another substantial obstacle for academic libraries is the amount of academic texts in eBook form—currently only five per cent of academic texts are even available electronically, giving users little to choose from.[[4]](#footnote-4)

For those eBooks that are obtainable, libraries have difficulties informing patrons about what materials they have available, from making users aware of eBooks in the collection, to understanding how to find and access the texts. In a study analyzed in by Robert Slater in “Why Aren't E-Books Gaining More Ground in Academic Libraries? E-Book Use and Perceptions: A Review of Published Literature and Research,” Peter Hernon et al. find that the most challenging aspects of eBook use were “ignorance about their availability and the need to be taught how to locate and access them” despite most patrons’ comfort with internet use and searching.[[5]](#footnote-5) If students are comfortable with internet searching and finding other information online, then the library must rectify this challenge with education and awareness.

Many library websites separate their main collections from the eBooks, because the libraries are members of consortiums that have an established shared catalog, or because they only license the books from publishers. If a student wants a text but does not use the eBook catalog, the he or she will not notice the available eBook materials. Slater argues, “as long as the barriers to accessing e-books provided by academic libraries are greater than those for finding and accessing publicly available works through Web search engines, the search and discovery of e-books will remain low.”[[6]](#footnote-6) When students cannot even access an eBook, libraries fail to provide patrons a valuable lending option.

Some academic libraries solve this by integrating their eBook holdings into their main catalog. However, when libraries purchase licenses from publishers, they are purchasing metadata from an organization with different standards for cataloging. Vendors and publishers have no reason to match their metadata for the books to the MARC standards for libraries, making it difficult for the information about each holding to transfer. James Bucyzinksi cites the problems as “insufficient cataloguing resources and various technical reasons, such as the unavailability of “direct links” to specific eBook titles,” which prevents access for users.[[7]](#footnote-7) Fortunately, new software tools have been created to resolve this. These tools, allowing federated searching across many databases, can search library catalogs, eBook holdings, and local findings.[[8]](#footnote-8) While these tools, like VuFind and Endeca, are not universal or foolproof, they do provide hope for the success of eBooks in academic libraries.

To maintain the integrity and ownership of their materials, publishing companies put digital protection on their products. Digital Rights Management, or DRM, places limitations on subscribers while preserving publisher ownership over the item. However, DRM usually is a double-edged sword that prevents library users from using eBooks fully. Frequently, professors include eBook holdings in the library reserves for use an entire class, but the DRM limits simultaneous use of a text by multiple patrons. When several users want to retrieve the same item, the students experience limitations in their borrowing. In a survey analyzed by Linda Ashcroft, she cites that while most (82.9 per cent) libraries have subscription models that allow for simultaneous use for some texts and individual use for others, the “‘one person one book’ model is still prevalent.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Users in academic library settings most often want to borrow the same books because of a common goal, like reading for a course. However, with the restrictions placed by publishers, libraries can only give their users individual access.

Other constraints set forth by DRM for library use is prohibiting printing and forcing individuals to access an eBook on a single platform online, rather than allowing for interoperability. Students expect to be able to print their information, even in eBook form. DRM prohibits copies, resulting in frustration. Further, as most academic library users have mobile devices and prefer to work on multiple devices, transferring information from school computers to laptops to cellular devices to tablets, they want their eBooks to do the same. Unfortunately, DRM encourages publishers to provide only one kind of file for lending, while the many devices have unique reading platforms.[[10]](#footnote-10) Moreover, Robert Slater argues, “most academic e-book providers only allow users to access eBooks while remaining connected to the internet,” illustrating a significant limitation for users and libraries.[[11]](#footnote-11) Despite the positive aspects of DRM for publishing companies, eBook lending and access is thoroughly complicated for libraries and users, resulting in only in confusion and disappointment.

L. Sandborn suggests, “in lean and thoughtful times, an e-book collection can nudge libraries further into relevancy.”[[12]](#footnote-12) With a plethora of options for users to access their information, libraries must attempt to provide their users with valuable, yet convenient services. Currently, extensive eBook offerings are one of these services, but there are a variety of challenges that prevent users from using eBooks in the library. These challenges originate in ignorance about eBook availability and difficulty in understanding how to search for the materials, and DRM extends the complications, making eBook use tricky and inconvenient. It is up to the libraries to manage these problems and create solutions that will encourage more use of eBooks in the library. By embracing the issues, libraries will provide academic users with a new and important lending option.

Further, another substantial obstacle for academic libraries is the amount of academic texts in eBook form—currently only five per cent of academic texts are even available electronically, giving users little to choose from.[[13]](#footnote-13)

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