Title: User response to the introduction of e-books and e-audio in an Australian public library network

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User response to the introduction of e-Books and e-Audio in an Australian Public Library Network

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Abstract

E-books have yet to find a firm place in public libraries generally. In Australia a number of small scale pilot services have been introduced with varying results. One major Australian public library network, the ACTPLS, has recently introduced a collection of nearly 2,000 e-books and e-audio, accessible to users via the Web. This paper reports on the implementation of this service and the response of users after three months of operation. Generally, there has been a slow take-up of the service but no promotion or marketing effort has yet been made. Findings include a strong preference for e-audio materials, concerns over the chaptering of material and some hardware and software limitations.
E-books – broadly defined as the contents of a book made available to a reader in electronic form (Hawkins 2000) – have been around since 1971 when Michael Hart started Project Gutenberg with the aim “to put at everyone’s disposal, in electronic versions, as many literary works of the public domain as possible for free” (Lebert 2005). Over the next two decades this proceeded at a slow pace (with only 1,000 books online by 1997) but the growth of the Internet and increased attention from major commercial organizations has seen an explosion of interest, and commitment, to establishing vast on-line libraries of digitised books. With Google’s announcement in 2004 of a partnership with some of the world’s leading research libraries to digitise major parts of their collections, the e-book seems finally ready to make an impact (Google 2004).

Yet publishing directly in digital form without a print alternative has proceeded cautiously, despite initial optimism, and sales of e-books have been low. A consultancy report, prepared by Andersen Consulting for the Association of American Publishers in 2000, predicted that the US e-book market would rise to 10% of the consumer book market by 2005 (worth around $22 billion) (Romano c2002). The reality has proven these predictions to be wildly optimistic with US e-book sales reported at $179 million for 2005, less than 1% of total book sales (Association of American Publishers 2005). Given this slow growth, libraries (and their users too) have been cautious in their adoption and promotion of e-books as replacements for print materials (Cox 2004). However, building upon their experience with online journals and reference works, academic libraries have taken the lead in acquiring e-books and assessing their usefulness to users (Snowhill 2001, Levine-Clark 2006). Public libraries have been slower in their response to e-books, although discussion surrounding the introduction of them into public libraries has been ongoing for a decade or so (Noring 1996, Newcombe 1997). Enthusiasm grew with the launch of the Rocket e-book readers in 1999 and around this time the first public library networks in Australia and the UK began to look seriously at the introduction of e-books for their users. This met with limited success with one Australian public library reporting in 2002 “total frustration” over the whole experience, another felt it was too early to judge whether or not their small-scale trial could be determined a success while a third reported more positively, noting it had been successful as a public relations and educational tool (Hutley 2002). Similarly in the UK, where McKnight and Dearnley (2003, p.242) reported for the public library they evaluated “it is evident that the implementation of e-book collections offers a mixture of costs and questionable benefits at present.”

Despite such negative or at best, luke warm reports, public libraries have continued to conduct pilot studies, investigate alternative delivery methods and tried various measures in order to ascertain whether a viable market does in fact exist for e-books. One of the major findings of a recent UK research report (Dearnley 2004) emphasizes the need to know and understand your market first, before making the financial commitment that building a collection of e-books requires, with Sawyer (2002) calling on libraries to better understand the needs of their clients with the e-book market ill-defined with limited appeal. However, the evidence would suggest that close examination of the market is rarely undertaken and that for many libraries with functioning e-book collections, it has been a case of “putting it out there and seeing what happens” – as one university library candidly
admitted “at this moment (one month after launching e-books) we really do not have a clue as to how our users will behave with our netLibrary books...” (Cavallin and Bjorklund 2001).

Given this, and the small number of e-book user studies conducted, it would seem that there is a real need to gain a better understanding of how users react to the introduction of e-books, in order that libraries can assess the potential benefits to users and properly target and market, what for most public libraries in particular, is a relatively costly product. Thus this paper will outline the introduction of an e-book service into a large public library network (by Australian standards) and report on user response after its first four months of operation.

The ACT Public Library Service (ACTPLS) and establishing the e-book collection

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) is situated in the south east of the continent about 300km south of Sydney, and is home to the federal capital of Australia, Canberra. It comprises a relatively small area, highly urbanized. The population is around 325,000 with the lowest median age in Australia (34.5 years) (ABS 2006). Income and education levels are the highest in Australia with the 2005 census showing that 55% of ACT households had broadband Internet access (ABS(b) 2006).

The public library system comprises nine branches with over 130,000 active borrowers and an annual budget of around $A12m (ABS 2005). The Library first investigated e-books in 2001 with a view to using eBookman – hand held PDAs that were marketed by Franklin Electronic Publishers for a short period in the early 2000s. The intention was to purchase a number of units, upload titles to the readers and make the package available to users. However, the trial undertaken by staff indicated that the technology was not yet at a practical stage with battery life being a key concern. As one staff member noted “the supply of batteries to keep them going while customers obtained and read their e-books was overwhelming and the trial was abandoned” (Evans 2006 p.3). This experience proved to be an additional factor in making the Library feel less confident about the acquisition and loan of reading devices as a means of making e-books available to clients. With such devices being costly to acquire, lacking standardisation, in danger of becoming quickly outdated and requiring ongoing support and maintenance, they pose problems and increase workloads for already busy library staff. Having to develop loans policies (are they free, is a deposit required, does a user need to sign an agreement? What happens if the device is damaged, lost or stolen?) and uploading procedures to install content adds to the administrative effort necessary to manage these items. Given these concerns, and the experience with the eBookman, when consideration was again given to the establishment of an e-book service, there was a strong impetus to avoid portable devices and only make material available via a user’s home computer. Given the widespread uptake of the
Internet within the ACT and particularly, the upsurge in broadband access since e-books were first considered, this was seen as being a practical and also worthwhile approach to adopt.

With the enthusiastic support of a number of key library staff, a proposal was developed towards the end of 2004. This followed a period of investigation – looking at what was being used and what was available. Given that the ACTPLS were using the Horizon Integrated Library Management System and had an established and positive relationship with SirsiDynix, the system vendor, there was an obvious impetus to look closely at Overdrive for the supplier of e-books, given their close relationship with SirsiDynix. Overdrive also looked attractive as being used in a number of US libraries and appearing to offer more material suitable for public libraries than did rivals such as NetLibrary.

Discussions with Overdrive started and after some delay, a proposal was developed that was accepted by ACTPLS senior management. Funding for the project had to be found within the existing library budget and savings had to be made elsewhere to accommodate the substantial setup fee and ongoing annual charge of around $A17,000 pa. Work then began with Overdrive developing the web pages and links and installing the appropriate applications software. Their links with SirsiDynix proved themselves at this stage with a relatively seamless integration of the Overdrive software with the relevant parts of the ILMS. However, problems related to software installation did arise due to the need for Overdrive to access the main server hosting the ILMS. In the ACT situation, this means accessing the main government IT network with consequent concerns regarding access by third parties. This security issue proved to be a significant hurdle and, for many public libraries sharing local government computing facilities, it is something that needs to be factored in (and discussed with the relevant IT sections) well before the software acquisition process is completed. While this did cause some delay, the issues were overcome and the new service was ready for trial in July 2006.

During the previous six months, library staff had undertaken content selection. This resulted in around 1,750 titles being selected. These comprised 1000 fiction items, 750 non-fiction. Of these in total, over 800 were audio e-books (identified as e-audio through the rest of the paper). Selection was made more difficult by the limited availability of titles in electronic format, the preponderance of US material and the contracts that Overdrive had (or didn’t have) with various publishers for supply of their material. In addition, for some publishers, while Overdrive may have access to their catalogue, the geographic rights did not extend to Australia. Encouraging Overdrive to pursue some of these publishers and expand on offerings relevant to Australia became part of the acquisitions process. The price of titles varied but averaged $A15 for e-books and $A55 for e-audio – substantially less than their physical counterparts (Evans p.2).

Due to the lack of standards within the publishing industry, together with the various access formats used by PCs and PDAs, it was felt necessary to acquire e-books in more than one format. Thus some titles were bought twice – once in Adobe format (more suitable for PCs), once in Mobipocket (more
suitable for PDAs). This increases the costs and part of the user evaluation will be to study the use of the two formats in order to assess the necessity for acquiring both. In addition, audio books too provided complications, with Overdrive supplying titles in MP3 format, but not supporting iPods.

Overdrive also does not support linking directly to titles provided by other suppliers. Thus public domain materials, such as those made available via Project Gutenberg, cannot be accessed directly through Overdrive. This creates some issues given that all Overdrive e-books are recorded in a separate (enhanced) catalogue – they are not integrated into the main library catalogue. But links to other e-books (eg. Gutenberg titles) are found in the main catalogue and users looking expressly for e-books, if they go to the Overdrive catalogue, will miss these other titles. It is an issue still not resolved.

**Trialing the service**

The service was made available to a small number of users (including staff) in July 2006. The public users were identified individually by library staff as those who had shown interest in the idea of e-books in the past and were willing to participate and provide feedback. They also had to own appropriate hardware at home (a Microsoft based computer and realistically, broadband connection). This is obviously one of the limitations of the service in that it requires the user to own the appropriate equipment. Using the collection within the library is not an option given that downloading an e-book or e-audio title is linked to the actual machine address. A title can be downloaded once only and then resides on that computer (unless copied by the user) – thus it is not really practical to use a PC within the library. This also raises another drawback of the Overdrive software in using a traditional analogue approach of once an item is booked out it cannot be accessed again until it is returned. Each e-title, once booked out, is unavailable in that format for any other reader until the three week loan period is over. Borrowers are limited to three titles and there is no method of returning an item before the three week period has expired – making titles less accessible than they should be and also limiting readers in the amount of material they can ‘borrow’ in that time. The concept of a return facility has been raised with Overdrive but so far has not been resolved.

Generally, the trial proved to be successful. The detailed guidance provided through the web to assist users appeared to work reasonably well (it is closely based on the help screens used by public libraries in the US and has thus had time to evolve into a useful tool); most expectations were met and a strong positive endorsement for introducing the service was received. One user commented, “congratulations on bringing a fantastic digital information service to the ACT library” (Evans p.11).

There were some common concerns voiced during the trial which, at the stage of writing have yet to be resolved. These can be summarised as follows:
• For e-audio, a desire to be able to download to iPods
• Problems with using an Apple Mac and not being able to access material
• The lack of Australian content
• The issue of chaptering – the contents of most titles (book and audio) are chaptered into 70 minute ‘chunks’. This means that a reader or listener cannot do anything other than listen to the entire 70 minutes at one time. It is only possible to start back at the beginning of the ‘chapter’ rather than anywhere in the middle of it.
• Concerns over the time taken to download the appropriate software (the first time around) and the downloading of audio titles generally.

All of these clients were relatively sophisticated IT users and so could be expected to manage reasonably well. Some minor issues arising from the trial (wording in instructions, information re copying to CD etc.) were resolved and it was decided to open up the service to a wider audience. Consideration was given to holding a formal launch with appropriate publicity but it was felt that, at this early stage, it would be better to introduce the service at a low key level and build it gradually while the Library gained experience and expertise in the delivery of these e-materials. Thus from August 2006 the link to the e-book website from the ACTPLS home page was opened and staff were encouraged to promote the existence of the collection to users they felt would be interested. A formal launch, with fanfare, was put on hold pending the results of this modest first step.

Evaluating the service – what do users think?

The software provided by Overdrive, the Digital Library Reserve (DLR), contains a large number of reporting options to provide content circulation statistics broken down in various ways. Table 1 below shows various circulation figures for e-books for October 2006 to January 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>October</th>
<th>November</th>
<th>December</th>
<th>January</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adobe e-books</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>761</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobipocket e-books</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overdrive e-audio</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>1288</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – E-titles circulation Oct 2006 – Jan 2007
From Table 1 it is clear that circulation has grown slowly since introduction of the service. The numbers are very small compared to overall circulation statistics for traditional materials (e.g., traditional audio formats, cassettes and CDs, have monthly circulation figures around the 8-9,000 level, compared to 3-400 for e-audio) but, given the lack of promotion and deliberate tentativeness in introducing the service, this is hardly surprising. One positive aspect of the figures is the relatively consistent level of borrowing.

The most popular materials are e-audio titles, accounting for 60% of the total borrowed. This confirmed initial findings from the trial period and supports the view that for many users, it is not so much ‘reading’ e-books that makes them attractive but the ability to listen to them at home, in the car or wherever using a portable MP3 player. Results of the user survey, reported later in this paper, supports this finding.

The most obvious difference is between formats with the Mobipocket option attracting very few users, with only 7.5% of all borrowings being in this format. This is a particularly valuable finding indicating that, with such a relatively low level of take up, the Library could possibly discontinue purchasing Mobipocket versions of titles, save money and cause little inconvenience to users. Again, this confirms the findings of the trial period where virtually none of the user group had heard of Mobipocket or wished to use the format.

**User response**

As part of the evaluation of the service, a questionnaire was developed to be completed by users who had borrowed at least one item from the e-book/e-audio collection (see Appendix). This was kept deliberately simple in order to encourage as many borrowers as possible to respond. It was also hoped that it would elicit as much free text comment as possible in order to build a more qualitative understanding of user reactions and response.

The survey was attached as a link to the ACTPLS e-book web page and users were directed to it when accessing the e-book and e-audio catalogue during February 2007. For first time borrowers this was not useful as they had no basis on which to make a response. Also, if they never returned to borrow again it is unlikely they would make the effort to come back to the web page and complete the evaluation form. This is a drawback as there may be many who tried the experience and found it wanting but never responded to the survey. Completed surveys were compiled using SurveyMonkey with assured anonymity for the respondents.
The survey remained live for four weeks after which time the link was removed and results analysed. A total of 79 respondents completed the survey, although not everyone answered every question. In addition, it was apparent that a small number, probably eight, of the respondents had not actually used the e-book service but completed the survey anyway. Overall, the findings showed:

- Nearly 80% of users were over 25 and under 55 – not really surprising. The very small number of younger users may reflect lack of awareness of the service, lack of interest or lack of appealing titles in the collection. In the free text comments on what was considered ‘bad’ about the program, the limited choice of titles topped the list of concerns equally with technical issues regarding access and downloading.

- 27% had borrowed more than six e-book titles during the period. This indicates a reasonable level of continued interest in the format with the potential to establish a regular and loyal user base. While overall, the survey confirmed the findings of the circulation statistics showing e-books less popular than e-audio, for some at least the benefits were clear with positive comments such as “I can take multiple books with me anywhere”, “It’s there any time”, “Multiple texts can be stored on a device that can be carried in a pocket”. However, for e-books there was a substantial percentage (45%) of one time only borrowers, reflected in comments such as “I do not find reading from the screen as comfortable as a book”, “…seems easier on the eyes to read printed material”, “I spend 50 hours a week doing screen based activity. I prefer to read my books away from the screen…” Such comments confirm other findings suggesting that for the foreseeable future, screen based reading is a relatively small market segment which may grow only slowly over the short to medium term.

- For e-audio titles, 33% had borrowed more than six titles. The spread with e-audio was more even across the borrowing range, suggesting a less polarized attitude to their use – once a user was introduced to them, more continued to borrow them than with e-books. As circulation figures indicate, this is a more popular medium with many respondents noting the traditional benefits of any audio book format (listening in car; while doing other things) with others commenting on the convenience of MP3 use – “My favourite thing is having them on my MP3 for traveling…”, “I love this facility and listen to the books on my MP3 player all the time..”. Negative comments focused mainly on the lack of compatibility with iPods.

- Fiction – both e-book and e-audio - proved popular with 40% reporting borrowing six or more titles whereas for non-fiction, the majority had borrowed only one title.

- 74% of respondents became aware of e-title availability via the Library’s website. Only one person reported learning about the service via newspaper or media. This confirms the lack of media coverage and suggests that if collection use is to grow substantially, some form of media promotion is required.

- 50% found the website instructions clear or very clear, with another 27% “OK” about them. This indicates quite strongly the effectiveness of these instructions in guiding users through the download procedure which most found to be acceptable if a little irritating. “It is a pain to have to download software to enable the book to be downloaded...would make much more sense to click and save.”

- Around 50% read the entire e-book via the screen, while around a quarter gave up and never finished the book. Very few, 11%, printed any or all of the text. 29% reported using special features such as searching within the text, increasing font size for readability etc, indicating a
relatively high level of understanding in the potential of these on-line features.

- For e-audio, 43% downloaded some or all to an MP3 player, and another 30% to CD for listening to away from the computer. Not surprising given the comments regarding the benefits of e-audio for listening to while doing other things. This high level of downloading could be an issue for publishers who have little or no control over their product once it has been copied to a CD or MP3 player where it can be held indefinitely, lent to others or further copied.

- The two commonest concerns expressed over the e-book and e-audio program related to content and the limited range of titles available and, for e-books, problems with on-line reading discomfort and eye strain. Building the collection and acquiring appropriate titles is not necessarily that easy given, as was noted earlier, the range of titles available in the appropriate format and the agreements publishers have regarding distribution. If demand is seen as building with the potential for increasing licensing agreements then it is likely that availability of material will improve as publishers seek to exploit this potential market.

- Users were split about the overall program. 39% were firmly against more e-book purchases, with 33% ambivalent – the general feeling being expressed in this statement “I don’t think the ‘budget for traditional items should be lessened”. For e-audio, only 23% were clearly against more purchases with nearly half agreeing more should be acquired. Ambivalence here covered a range of issues from the technical, such as the problem with iPod compatibility, to concerns with the elderly used to using traditional equipment and unlikely to be moving to newer technologies.

Overall, the findings from this survey indicate a reasonable level of community acceptance and belief in these new formats. The number of users is small at the moment but with relatively modest promotional efforts could almost certainly be expanded significantly. The e-audio market looks assured with real potential to move further into this market as older formats, such as cassettes, are weeded and replaced. Availability of content may be a major limiting factor and is an area where the library needs to take a proactive role in lobbying publishers.

For e-books, the outlook is less clear. Smaller numbers are enthusiastic about their potential with a majority, 72% of those who had tried them, against or ambivalent in their view on further purchases. Further research needs to be undertaken in order to try and determine the nature and extent of the market for e-books within the ACTPLS. It appears this will be a niche market for the foreseeable future and a clearer understanding of where those niches are will help considerably in the proper use of scarce library acquisition resources. And this is an issue that needs to be carefully analysed. Apart from the one-off setup cost, there is the annual license fee, currently $A17,000 which has to be paid before any titles are acquired. For the ACTPLS, this is a substantial figure and while savings are made through acquisitions (as was noted earlier, e-titles are generally 50% or more cheaper than their physical counterparts), circulation will have to build significantly to justify the cost of this program.
Finally, the positive comments expressed during the trial program regarding the library’s uptake of new technologies were echoed in this survey with a number of respondents complimenting the ACTPLS on their engagement with the new technologies, “I am so pleased the library has moved with the new technologies”, “I hope this service will continue and expand”. These are encouraging statements which suggest that, for the ACTPLS, some users at least expect their library to be at the forefront of technological innovation.

Given the findings reported above, it would seem reasonable for the Library to vigorously promote and extend the e-audio collection, analyse and research the e-book market and until that is done, limit acquisitions in this area (particularly for non-PDF formats) and revisit the cost/benefit equations after a reasonable amount of time has expired (at least one year) when it may be easier to assess the overall success of the program and its ongoing viability.


http://www.publishers.org/industry/2005_S1FINAL.pdf


http://magpie.lboro.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/2134/2128/1/laserfinal3.pdf


Appendix

Public Library Users response to e-Books and Audio e-Books

Thank you for looking at this survey. It should only take five minutes to complete.

Please **BOLD** the appropriate response:

**Your Age group:**
- under 25
- 26-40
- 41-55
- 56-70
- 71 +

If you have downloaded an e-Book or Audio e-Book please complete the following survey.

If you **attempted** to download an e-Book or Audio e-Book but gave up at some stage in the process please move to the comments section and briefly note what happened.

- **How many e-Books have you downloaded**
  - 1
  - 2-3
  - 4-6
  - 6+

- **How many Audio e-Books have you downloaded**
  - 1
  - 2-3
  - 4-6
  - 6+

- **How many were fiction**
- **How many were non-fiction**
How did you become aware that e-Books and Audio e-Books were available:

Website  Library staff  Newspaper or other media
Through a friend or acquaintance  Other (please outline) ____________________

Did you find the instructions on the Library website clearly explained what you had to do to access the books

Very unclear  Slightly unclear  OK  Clear  Very clear

For the FIRST e-Book or Audio e-Book you downloaded, how long did it take you to complete the process

Under 10 mins  11-20 mins  21-30 mins  31-40 mins  40+

For e-Books, did you

1) Read the entire book online  Read some of the book online and give up
   Deliberately read only parts of the book

2) Print out a small portion  Print out a lot or all of the book

3) Save some to floppy disk or CD  Save all to floppy disk or CD
4) Use any special features available to you (such as searching within the book, changing font size for readability etc)

For Audio e-Books, did you

1) Listen to the entire book through your computer  
   Listen to some and gave up

2) Save some to CD for playing in car or elsewhere  
   Save all to CD

3) Save some to MP3 player  
   Save all to MP3 player

Please comment on what you found be good about e-Books and/or Audio e-Books

__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________

Please comment on what you found bad about e-Books and/or Audio e-Books

__________________________________________________________________________________
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Should the Library buy more e-books and Audio e-books if it means less money to spend on
traditional print items  
Yes  
Depends  
No
Please comment if you circled “Depends” above