



Ebooks are definitely here to stay. Dean Mason explains the basics and emerging implications for library professionals.

Last night, I, a print-devotee, became incredibly frustrated when a title I wanted to start reading was not available as an ebook to download immediately. I will buy the print copy soon, "but why can't I start reading it NOW?", my inner voice grumbled.

And I am in fast-growing company. Ebook sales are more than doubling every year, representing a shift of proportions unusual in the slow world of books. 2010 was widely hailed as the year that ebooks 'arrived', even though they still represent less than 5% of total book sales. The scale they achieved in 2010 is more a warning to everyone that they do deserve serious attention. Or, at least, much more than a scoff.

Here are a few of the basics to update those less familiar with what the term 'ebooks' represents today. It is a lot more than 10 years ago when Stephen King's *Riding the Bullet* first appeared and it is no doubt a lot less than what it will represent in 2020 and with the advent of web XX.0.

Content?

When a title is released in both print and electronic formats you can expect to get the same content in each. The majority of ebooks sold today are for popular trade publications (think of the range of titles you see at the airport bookshop) and are straight conversions, perhaps with hyperlinks to internal or external references.

Formats?

Most publishers today are preparing their titles in both PDF and ePub formats. The main benefit of ePub (an XML format, now considered 'the' standard) is that it renders the text to suit the device on which you are reading it. This means you don't have to keep scrolling to the left and

right if you are reading on your mobile phone for example, it will automatically be one neat column to fit your screen size. There are other benefits too, like being able to email from within the document, if digital rights management (DRM) allows.

Copy/Print?

This is the sort of thing that DRM manages. Most publishers allow some copying and printing, say up to 20 pages. But for poetry and short story collections it might be zero to protect contributors of individual pieces.

Lend/re-sell?

That depends on the DRM, and, the vendor who sells them. If you buy an ebook direct from O'Reilly for example, you can send the entire ebook to a friend by email from within the ebook itself, with comments. But if you buy a Kindle book, you can not transfer it to anyone. Different vendors like Blio (Baker & Taylor), Google, and Kobo are talking of offering lending and re-selling options, but they are not yet proven.

Any device?

This depends primarily on the vendor. The trend is for most ebook vendors to allow their ebooks to be read on any device. But when Amazon's Kindle, and Barnes&Noble's Nook began competing in the U.S. they were aiming to be exclusive platforms, like iTunes was to music on the iPod. But then entered Blio, Google, and Kobo, each trumpeting loudly that they will be device 'agnostic', meaning you can read their ebooks on any device. Subsequently, Kindle and Nook are moving to be more flexible in this way also.

Use on multiple devices?

Not always, but it seems to be becoming the trend. Kobo, Blio and Google are emphasizing this type of flexibility and it seems the other vendors will follow. They even promise to remember where you were up to, regardless of which device you last 'closed' the book on.



Special thanks to Tim Courland, who created the font used for the heading of this article, and to Susan Courland, who created the E.E. D special back to basics logo on page 19. The figures were created entirely using CPUs and fans from discarded computers.



Buying – for personal use

It's very easy, from your PC, mobile phone, or other mobile device. One of the biggest difficulties in Australia is that not all ebooks that are available in the U.S. are available here. You usually get to the check-out page (and have entered all that boring ID info yet again!) before being told it is not available in your territory.

Buying – for libraries

The most common model is for a library to take out a subscription to a bundle of ebooks on a vendor's platform, but accessible via the library's catalogue. These might be publisher-specific, or they might be across a range of popular titles. (Ebsco's recent purchase of NetLibrary will allow searching across ebook and journal content.) Beyond that there is a variety of possibilities regarding simultaneous borrowings, limited number of borrowings per title, or per collection, whether the complete file downloads to the patron's machine and then self-destructs, or whether it remains in the cloud, and so on. Overdrive and Ebooks Library (EBL) are another two leading platform providers to keep an eye on.

Pricing?

For personal use, the average price is 75% of the printed price. However, Amazon blazed a trail with a \$9.99 price point regardless of the recommended retail price. They are subsidizing these sales (presumably to help boost Kindle device sales) but the future for this pricing is uncertain. Publishers appear to be moving to an 'agency' model where they will effectively sell direct to the customer and pay the 'agent' (the re-seller) a commission. For library purchasing it is another ball-game, and still too fluid to summarise here.

Tricky?

You bet. This mix of DRM, platform requirements, device dependency, changing publisher terms, differing vendor offerings, and other factors, are making the ebook market tricky territory for libraries to venture into. Serious partnering with one or two vendors is the best way to start testing what might



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