TL V64N2: PRINT, ELECTRONIC OR BOTH? HOW LIBRARIES CHOOSE A FORMAT WHEN PURCHASING BOOKS

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Print, Electronic or Both? How Libraries Choose a Format When Purchasing Books

by

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TLA 2014 Conference Program Abstract

The choice of formats for monograph acquisitions is an important decision, not easily made. This program will survey how several different libraries make the decision about which format should be chosen for which books. To see the reasoning behind other libraries' choices may be helpful in determining your own collection development policies

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Introduction

Electronic books are hardly a new phenomenon in libraries--in fact, the first commercial e-books were marketed to libraries in 1999 (Ramaiah, 2012). By 2014, e-books constituted a third of the retail book trade (Greco & Osman, 2013) and 11% of public and academic library materials expenditures ("Library Acquisition Expenditures," 2013). Although e-journals have found ready acceptance among patrons in the last two decades, the adoption and acceptance of e-books has proceeded more slowly (Guthrie, 2012). Librarians who select materials for their collections face difficult choices when determining whether to accession a title in print or electronic format. Ideally, libraries would purchase titles in both formats, but budgets seldom permit such liberality.

The University of Memphis Libraries recently began acquiring individual titles in electronic format. This practice is new to us, although electronic books are not (we have been purchasing packages of e-books since the late 1990s.) As the collection development librarian, I have been faced for the first time with the question of whether to choose print or electronic format for individual titles. Without firm guidelines in place, many choices have been arbitrary.

In order to develop a more systematic process for making format decisions, I have assembled some practices employed by other libraries. This work is intended to help our library develop guidelines for choosing a format when purchasing individual titles. I know this research will help our library to come closer to best practices, in which librarians frame "their e-book decisions according to the particular dynamics of their institutions, particularly the curriculum and users' information-seeking behaviors and technology preferences" (Connaway & Wicht, 2007). I have collected suggestions from published library literature as well as the 20 responses to a

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questionnaire sent to the COLLDV-L email listserv on March 19, 2014 (see Appendix). This article will concentrate on decision-making around individual title purchases; decisions about e-book packages, patron-driven acquisitions, and licensed content involve different considerations.

Considerations for Choosing a Format

There is no consensus among librarians around any particular reasons for format choice, but the following considerations stand out as most common among many factors that influence such decisions. Librarians determining whether to acquire a title as electronic or print may wish to address the following questions:

1. Who will use the title?
2. How will the title be used?
3. What are the objectives of the library's collection management program?

Who Will Use the Title?

Many librarians choose a format that best suits the patrons they expect will be the primary readers of the book. Different populations prefer to use books in different formats (individual experiences vary, of course, but reports from librarians cited here are generalized to large groups).

An easy decision is available when a purchase is made at the behest of a particular patron. Libraries that purchase books requested directly by an individual may defer to the patron's preference in format. A twist on this practice is when libraries divert an interlibrary loan (ILL) request to acquisitions; an additional contact with the patron may be needed to determine his or her preferred format. Libraries using the Getting-It-System Toolkit, a semi-automated system for diverting ILL requests to acquisitions, may configure their settings to allow users to declare their preferred formats upfront (Pitcher, Bowersox, Oberlander, & Sullivan, 2010).

The format consideration reported most often by questionnaire respondents was whether books are intended to support patrons who access the library's materials remotely. Remote patrons are often students in an online or distance education program but may also be patrons of public libraries who have difficulty travelling to the library. Because of the ease of accessing electronic books from any properly authorized computer, and the inconvenience and cost of shipping print books to and from patrons, many libraries choose e-books to support such programs.

It may be surprising, however, to learn that e-books have considerable appeal to users located near the library as well. In their study of the health sciences library at University of Pittsburgh, Folb, Wessel, and Czechowski (2011) find that "some of the heaviest users of the e-book collection were within one block of a library, disproving the intuitive idea that e-book use would increase with distance from the library" (p. 225).

Similarly, one research university who responded to the questionnaire reported that they choose e-books for "subjects with internship/practicum requirements." During those outplacement semesters, students will seldom be on campus, making e-books a good choice for accessibility.

Libraries serving practicing professionals may also opt for e-books. For example, Folb et al. (2011) report that physicians find electronic access to medical texts to be a "lifesaver" (p. 226) when faced with immediate clinical needs for information.

Although accessibility is a concern, librarians are also interested in providing materials in a format that patrons enjoy using. One liberal arts college reports that contrary to notions that young people are "digital natives" (McHale, 2005), their first-year students "shun e-books" and strongly prefer print books. Public library patrons have been found in studies to find reading print not only faster, but more relaxing (Maluck, 2012; Ramaiah, 2012; Divakar, 2012). There is considerably more visual fatigue associated with reading e-books on a bright white screen than with reading printed books on paper; in addition, many patrons report that reading e-books on a personal computer (as opposed to a tablet computer or a dedicated e-reader) also increases anxiety because the activity feels similar to office work.

Another consideration of accessibility is the ease of even opening the book. The codex has been the norm for books since the days of the Roman Empire. Its operation is easily understood and offers few barriers to instantly viewing the desired text. As Darnton (2009) notes, it is "convenient to thumb through [and] comfortable to curl up with . . . . It does not need to be upgraded or downloaded, accessed or booted, plugged into circuits or extracted from webs" (p. 68). On the other hand, at many libraries "ebook downloading is complicated. Digital rights management, secondary logins, downloading restrictions, and additional software programs make borrowing an agonizing process rather than a simple exercise" (Johnson & Buckley, 2014, p. 11). The problem is compounded by the fact that different providers offer different interfaces for e-book navigation--which also display differently on various models of reading devices (Browne & Coe, 2013). Books intended for patrons with

little familiarity with, or little patience for, the process of loading and navigating files on a computer may be better purchased in print. Libraries providing e-books should also be prepared to provide technical support for users (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. "E-book blues" by J.-P. van Arnhem. From "Is Digital Rights Management (DRM) Impacting E-book Adoption in Academic Libraries?" by J.-P. van Arnhem and L. Barnett, 2014, *Charleston Advisor, 15*(3), p. 63. Copyright 2014 by The Charleston Advisor. Reproduced with permission.

A different sort of readers from typical public library patrons are "power users," defined as "users who discover, browse and read extensively in longer sessions" than the average library user (Ahmad, Brogan, & Johnstone, 2014, p. 43). For patrons who use numerous books in a single session, e-books offer considerable advantages in terms of portability and weight--a computer full of e-books weighs no more than a device loaded with a single title; by contrast, a bag full of print books can be cumbersome and even threaten spinal health by compressing lumbar discs as much as 10% of their height (Shymon, Hargens, Minkoff, & Chang, 2014). On the other hand, e-books can typically be opened and read only when other titles on the same device are closed, ruling out the experience of keeping open several print volumes and referring from one to the other as needed (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. St. Jerome as a "power user" (Caravaggio, ca. 1606, *Saint Jerome in his study*). Image source: Wikimedia Commons.

How Will the Title Be Used?

Although the format preferred by likely patrons is a strong determinant for librarians making acquisition decisions, another key consideration is the use to which a book will be put. For academic libraries in particular, compatibility of a book with other instructional technology is important. As well, the scholarly goals to be accomplished by reading the book influence format choices.

Numerous academic respondents to my questionnaire reported that titles intended for course reserve were almost universally purchased as electronic books. Depending upon the size of the class, acquiring sufficient print copies to meet demand may far exceed the costs of an unlimited-user license for the electronic book. E-books also allow seamless transition from an online syllabus or courseware to accessing assigned readings. In a small study at Dickinson College, Rojeski (2012) placed the same materials on course reserve in electronic and print formats; usage of the e-book editions was as much as twenty times greater.

The cost advantage of an unlimited-user license motivates many libraries to purchase books that are assigned readings in electronic format, even if they are not formally designated for course reserve. Acquiring print monographs for non-reserved assigned readings usually means that the books will be checked out before each student has a chance to read them, forcing the latecomers to purchase the books. E-books are, in the words of one questionnaire respondent, "more equitable to students in terms of access and price."

Of course, occasionally an instructor will assign readings from an e-book that the library already owns--and fail to alert a librarian. One respondent noted that he usually becomes aware of such situations "when we get a flood of complaints the first week of classes because the e-book we own is always in use." Another respondent called that situation a "public relations debacle" and always buys multi-user licenses to forestall such incidents.

The question of textbooks in academic library collections is frequently debated. Students continue to request textbooks through ILL despite policies prohibiting such borrowing (Blackburn & Tiemeyer, 2013), and some libraries are purchasing textbooks as an outreach opportunity (McKay, 2013; Middlemas, Morrison, & Farina-Hess, 2012), but for many reasons, the acquisition of textbooks is viewed as "too cost-prohibitive for many libraries" (Lyons & Hendrix, 2014, p. 263). However, there are a number of emerging models for libraries to manage licenses for temporary semester-long access to e-textbooks, including publications from McGraw-Hill, Nature Publishing Group, and Bridgeport Education (Lyons & Hendrix, 2014; Parker, 2014). Libraries that prioritize access and lowering costs for students are exploring purchase or "rental" of e-textbooks.

E-textbooks, like other textbooks, have their detractors. Two separate studies have found that students prefer the experience of reading textbooks in print (Folb et al., 2011; Cuillier & Dewland, 2014). Numerous survey respondents reported the same--that students are "largely still uncomfortable" with e-books, and that there is "still a lot of sentiment" for print books among even the youngest patrons. Contrary evidence is found in a Pearson Foundation survey (2012), in which "almost six in ten college students prefer a digital format when reading books for fun (57%) or textbooks for class (58%), while one-third say that they prefer print. This is a reversal from [the previous year], when more students preferred print over digital (p. 3)."

Concerns about e-books should not be dismissed as mere nostalgia or Luddism. There is a large body of research that shows that reading speed, learning, and comprehension vary between e-books and print volumes. Thus, the appropriate format for acquisitions may be dictated by the intended learning outcome for users of the title.

Readers scanning for specific facts from a text perform better when using electronic materials (Mayes, Sims, & Koonce, 2001). This justifies the choice of many respondents who wrote that reference books are usually purchased as e-books (with multi-user licenses, of course.)

However, readers who are seeking to follow an argument, comprehend a passage, or retain the material will do better to read on paper. Numerous studies have found improved performance on these measures from subjects reading printed works. Garland and Noyes (2004) found that material read from paper is more likely to be retained in long-term memory than material read on a monitor. Mayes et al. (2001) found that readers of electronic material also exhibit lower levels of reading comprehension than readers of print material. The increased cognitive workload of reading plus operating a computer results in higher fatigue for readers of e-books (Wästlund, Reinikka, Norlander, & Archer, 2005).

Some of these effects are due to physical defects of computer monitors, such as the constant refreshing of the display, which disrupts the process by which visual memories are formed. Others, however, are due to the absence of physical features embodied in the codex form of the printed book. Mangen and Schilhab (2012) demonstrate that an important part of reading and understanding a lengthy work such as a scholarly monograph is the incorporation of haptic cues into the visual and linguistic sensory input provided by text. As Jabr writes in an able summary of research into "Why the Brain Prefers Paper" (2013),

Beyond treating individual letters as physical objects, the human brain may also perceive a text in its entirety as a kind of physical landscape. . . . Some researchers think they are similar to the mental maps we create of terrain . . . and of indoor physical spaces. . . . People report that when trying to locate a particular passage in a book, they often remember where in the text it appeared. Much as we might recall that we passed the red farmhouse near the start of a hiking trail before we started climbing uphill through the forest, we remember that we read about Mr. Darcy rebuffing Elizabeth Bennett at a dance on the bottom left corner of the left-hand page in one of the earlier chapters of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (p. 51).

Such a sense of place within the book was an important reason that the codex form prevailed among early Christians: "It was easier to find a passage in a codex than in a scroll—an important point for a new religion in which textual authority was important" (Kallendorf, 2010, p. 31) (see Figure 3).
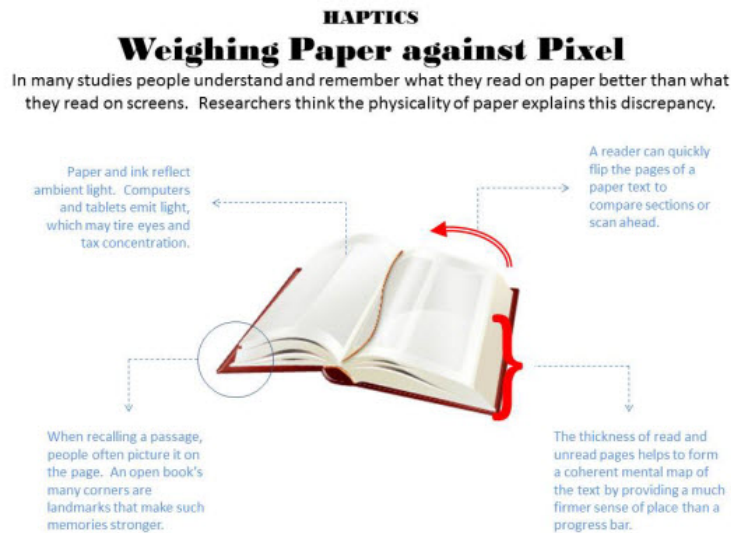

HAPTICS

Weighing Paper against Pixel

In many studies people understand and remember what they read on paper better than what they read on screens. Researchers think the physicality of paper explains this discrepancy.

Paper and ink reflect ambient light. Computers and tablets emit light, which may tire eyes and tax concentration.

A reader can quickly flip the pages of a paper text to compare sections or scan ahead.

When recalling a passage, people often picture it on the page. An open book's many corners are landmarks that make such memories stronger.

The thickness of read and unread pages helps to form a coherent mental map of the text by providing a much firmer sense of place than a progress bar.

Figure 3. The haptics of reading comprehension. From "Why the Brain Prefers Paper," by F. Jabr, November 2013, *Scientific American, 309(5),* p. 52. Copyright 2013 by Scientific American. Adapted with permission.

Clearly, then, books intended not for quick reference but for serious study will serve their readers better if they are offered in print. Reading a printed works offers an additional advantage of being unconnected. Patinkin (2007) observed about online newspapers a truth that applies to reading anything on an internet-enabled device:

In a time of distractibility, a paper also keeps you focused. When we go online, we may start with a news story, but then go chaotically from e-mail to stocks to Google to shopping, and then back to news. But sit with a newspaper, and you no longer are sidetracked. . . . There's no "you have mail" chime to interrupt you.

Although the type of information-seeking needs that the book will meet often dominate decision-making about format, other elements of intended use often dictate choosing the e-book. If a library seeks to deliver the title as soon as possible to a patron, orders for electronic books can be fulfilled literally at the speed of light. Some titles have features that can only be used when accessing the electronic version; for example, a number of children's books are written to be used on a tablet in conjunction with a "book app," which allows readers to interact with the text or illustrations as though it were a video game. Readers can touch an illustration to activate moving pictures, or enable audio narration of the text (Scheuer, 2013) (see Figures 4a and 4b).

Figures 4a and 4b. From trailer video for Auryn's iPad app, *Teddy's Night,* 2010 (illustrations by Birte Muller). Copyright 2010 by Auryn, Inc. When the reader touches the blank paper taped to the wall (top), the app opens a finger-painting function (bottom). Still images retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=4rUzThVkTYI. Reproduced with permission.

Several respondents noted that edited anthologies of works by multiple authors are similar to journals in terms of a reader's interest; that is, rather than reading the entire volume, most researchers are interested in a single chapter. As Guthrie (2012) points out, e-journals have enjoyed nearly universal acceptance because

> the centrality of the article to usage of journal materials offered a number of benefits in the transition to a digital environment. Perhaps most important is the fact that articles are typically relatively short. This . . . enabled scholars to easily and cheaply produce a usable paper version using their desktop printer. As a result . . . they can be easily be used in either digital or print form as suits the need of the particular user (p. 357).

The same is true for chapters within edited volumes, making the electronic format a sensible choice.

Other libraries take note of the types of books that show exceptionally high use within their e-book platforms and prefer electronic format when purchasing other titles in the same genre. For example, librarians at the University of Iowa discovered that test-preparation books were among the most highly used titles from their pilot of a patron-driven acquisitions program (Fischer, Wright, Clatanoff, Barton, & Shreeves, 2012).

What are the Objectives of the Library's Collection Management Program?

As if considerations of the type of user and intended use of the book are not enough to weigh, librarians also take into account the long-term goals of their collection-building activities. For example, although libraries primarily exist to provide information to their patrons, they also participate in "information ecology" (Capurro, 1990). Libraries serve as customers for scholarly presses and function as reserves for other libraries by participating in ILL. Their activities are at several "trophic levels," both as consumers and providers of information, and expand the "information ecosystem" beyond their own walls and IP addresses.

To address the long-term information needs of their patrons, librarians must be concerned with preservation of their collections. In some ways, e-books offer excellent opportunities to maintain the volume count of a library.

For example, e-books never go missing or suffer physical damage.

Some survey respondents wrote that they have policies of either replacing any missing print titles with electronic editions, or else preemptively purchasing e-books in those subject areas known to suffer disproportionate levels of theft. Larceny-prone categories will vary by library. One respondent recorded hers as "titles on Buddhism and anything related to marijuana;" at University of Memphis, they are Bibles and African-American history. Another respondent reported that they have moved all their cookbooks to electronic format, to avoid damage from spills, burns, and other kitchen hazards (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. A cookbook showing damage incurred *in situ.* Photo by the author.

While hazards to print books are ever-present, the preservation of codices is a well-established science with proven results. Libraries intending to keep their books for decades or centuries know how to do so with printed volumes (Balloffet, Hille, & Reed, 2005). On the other hand, preservation of e-books is still an emerging discipline with many unresolved problems. As Walters (2013) notes, there are numerous concerns about preservation of e-books, including the facts that

> the ability to read an e-book is contingent on the existence of a complex infrastructure that may be owned or controlled by multiple agencies. . . . The medium most often used to store e-books—the magnetic disk drive—is far less reliable than print . . . . File formats sometimes change due to decisions made by publishers or aggregators. In other cases, formats are abandoned as e-book suppliers merge or go out of business.

The fact that suppliers may go out of business is dangerous to libraries which do not host purchased content on their own servers; e-book files stored on a vendor's server are vulnerable to the misfortunes of publishers and aggregators, while print books are in the library's possession. The vulnerability of e-books stored on a vendor's server is illustrated by a 2009 incident in which customers who had purchased e-books from Amazon found that the volumes had been deleted from their Kindles, and the purchase price refunded. The titles in question were George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984* (Stone, 2009)!

Libraries do not exist hermetically sealed away from the publishing industry, their communities, and the patrons of other libraries. The choice to accession e-books rather than print affects a library's ability to serve its traditional functions within the information ecosystem, in ways discussed below.

When libraries were limited to circulating books to a single user at a time, it meant that other users with immediate interest in the title had to buy it; increased demand at the library often resulted in additional purchases there as well. E-books change that economic exchange, however. Guthrie (2012) notes, "If libraries can enable electronic access to all users in their community, however, this could reduce the number of books purchased with negative financial ramifications for publishers." The reduction of library purchases has had a particularly strong effect on academic presses. The popular notion that libraries constitute a vital market for university presses was confirmed in a recent study by the University of Chicago Press, which found that nearly half of its scholarly monograph sales were to libraries (Anderson & Blobaum, 2014.)

Patrons are not the only local users of a library's collection, either. For academic libraries, provision of information to non-affiliated users is often an important part of their service to the community. Typically, this service takes the form of providing reference assistance and circulating print volumes. But under most license agreements, e-books are accessible remotely only by authorized patrons, and only at the library itself by non-affiliated users. Reading a book on an unfamiliar computer surrounded by strangers is uncomfortable for many users. Compounding that difficulty, many libraries place time limits on unaffiliated users' access to computers. Choosing to purchase an e-book means shutting off non-affiliated users from its content in many cases (Reinsfelder, 2014).

Libraries also serve readers around the world through ILL. To date, there has been no effective way to loan an e-book to another library; as Wicht (2011) notes, "it is common for publishers and vendors to prohibit in their license agreements the use of e-books to fulfill ILL requests" (p. 205). As acceptance of e-books has grown, fulfillment rates for ILL requests have decreased (Williams & Woolwine, 2011). Librarians who wish to continue to actively participate in ILL as lenders should choose print books. However, an innovative program called Occam's Reader has recently been introduced by members of the Great Western Library Alliance (GWLA) ("Occam's Reader," 2014). Occam's Reader allows automated scanning of e-books; the scans are made available to borrowing libraries on a time-limited basis. To date, only Springer has agreed to allow its e-books to be scanned for ILL, but GWLA is in negotiation with other publishers. The program is currently limited to GWLA members, but it is anticipated that other libraries may start participating in 2015.

A related consideration to the purposes of a collection is the purpose of a library's physical space. Many libraries are opening up their buildings for collaborative learning centers, laboratories, and other uses which limit the amount of space available for shelving print books (Turner, Welch, & Reynolds, 2013). Libraries faced with a dwindling number of shelf feet may choose e-books because they do not occupy space in the library building. However, this does not mean libraries can abandon the practice of culling out-of-date books just because they no longer occupy space. The same considerations of out-of-date content, clogged catalog displays, and lack of relevance that motivate weeding of print books also bear upon e-book collections (Moroni, 2012).

Although e-books save space, they deprive users of the ability to browse the shelves for titles that are classified together. Properly cataloged, e-books may be found in the catalog according to subject heading or keyword. But, as Thomas Mann notes, classified shelving "allows for--indeed, positively encourages and enables--discovery by serendipity or recognition" (p. 49). Many a researcher has a story of finding a book that was crucial to his or her research, but had not turned up in a catalog search, while retrieving another volume from the shelf. If e-books are assigned a classification number in the catalog, the problem may be partly ameliorated through a call number browse in the OPAC. But if, as is the case at University of Memphis, e-books are not classified, there is no way to browse them within a classification range.

Conclusion

As is true for so many aspects of librarianship, there are no absolute criteria for choosing the format of a book. Librarians must decide whether to prioritize access versus reading comprehension, physical preservation versus integrity of the volume count, and participation in the larger information ecosystem versus pleasing affiliated patrons with their preferred format. It is gratifying to know that so many librarians have carefully considered and documented the choices facing us. We must reconcile the best interests of our libraries, patrons, and communities with the ethical standards of our profession.

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Acknowledgements

Appendix

Message sent to COLLDV-L listserv on March 19, 2014:

"Hi, all:

I'm working on a talk for the Tennessee Library Association next month. My topic is deciding on a format for monograph acquisitions, and I'm hoping to incorporate information about practices at other libraries.

If you have a few moments, would you mind replying to the questions below? I'll share a summary if you're interested.

(NOTE: for all questions, please assume that your funds are limited to acquiring a title in only one format; and please assume you are purchasing individual e-book monographs, not packages)

1. Are there firm guidelines for choosing to acquire a title in e-book instead of print? (e.g., we always buy engineering books in e-book format)
2. Are there firm guidelines for choosing to acquire a title in print instead of e-book? (e.g., we always buy novels in print)
3. In the absence of firm guidelines, what criteria do you use to decide on a format?
4. If there is a price difference between e-book and print, how does that affect your decision?
5. If you choose e-book, how do you decide how many simultaneous users to license?

Many thanks for your thoughts!"

Twenty responses were received.

Steve Knowlton, Collection Development Librarian at University of Memphis, can be reached at steven.knowlton@memphis.edu

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