Introduction

Abstract

Chapter 1 of Library Technology Reports *(vol. 49, no. 3) "E-book Platforms for Libraries" provides an explanation of the different types of for-fee platforms that have emerged in the e-book market in recent years, including those produced by publishers, aggregators, and distributors, and also by various technology companies with little or no background in the book business prior to the e-revolution. This chapter also touches on the unique needs of librarians purchasing e-books in public, academic, and K–12 settings.*

Librarians are inundated with the choices available to them when selecting e-book platforms for their institutions. Some platforms serve primarily as tools for lending e-books to patrons; others serve as research tools for students and faculty. Some are available directly from publishers who curate the content; others come from aggregators and distributors who amass content from disparate sources. Some provide broad coverage of subjects and are suitable for all libraries; others have scholarly undertones, target niche markets with subject-specific content, and may be of interest only to certain types of institutions.

Not only do librarians and information professionals need to keep up with the proliferation of e-book platforms, they need to keep up with how those they already have access to are evolving. As library vendors continue to experiment with business models, consolidate content, and merge with competitors, librarians need help figuring out how to sort through the myriad options and choose what to purchase based on the needs of the institutions they serve. Many things come into play, with pricing and access options and quality of content at the top of the list of factors to consider.

This report provides an overview of the various types of e-book platforms available to academic, research, public, and K–12 libraries in the United States (and beyond), with a special focus on the products that house electronic versions of books also available in print (thus preserving the original "container" in a digital environment). Platforms covered include e-book–lending services like OverDrive and 3M on the public library side and Brain Hive on the K–12 side; major aggregator platforms like e-books on EBSCOhost and ProQuest's ebrary; research platforms providing reference content only, including Literati by Credo and the Gale Virtual Reference Library; single-publisher–populated e-platforms like SAGE Knowledge and De Gruyter Online; and the platforms housing monographic content by university presses, such as University Press Scholarship Online.

The report does not include journal platforms or the electronic resources known in the library world as databases, unless e-books are their integral component and are available alongside other types of content, such as journals. Good examples of platforms that provide e-books alongside journals include JSTOR and Project MUSE, as well as established STM platforms like SpringerLink and Elsevier's ScienceDirect. The report also does not include e-book platforms available for individual use unless they are also available to libraries. Examples of platforms with consumer as well as institutional pricing options include Cengage Learning's Questia and Scholastic's Storia.

The focus of the report is on the e-book platforms sold to libraries by the vendors with an established presence in the library market, including publishers, aggregators, book distributors, wholesalers, and technology companies. As their products show, they have chosen different strategies to sell e-book content, but their basic goals are similar: to help libraries deliver e-books via business models that meet the needs of library patrons as well as those of the companies that produce the e-books. The aim here is to elucidate the details of each of those business models and to give librarians a summary of the e-book landscape. Librarians may use this report as a starting point in their hunt for e-books or to familiarize themselves with the array of options available to them. The report may also be useful to new-to-the-profession librarians or LIS students needing a crash course on the intricacies of e-book purchasing.

Open-access e-book platforms are excluded from this report, as they warrant a separate discussion and their unique purpose and business model make it difficult to compare them with the platforms sold to libraries via elaborate purchasing plans. These include sites like Unglue.it, DOAB (Directory of Open Access Books), OAPEN (Open Access Publishing in European Networks), and SciELO Books (Scientific Electronic Library Online), to name a few. Likewise, public-domain e-book platforms that provide free access to the content in public domain, such as Internet Archive, Project Gutenberg, HathiTrust, World Public Library, Big Universe, and Children's Books Online, are also excluded as they serve an entirely different purpose. However, libraries with limited e-book budgets will find great value in them and are encouraged to explore all alternatives to for-fee platforms in their efforts to bring e-books to their patrons.

Note: While this report covers the majority of the e-book platforms used in academic, public, and school libraries in the United States, it does not claim to include every e-book platform available to such libraries. A product may have been overlooked for one of two reasons: the author wasn't aware of its existence at the time this report was compiled, or the companies contacted did not inform the author of all available offerings. Since e-book platforms continue to evolve at a rapid pace, librarians are advised to continually monitor the progress of products of interest, as information about their scope and functionalities changes on a quarterly, monthly, and even weekly basis, as well as to keep pace with the new platforms entering the e-book market each year.

Marketplace Basics

Companies that sell e-book content to libraries start out with the same objective—to deliver books digitally to library patrons—but along the way they take different paths to get there. Their varied business models often reflect the corporate structure of each company as well as the technological advances and the changing research needs or reading habits of the users. In the case of e-book lending services like OverDrive or Follett, the end user is usually a public or school library patron looking to check out the latest best seller and download it onto his or her reading device. In the case of research platforms like SAGE Knowledge, it is an undergraduate or graduate student perusing a subject-specific reference source on the library computer.

Technology continues to do its part in transforming the ways in which readers absorb e-book content, both for entertainment and for scholarly inquiry, with one key factor driving the rise in popularity of e-books: the staggering proliferation of hand-held devices in recent years. Because e-book content is now more portable than before and the devices needed to make it portable are more affordable, libraries are in a better position to lend e-books or make their content available for research purposes.

There is no shortage of e-book platforms to choose from, whatever the library's needs. And while the plethora of options may be welcome by some, others see it as an obstacle contributing to confusion and product fatigue for both librarians purchasing platforms and patrons using them to gain access to e-books. Still, there is a flip side to platform fatigue: librarians may gain more value in the long run, and having choices may alleviate some of the anxiety of being stuck in an undesirable situation with only one vendor. Whatever their opinions on this issue, librarians will often find themselves comparing apples and oranges when choosing among e-book platforms, but they will also quickly discover that they can always find what they are looking for if they take the time to get to know the market.

Purchasing of e-books usually starts with the consideration of the source of the content. Librarians may choose to purchase directly from the original curator (i.e., publisher), one of many aggregators (whose platforms offer content from multiple publishers), or distributors (companies that sell e-books from everyone in the information chain, both publishers and aggregators). As library vendors continue to experiment with business models and take advantage of the technologies available to them, it has become more challenging to define the roles of distributors versus aggregators—even wholesalers—as many have dramatically expanded their roles in recent years. Some aggregators, for example, have taken on the roles of both distributors and publishers, while some publishers have opted to distribute their own e-book content in addition to making it widely available via other platforms. In a print environment, it was easier to define the roles of library vendors. In the e-book market, however, the lines have started to blur, making it necessary for librarians to pay close attention to where the content is coming from to avoid both confusion and content overlap.

Publisher E-book Platforms

Libraries acquiring trade titles don't have the option to purchase e-books directly from publishers like Random House, since those books are usually available through e-book lending services, such as, for example, OverDrive and 3M. On the academic side, quite a few publishers have pursued their own e-book initiatives, releasing platforms that house e-versions of their own titles. Publishers like Oxford University Press, SAGE, and Springer, for example, have made great strides in improving functionalities of their platforms and discoverability of their content. As a result, their products often feature tools just as sophisticated as those by major aggregators.

Since science and technology content ages more rapidly than other types of content—owing to time-sensitive advancements in the STM field—STM publishers faced the e-book challenge long before others and have positioned themselves as leaders on the e-book front. On the K–12 side, the industry has, in recent years, seen the proliferation of platforms featuring interactive e-books, such as those by Scholastic and Rosen Publishing, as well as web-based e-book platforms, such as epointbooks.com, which hosts the titles of several imprints, including Rosen Publishing, Gareth Stevens Publishing, Britannica Educational Publishing, and Windmill Books.

There are many advantages for libraries wanting to buy directly from publishers, including the elimination of middlemen in the process, which saves libraries time and money, and the ability to search across content formats without significant restrictions. (Many publisher platforms fully integrate e-book chapters with journal articles, making it easy for students to peruse e-books and journals on the same topic simultaneously.) Librarians opting for publisher platforms often discover that publishers are more open to negotiations than large aggregators and will work with librarians to accommodate their unique needs.

Publisher platforms also feature a more “organic” look and are equipped with publisher-nurtured enhancements, including maintenance by on-site editors and other staff members familiar with the content. Their platforms may also contain content not available in an aggregator version of their books, particularly multimedia enhancements. On the flip side, working with multiple publishers simultaneously means signing multiple agreements, which requires juggling and business acumen. Plus, there is more to keep up with, as librarians (and patrons) need to get trained each time a new publisher platform is implemented.

Aggregator E-book Platforms

Aggregators include companies that amass e-book content from multiple publishers and sell it to libraries via a range of buying plans. They tend to be more established in academic libraries, since much of their e-book content is intended for use by students, faculty, and scholars. However, many aggregators are releasing public library and K–12 versions of their legacy platforms, and their presence in schools and public libraries is expected to grow. E-books on aggregator platforms are fully searchable and cross-searchable and may be acquired in several ways. Just about every major library aggregator offers its own unique business model. Librarians need to familiarize themselves with the peculiarities of each before deciding what works for their digital environments.

Since aggregators were the early players in the e-book market, their products are often ahead of the curve in terms of technical capabilities and purchasing options. Major aggregator platforms include e-books on EBSCOhost, ProQuest’s ebrary, and Ingram’s MyiLibrary. Others include EBL (by Ebooks Corporation Limited; acquired by ProQuest in January 2013), Safari Books Online, Books24x7, Knovel, and, for reference e-books, the Gale Virtual Reference Library and Literati by Credo. When buying from aggregators, librarians are dealing with one versus many license agreements, and the ordering is easier since aggregators are fully integrated into distribution systems. Another advantage is that aggregators provide many more titles in one place and are often marketed to libraries as “solution” platforms with a host of embedded discovery services and features that extend beyond providing access to the content, including interactive learning tools and lesson plans.

Since aggregator platforms are publisher-neutral, they are likely to give as much exposure to best-selling titles as to those published by small presses. On the other hand, not all titles from every publisher are available, and many are not available in e-book format as soon as they are published in print (owing to embargo periods set by publishers in advance). Lastly, although they provide access to large quantities of content, aggregator platforms usually come with a high price tag, often impose minimum purchase requirements, and don’t allow much room for negotiation since e-book prices, like embargo periods, are mandated by publishers.

Distributors and E-book Lending Services

It has become difficult to set distributors apart from aggregators, as both engage in similar e-book practices and the explosion of new technologies has paved the way for significant expansion of distributor and aggregator roles in the library market. Distributors usually distribute e-books to libraries in an à la carte fashion, include large quantities of popular titles heavily circulated in public libraries, and generally do not make the e-books on their platforms cross-searchable. Distributors’ main mission is to circulate e-books on a title-by-title basis rather than to “integrate” them or use them to develop “offspring” collections.

For the purposes of this report, distributors include both wholesalers migrating to the e-model, such as, for example, Baker & Taylor, as well as lending e-book services like OverDrive and Follett, which have dominated e-book distribution in public and school libraries for a number of years. Although wholesalers and e-book lending services may not appear to have much in common, both types of companies generally operate on a one book/one user business model. This means that an item can be checked out for an established period of time by one user. In addition, their titles are coded with DRM (digital rights management) to limit access after the due date.

When e-books started to gain momentum in libraries, print wholesalers were not equipped to handle digital transactions as their systems were based on the traditional print model. But owing to new technologies, they are able to transform their practices and develop digital media platforms of their own. Baker & Taylor's Axis 360 platform makes it possible for libraries to acquire all content in one place. This is especially beneficial for libraries already using Baker & Taylor for their print collections. Purchasing e-books through wholesalers allows for a great deal of flexibility, too. Librarians may purchase single or multiple e-books from many different publishers and aggregators, and they can negotiate their licenses directly with the wholesaler (e.g., Yankee Book Peddler offers e-books from ebrary, EBL, and EBSCOhost). However, e-book prices and licensing terms are set by the publishers, not wholesalers.

University Press Consortium E-book Platforms

When e-books started to gain acceptance across academia, university presses realized that their monograph content needed to be digitized quickly but didn't have the means or the resources to implement new workflows required to digitize their backlists. Instead, they turned to the more established players in the business to make their content available in e-book format. This has given rise to four digitization initiatives supporting the academic market: Oxford University Press's University Press Scholarship Online (UPSO); Cambridge University Press's University Publishing Online (UPO); University Press Content Consortium's (UPCC) Book Collections on Project MUSE; and Books at JSTOR.

Oxford's UPSO and Cambridge's UPO launched in Fall 2011, representing the efforts of two leading university presses using their existing platforms as the foundation to digitize their own backlists as well as those of partner presses. UPSO is a collaboration between Oxford and several other university presses (including Fordham and University of Florida) to aggregate monograph content into a single, cross-searchable platform. UPO is also hosted by a university press with a long history of scholarly publishing, but it casts the net wider. The result of a joint venture between Cambridge University Press and partner publishers (including Liverpool University and Mathematical Association of America), UPO integrates scholarly books with journal articles on a single platform.

The Project MUSE and JSTOR models represent the initiatives of well-known aggregators in the library community that saw an opportunity to build a bridge between librarians and university partners at a time when their means to digitize their own content were limited. While hoping to emulate the successes they've had with journals, both Project MUSE and JSTOR are marrying scholarly books to journals and incorporating other types of content into their growing platforms.

E-book Platforms in Academic and Research Libraries

Academic libraries have for the most part mastered the shift from print to digital on the journal front. E-books are perceived as the next digital frontier. E-book concerns in academic libraries extend beyond circulation issues and involve questions about how e-book platforms support the research needs of students and faculty. Academic vendors are therefore expected to provide the tools and services that help students and faculty deepen and simplify their research at the same time. This has led to the merging of e-book and journal content in a number of platforms.

Whether via advisory boards or through feedback provided to their vendor representatives, academic librarians have had a lot to do with why more e-book platforms now feature journal content as an integral part. In fact, merging e-books and journals is seen as the next big movement in academic library collection development and simply the nature of the beast spawned by technology—one especially welcomed by librarians focusing on information literacy instruction. Many have argued that by not having to explore different vehicles for each kind of information source, instructors can focus on teaching better strategies for using the information itself.

E-book Platforms in Public Libraries

Main e-book controversies in public libraries continue to revolve around e-book lending policies as many trade publishers maintain their imposed restrictions on e-book circulation (e.g., HarperCollins has an imposed limit of 26 checkouts on their e-books, while Random House continues to raise e-book prices, in some cases by 300 percent) and several others (e.g., Hachette) remain uneasy about making their e-books available for library lending. As of early 2013, complications surrounding e-book lending in public libraries showed no signs of slowing down, but progress has been made with some publishers previously hesitant to sell e-books to libraries. In late 2012, Penguin embarked on a new e-book pilot program with the New York and Brooklyn Public Libraries to allow patrons of the two systems to check out Penguin titles six months after publication via 3M Cloud Library, which already partners with Penguin's sister company Random House.

Public libraries have several e-book lending services to choose from, both for adult and K–12 content, with OverDrive usually the first platform most public librarians turn to when deciding on adding e-books to their library's offerings. OverDrive remains the only platform currently offering books on Kindle (owing to OverDrive's partnership with Amazon) and no other platform for public libraries has as many "big publisher" titles. However, OverDrive's domination started to be challenged in late 2011 when 3M entered the e-book market as a direct competitor. 3M is a cloud-based e-book lending system that lets patrons read and check out titles at home, on the go, or via discovery terminals (or kiosks) located inside the library.

A number of public libraries have started experimenting with purchasing books directly from publishers as opposed to committing to a single e-book lending platform. A good example is Douglas County Libraries (CO) model, which has received a lot of attention from the library community and significant interest from publishers. The library hosts its own e-book content on an Adobe Content Server (ACS) and is able to purchase directly from hundreds of publishers at a discount. Patrons are able to borrow thousands of e-books from the collection, while the library claims the ownership of the titles after purchasing them (the way they used to do with print books). This "buy, own, distribute as you'd like" model created by Douglas County Libraries has been picked up by hundreds of libraries across the United States and promises to gain an even larger following in the future.

E-book Platforms in K–12 and School Libraries

Like academic librarians, school and K–12 librarians look for ways to tie digital content to information literacy as more emphasis is placed on educating children at a young age about the types of learning resources available to them. Educators are drawn to "enhanced" e-books that provide embedded tools allowing students to enrich the reading experience by creating storyboards and blogs, writing book reviews and e-mails, and even building wiki pages and websites. Several well-known K–12 publishers have already successfully launched a series of interactive e-books designed to meet the needs of AASL (American Association of School Librarians) standards as well as to support transliteracy skills among K–12 students. These books engage students (at various reading stages) by encouraging them to create their own content within the books. They also engage parents and educators with embedded lesson plans, suggested classroom activities, quizzes, and more.

K–12 librarians expect e-book platforms to include embedded tools that help educators do their job better. They are also on the lookout for platforms fully aligned with the Common Core, a nationwide initiative that calls for a deeper understanding of the context behind each text a student encounters, to be gained via discussions and close readings of primary sources (rather than traditional textbooks). When the Common Core first began to make waves in 2010, reference publishers in particular were quick to recognize the value of their content—especially in digital form—for educators implementing the new standards in their curriculums. This is why we have witnessed more releases (and re-releases) of e-book platforms strongly aligned with (and supporting) Common Core coming from major aggregators such as, for example, EBSCO, as well as publishers like Infobase, which offers a range of subject-specific e-book resources supporting the Common Core.

Major K–12 e-book aggregators include Follett and Mackin. Both platforms are designed to enhance students' research experience via a purchase-to-own acquisition model and both support use of multimedia to enhance learning in K–12 settings, but there are some notable differences. Mackin is a web-based portal that integrates all of its e-books and databases (from well over twenty publishers). The platform supports a number of classroom research activities but does not yet allow for books to be checked out individually. Follett, on the other hand, offers a larger number of selections of e-books, which can be checked out or downloaded for reading either on a web browser or a mobile device.