

E-books in the Public Library Today

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In *Introduction to Information Science*, Bawden and Robinson (2012) briefly acknowledge the e-book format as a mode of digitization that has been slow to become commonly used for popular works as opposed to academic works like journal articles. As technology that facilitated e-book reading like the Kindle and the iPad were introduced in the early 2000's, e-book popularity seemed to increase, but its competition with print "remains to be seen" (Bawden and Robinson 2012, 217). In the intervening years since this textbook was published, e-books have remained significant, especially as they relate to public libraries. The current state of e-books for popular works has important implications for public libraries.

When considering the e-book format as a whole, it is important to note prevailing perspectives on the present and future of both print books and e-books. Ballatore and Natale (2016) set forth a framework with which to view this contrast. They posit three narratives based on recent research and conversation about books: "the death of the book as the end of humanism," "liberating the book from its mortal coil," and "coexistence of e-books and print books" (2382-2386).

The first of these three narrative fears the end of the print book to the point of direct opposition to e-books; it has among its proponents the late author Ray Bradbury, who was against the publishing of his work in e-book format (Ballatore and Natale, 2382-2384). The second envisions a world free of the constraints of print and where e-books and hypertext are primary in a "digital utopia" (2383-2385). After offering arguments contrary to those first two narratives, the authors present a third way where the two forms, print and digital, both exist for different types of users and needs (2385-2386).

This paper will focus on exploring e-books through the framework of this third narrative that emphasizes the coexistence of print and digital books. According to Ballatore and Natale (2016), this narrative firmly rejects the possibility of the death of books, emphasizing the patterns of coexistence that are likely to arise” (2385). While the other two narratives hold some validity, the consensus of many recent published research on e-books lend support to the narrative of the coexistence of e-books with print books.

Richard J. Gilbert (2015) explores the ways in which e-books have brought change through disruption to the book industry as a whole, starting with the introduction of Amazon’s Kindle e-reader in 2007 (165). Since that introduction, “sales of e-books in the United States increased at triple-digit rates..., reaching 20.8 percent of revenues and 23.8 percent of unit sales of trade books in both print and electronic formats in 2013” (166). Those numbers are a significant portion of book sales, yet Gilbert also notes that those numbers seem to have plateaued, and that “it is difficult to know whether the flattening of e-book sales is a pause in an upward trend of e-book sales or an indication that e-books have found their place and that the print book will continue to be the most popular format” (166).

Amazon’s influence on e-books and the e-book market cannot be underestimated, as Gilbert (2015) demonstrates through extensive discussion of Amazon’s pricing models for both e-books and print books and its battles with publishers and other booksellers. He notes the significance of the e-book for Amazon and its dominance, saying, “the e-book roiled the traditional publishing industry by expanding the reach of online book retailing and further entrenching Amazon’s position in this increasingly important retail channel” (181). The selling

of e-books seems essential to Amazon's business and key to its growth, which makes the company an important factor in considering the future of the growth of e-books.

One benefit to Amazon's large share of the e-book market is the ability to study a large subset of data about e-books, as evidenced by Simon Rowberry's (2016) analysis of social reading on Amazon's Kindle reader. This analysis is an example of e-books fulfilling a specific purpose that a print book cannot accomplish. One feature of a Kindle e-book is the ability of the reader to highlight portions of text that can be shared with others through Kindle's Popular Highlights (211). With access to this data, Rowberry was able to analyze some of these popular highlights to draw interesting conclusions about highlighting behavior. This process and analysis is only made possible with the e-book format, as well as Amazon's collection and sharing of data.

Rowberry chose to narrow his analysis of the metadata available from Amazon to highlights from e-books that were in the public domain. In explaining why he made this decision, he says,

The economics of public domain e-books, which are often sold cheaply or released free of charge, have ensured a robust market, although users may not have necessarily read them. ....Public domain e-books have undergone a form of consecration, which has an ancillary effect on contemporary readers' interaction with them, as users may find their reading shaped by the wealth of material based upon the book's reception prior to their interaction with the text. This can lead to a convergence of thought and reaction to texts that are familiar, which is the perfect counterpart to the hive mind culture of Kindle Popular Highlights (215).

These insights inform his research about how readers choose what to highlight and demonstrate the popularity and relevance of widely-available public domain e-books. The e-book format as well as the resource of Kindle Popular Highlights seem to have given these older books new life.

A downside to Amazon's dominance in the selling of e-books, yet an issue not limited solely to Amazon, is privacy concerns. Amazon is a profit-seeking business which collects an incredible amount of data about its customers and their reading habits. This practice, while useful in the case of the previously referenced study by Rowberry, is a challenge for libraries interested in protecting patrons' privacy. According to Alan Rubel (2016), "Libraries wishing to lend books in Kindle format can at most provide a warning to patrons about Amazon's privacy policies" (183). The very nature of the sharing of electronic resources by libraries invites serious argument and discussion surrounding privacy and intellectual freedom. Diving deeply into these arguments is beyond the scope of this paper, but the consideration of privacy concerns as it relates to e-books, especially in connection with businesses such as Amazon as they relate with public libraries, will be an essential component to the future of this format.

Outside of the Amazon and Kindle ecosystem, the impact of e-books on readers in general is being researched. Seth Ketron and Kelly Naletelich (2016) investigated by small qualitative survey the emotional benefits and drawbacks of e-books as compared with print books. They note in their introduction that while e-books are rising in popularity, "Many consumers appear to favor both e-books and printed books" (434). Their survey results found themes that support this idea by demonstrating different emotional reading needs fulfilled by different formats.

In terms of benefits, readers surveyed appreciated the convenience of having a whole library of books available in just one device, as well as the ease of checking out an e-book digitally from the library without having to visit the physical location (Ketron and Naletelich 2016, 440). They also enjoyed the online community that e-books encourage (441) and the ease with which they could find new titles and quickly download titles (440). However, some readers missed the physical engagement with a book when reading an e-book instead, describing feeling emotionally disconnected when reading an e-book (444-445). These and many other findings are a fascinating window into the emotional aspects of reading that depends on which format is used. Both print books and e-books had positive and negative feedback from the small group of surveyed readers.

The researchers drew the conclusion from their comparison of both formats in their survey that “while e-books have surged in popularity, printed books may never be completely phased out.” (Ketron and Naletelich 2016, 449). Significant changes need to be made in e-book technology in order for e-books to be able to replace some of the emotional and physical functions of a print book. In e-book technology’s current state, though, these two formats are used by consumers to meet different kinds of needs.

If e-books and print books meet different needs and both formats continue to coexist, what are the implications for the public library? Many public libraries already provide e-books for popular works to their patrons through a number of vendors. A logical next step is to measure the scope of e-book use in public libraries and determine how those numbers will inform decision-making.

In 2016, *Library Journal* added e-circulation (e-circ) numbers as one of five data points in its Index of Public Library Service that “rates U.S. public libraries based on selected per capita output measures” (Ray and Lance 2016, 26). The other four measures in this index are library visits, circulation, program attendance, and public Internet terminal use. Libraries that meet certain standards in their population service area are awarded the status of being a Star Library. This addition of e-circ as a data marker, along with *Library Journal*’s reasoning behind the change, presents the argument that e-books are here to stay in the public library ecosystem and that e-books are broadening the definition of library service (Ray and Lance 2016, 26-37).

*Library Journal* defines e-circ, or circulation of electronic materials, as “e-books and downloadable audio and video but not licensed databases or what PLS (Public Libraries Survey) now calls electronic collections” (Ray and Lance 2016, 26). Adding this data point solidifies e-books and other electronic materials as an essential part of public library circulation. Yet e-circ remains just one piece of the data puzzle in the analysis of library outputs. Its recognition alongside these other data markers for libraries falls under the umbrella of the narrative of coexistence, with the circulation of e-books residing with these other important measures.

*Library Journal* chose to include e-circ data “because it represents a new kind of public library use, which...no longer requires most users to visit a physical library. The assumption that the overwhelming majority of public library use is connected with in-person visits is no longer tenable” (Ray and Lance 2016, 27). This conceptual change marks a significant difference in thinking about public library services beyond the scope of a library’s physical space. A future-thinking library will be excited about the possibilities inherent in this expansion, such as

the potential to reach new patrons and create new and innovative programming to meet the needs of those new patrons.

In *New Library World*, Massis (2016) presents examples of strategies libraries in North America are trying in order to reach patrons beyond their typical spaces. In order to meet the needs of people in their communities, including those who are tech-savvy and those who may not have access to traditional library offerings, many libraries are experimenting with new services. Massis says, “Book vending machines, DVD lending machines, iPad borrowing, e-book download terminals, a nearly infinite number and types of library materials dispensed via vending machines, self-service lending environments or designated digital download standalone stations are appearing with greater frequency outside the traditional library structure in the USA, Canada and cities around the globe. Such services offer the convenience, access and portability that library users have come to expect in today’s information-rich realm” (408). These kinds of services, particularly ones in support of e-books, help the the public library adapt quickly to the new frontier of offering services outside of the physical public library.

When viewed through the frame of Ballatore and Natale’s (2016) third narrative of the coexistence of e-books and print books, the current state of e-books is full of promise. Neither the end of the print book nor the answer to every reading scenario, the e-book is finding its place alongside print books in the public library arena. E-books present public libraries with new and interesting challenges that could potentially lead to great new services, especially as they track their usage through e-circ numbers. Concerns about privacy and the effect of businesses like Amazon on e-books should be taken seriously and investigated, yet those concerns should not



immediately disqualify e-books from their place at the metaphorical library table. The e-book as a format is here to stay and deserves its standing as a viable public library resource.

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