

Key Benefits of Free Reading Zones

Empowering Authors, Publishers, and Readers

Since launching the FREZ initiative in the summer of 2016, I have published countless articles¹ and given numerous presentations (at live conferences and via webinars) on the impact of FREZ on society and its various sectors, particularly the book and library industry—including publishers, authors, libraries, book distributors, and all who work with books and encourage or enable dissemination of knowledge in one form or another. I have usually discussed the benefits of FREZ in the context of three distinct branches of society: culture, education, and tourism.

If we think of the book industry as belonging under the umbrella of Culture and Cultural Affairs, we can discuss the benefits of FREZ in the context of promoting arts and creativity as well as enabling reading and influencing lifestyles (e.g., people embrace the idea of reading books on their mobile devices the same way they listen to music on the go). When creating conditions that allow for digital reading of books to become the fabric of life—the way it has already become with other types of content online, including, for example, news portals and blogs—we enable more reading to take place outside the usual and expected settings, and we allow more culture to flow. Reading is no longer tied to physical objects that are carried around, and it no longer needs to be tied only to specific locations (e.g., privacy of one's home, the library). Instead, it becomes an ongoing activity that occurs whenever and wherever users want to experience it. It is, therefore, more spontaneous and more in line with today's on-the-go lifestyles.

As we've learned from the industries that have undergone digital transformations before publishing



Figure 2.1
Image by No Shelf Required

(e.g., the news industry, the music industry), the fastest (and perhaps easiest) way to get people used to consuming content in new environments (in this case, digital) is by making the content freely and easily accessible through sponsorships (think of enjoying music on YouTube or reading quality news articles online for free). While *free* does mean readers don't pay for the reading, that does not translate to publishers and content creators not getting their fair share. It

simply means *someone* other than the reader is picking up the tab and doing it because that *someone* sees value in being part of a project that supports culture and sharing of human creativity.

A wide range of businesses and institutions support cultural endeavors of all kinds, usually orchestrated by various government entities (e.g., institutions that exist for the sole purpose of promoting literacy and education). But it is also not unusual for a bank or insurance company to sponsor a book festival or some gathering where people celebrate creativity in literature and arts. Major corporations have entire departments devoted to sponsorships of cultural events. It helps those corporations develop brands with a human face and garner sympathy, respect, and even new customers along the way. When presenting the FREZ project to potential sponsors, I emphasize what is a powerful distinction between supporting typical cultural events and supporting FREZ—the support of not only the creator (author) but also the one consuming the created (reader).

While FREZ benefits publishers, authors, and software companies because those whose work is exposed in the zones get paid through a merit-based business model, it ultimately—and above all—benefits the end user. By supporting a FREZ, the sponsor engages in an unprecedented type of sponsorship that not only helps a very small, isolated segment of the society belonging to cultural circles get the funding it needs to keep its operations running, but also helps the ultimate beneficiary, the reader, by exposing them to more culture, information, and educational content. And by helping the reader, the sponsor actually helps an entire industry because more books are discoverable in FREZ, more authors are promoted, and more opportunities are created for publishers to tap into new revenue streams.

Speaking of publishers, let us not forget that in today's digital age, traditional publishing houses are but one outlet through which authors can publish their work. In the past decade alone, there has been a proliferation of indie publishers and self-publishing services allowing more aspiring writers to get published than ever before in history. Some choose to publish their work in digital format only (the cheaper route), while others embrace a host of services available to them by companies specializing in helping independent authors publish and distribute their work. In fact, well more than half a million new titles published each year do not bear the imprint of an established publishing house. They are self-published. According to a Bowker report, more than 700,000 books were self-published in the United States in 2015.²

When the notion of self-publishing entered the picture, it was perceived by many as challenging, encouraging mediocrity, devaluing the integrity of the editorial process (the backbone of publishers' businesses),

devaluing the price of books (because self-published titles were sold for a fraction of the cost of professionally published titles), and calling into question the very notion of an author and who qualifies to be called an author. According to a 2002 *New York Times* article, 81 percent of Americans said in a survey they "had a book in them" that they wanted to publish.³

Although valid concerns exist about the quality of self-published titles, valid arguments also point to a significant number of high-quality titles produced independently. Traditional and independent publishing now coexist rather than trying to discredit one another, and both need to be given their fair share of exposure through FREZ. This, of course, does not mean that every book ever published can easily be uploaded into the system without authorization (filtering on some level still remains part of the process, and that's certainly been the case with FREZ; in fact, Total Boox's collection has always been curated by editorial staff, myself included, and we did not allow random content to enter it without prior approval or validation), but it does mean that independent publishers and authors are equally welcome to contribute.

When users enter the virtual library inside a FREZ, they are automatically exposed to a wide range of titles in a wide range of categories by a wide range of authors and publishers in a wide range of languages. Because books are always there, ready to be downloaded and read, the collection can be as comprehensive as possible. In fact, the more comprehensive the catalog, the greater the chance that more books will be discovered by more readers. Therefore, this virtual library does not discriminate when it comes to content types. The same readers who enter the library to read for leisure and get lost in books about sports and entertainment may also discover books relevant for their professional development or continuing education.

This virtual library also does not discriminate when it comes to publishers and authors. While various titles get highlighted on the main page (the homepage), and these highlights change frequently and are meant to encourage browsing and promote the breadth and depth of the collection, no special treatment is given to certain publishers, titles, or authors. As already explained, there are no additional marketing opportunities for publishers or authors to pay to get more exposure. Once readers enter the app, they are left alone to browse among thousands of titles in hundreds of categories as they see fit. One moment they may be perusing a highly sought-after title by a reputable New York-based publisher, and the next moment they may be perusing a self-published title by a Texas-based mystery fiction author.

This type of a setting ensures that a fair chance is given to authors whose titles have traditionally not benefited from the standard marketing and PR practices

of well-known publishers. It also ensures readers are given an opportunity to discover literature on their own terms without being influenced by outside forces. One of FREZ's core values is that it places trust in the reader's ability to navigate their way through the maze of reading possibilities in an open virtual library. It encourages them to go on spontaneous reading voyages where there are no middlemen pointing readers in one direction and not another to encourage sales of specific titles. The reader—and only the reader—gets to decide what content to consume and when.

This setting, I believe, empowers readers to become savvy consumers of literature who, over time, develop their own censoring mechanism and ability to distinguish among the options available to them. In addition, a strong message is sent to readers that their privacy is respected and never called into question. If they reach for a book to read at a bookstore or a physical library, they usually do not enjoy the benefits of full privacy. There is usually a counter they will need to walk to, where the physical objects in their hands will be seen by at least one person and logged into the system as a sale or a checkout. The word *free* in FREZ, therefore, has two equally powerful connotations. The first alludes to the reading being free of charge to the user; the second alludes to the reader experiencing true freedom of reading in an environment where a possible discomfort of the physical experience of having to deal with a clerk is eliminated.

Even if this person at the library (or the bookstore) is a complete stranger, and even if the library also protects the right to privacy (as it does), the patron may not feel completely at ease while at the counter. To experience the complete freedom of reading, readers need to be inside a virtual library, where no physical person awaits them at the counter. While reading in FREZ is measured (in aggregate) to determine how much to pay publishers, it is not kept track of in ways it is kept track of in libraries. The system never asks users to confirm their private information or asks them to show an ID. It simply identifies them as readers inside a location determined via GPS coordinates or Wi-Fi network.

Another noteworthy cultural benefit of FREZ is the mixing of literatures for the sake of promoting authors and titles outside their national or ethnic (and geographically limiting) settings. Since the collection of e-books grows constantly and is multilingual, a wide variety of books in languages other than English are also part of the offering. This means that a FREZ in the United States will expose books in French and German, while a FREZ in France and Germany will expose books in English. This also means that various ethnic communities across the United States will be exposed to books in their native tongue, which have always been supplied in limited quality through local libraries.

One of the main reasons the publishing industry trails behind other industries in terms of its ability to transform digitally has to do with the underlying fear of piracy and cannibalization of print sales once e-books *really* take off. Since the advent of e-books, many book publishers, particularly the Big Five (HarperCollins, Random Penguin, Simon & Schuster, MacMillan, and Hachette) have remained resistant to experimenting with business models other than one copy—one user, particularly in the library market (at the time of the writing of this report, HarperCollins had just announced a new partnership with hoopla digital,⁴ which will allow it to test a nontraditional model, and this certainly shows progress). This is why there has been much friction between those publishers and libraries in the past decade. Although publishing has made great strides with e-books, in terms of both their functionality and their affordability, the old notion that digital and print formats compete—that one somehow cancels out the other—persists.

I have argued (and still believe) that those claims have been exaggerated, taken out of context, and persist largely owing to a lack of understanding of the unique benefits of each format. Given that I came of age as a book professional in traditional print publishing, it wasn't until I migrated to the digital side that I began to understand the distinct benefits of each format afforded to readers, publishers, and libraries. Print and digital have, in fact, never really competed. If anything, they complement each other. One of the goals of FREZ is to create conditions for exposing e-books for free consumption while simultaneously creating conditions for marketing those same titles in print so that readers who discover them in electronic format may want to own them (or give them as gifts) as physical objects. Even if readers don't reach for a print version at any point after engaging with its digital counterpart in FREZ, content creators will be compensated for the reading as it unfolds, every step of the way.

In summary, these are the key cultural benefits of FREZ:

- New opportunities for publishers, big and small, to reinvent their businesses
- New opportunities for old or neglected literature to be discovered by new readers
- New opportunities for sponsors and libraries to help preserve cultural heritage
- Empowerment of independent authors and indie presses
- Empowerment of readers and an investment toward their literacy
- Encouragement of creativity beyond traditional cultural circles
- Opportunity for cultural entities (e.g., museums) to enhance their offerings

- Exposure to literature in other languages and from other cultures, encouraging a blending of cultural heritage

Equalizing Access to Knowledge and Education

The power of the e-book, as I see it, is precisely its ability to be available to anyone, anywhere, at the same time. More specifically, the power of the e-book (or digital text, in general) is to equalize access to information and knowledge in ways not possible in the physical world since the advent of the printing press. Our society has largely depended on government entities to provide us with the knowledge and education necessary to thrive as we transition into adulthood. But until the advent of the Internet and online technologies in the 1990s, you needed to live in the right zip code to have access to the world's most affluent libraries (this is still largely the case).

You need not look further than how various libraries have dealt with e-books to see that small budgets have prevented many libraries in the United States from implementing e-book programs. Meanwhile, the most affluent city library systems, such as, for example, New York Public Library (NYPL), continue to reinvent the digital wheel and engage in innovative projects most other libraries in the United States will not be able to for a long time. People living in thriving urban areas have had the privilege of getting free access to e-books via their local libraries for years.

In early June 2017, NYPL announced the release of Subway Library, a new initiative between NYPL, Brooklyn Public Library, Queens Library, the MTA, and Transit Wireless that provides subway riders in New York City with free access to hundreds of e-books, excerpts, and short stories.⁵ The libraries are using their own SimplyE reading app (rather than relying on third-party vendors to supply the platform). This is the perfect example of an innovative FREZ project in which libraries take center stage and act not only as sponsors (in cooperation with other companies, in this case Transit Wireless and the MTA) but also as technology providers and remain in charge of the business model that suits them and their needs.

The innovation we see take place with New York City libraries, however, is not the innovation we witness in the rest of the United States and most of the world, where access to quality literature in digital format remains marginal at best. In fact, most of the world's public libraries—from what my experience dealing with libraries outside the United States has taught me—do not provide access to e-books for the simple reason that they cannot afford it. Likewise, as the recent white paper by the Frankfurt Book Fair, *Business of Books 2017*, revealed, only six countries

continue to dominate the book, and consequently the e-book, business: the United States, the United Kingdom, China, France, Germany, and Japan.⁶

If the true potential of the e-book is to be available to anyone, anywhere, whose responsibility is it to unleash that potential? Clearly, libraries cannot do this alone, if for no other reason than for the simple fact that while they may all be created equal, they do not all have the same means. A library such as NYPL gets more donations and endowment money than hundreds, if not thousands, of libraries around the world combined (see, for example, the March 2017 *New York Times* article revealing a \$20 million gift given to NYPL by Merryl H. Tisch, the former chancellor of the New York State Board of Regents, and her husband, James S. Tisch, the president and chief executive of Lowes Corporation).⁷

The same argument may be applied to academic libraries. How does a library supporting research at Harvard or MIT measure up to a library supporting a small community college in a developing country? Should students not enrolled at Harvard or MIT have the right to the same information and research as students lucky enough to be attending Ivy League schools and other elite schools?

This issue has been at the heart of the open-access (OA) movement, which began on the journals side of publishing and has in recent years spread to e-books (known OA initiatives include Knowledge Unlatched and Unglue.It). Its basic premise is to make scholarly (and other) content available for free (usually in PDF) to users anywhere in the world by relying on support from participating libraries or other institutions to cover the cost of production in advance (so that publishers and authors are compensated for their work). The OA model faced some resistance in its early stages but is today embraced even by the largest scholarly publishers, which now have departments dedicated to producing OA journals and e-books.

Like OA, FREZ seeks to expose scholarly content free of charge to the user (who may read it but not redistribute it for personal gain), but there are key differences. FREZ does not serve as a publishing tool that guarantees some revenue to the author and publisher in advance, regardless of whether the publication gets read or not. FREZ pays publishers, regardless of the types of books they publish (including monographs, handbooks, and other scholarly materials), only if and when any part of the books has been read. These are books usually sold to bookstores and libraries at regular retail (or library) prices or sold online through channels like Amazon for about the same price as their print counterparts.

As already explained, FREZ does not discriminate between publishers, authors, or types of books. It gives every genre equal exposure and allows readers to find their way to the literature that interests them,

which may range from a romance novel and spirituality to travel and cooking and from professional literature to scientific handbooks. As more and more publishers develop OA programs, and more academic books become unlatched and unglued, the greater the impact on the communities with limited access to educational content. FREZ, on the other hand, seeks to democratize access to knowledge by making available all the books of any publisher willing to participate, now. If FREZ includes areas that are home to large numbers of students and academics, the benefits for the education sector are all the more visible.

Leveling the Playing Field

In April 2016, I was invited to speak about FREZ in Osijek, a city in the east of Croatia that, some twenty-five years after the war, still shows visible signs of devastation (bullet-ravaged buildings still populate even the main square). This “forgotten” city, as it’s often called, may still be in the process of rebuilding itself, but it’s a city that recognizes the value of free access to knowledge. Otherwise, its main educational institution, the University of Osijek (UO), wouldn’t have invited me to speak about FREZ. I spoke in an auditorium full mostly of students (but including some faculty) about the importance of free access to knowledge for university students like those at UO, where access to textbooks in print format is very limited and not anywhere near the standards of the universities in other cities in the country, especially in the capital of Zagreb.

I drew their attention to the main goal of FREZ: to level the playing field. To give cities like Osijek and its residents an equal chance at education and success in life. When a city like Osijek, for example, becomes an open virtual library, any person inside the city’s border (including but not limited to those attending UO) could access thousands of books in digital format via a free app regardless of their affiliation. The goal is to uplift rural areas and economically disadvantaged regions where libraries struggle to remain open and where bookstores have long gone out of business (as is the case in Osijek).

During the discussion that followed the presentation, I learned (from the students) that the university library does not provide textbooks in digital format. On average, there are two print textbooks (or required course readings) available for the entire class (usually averaging hundreds of students), and they often perform poorly on exams owing to the fact that they simply don’t get to the materials fast enough (the materials are passed around). This is not the case in the capital, of course, or the most developed parts of the country that have not been affected by the war. This is, however, an accurate portrayal of what higher

education looks like in many cities in Croatia, and in many countries in Europe and all over the world, even the most developed ones, including, of course, the United States.

As our industry continues to explore the possibilities with e-books and e-content, and the wealthiest urban libraries (public and academic) continue to expand their influence (and receive the most funding), let us not forget that the vast majority of libraries around the world are trailing behind. Despite the technological advances of the past two decades, our industry has a way to go before it fully taps into the potential of e-books to equalize access to knowledge in educational settings. FREZ is an attempt to get there in a way that gives credit and compensation where credit and compensation are due.

Aligning Missions with Non-book Industries

One of the most invigorating aspects of digital publishing has been its ability to partner with industries outside the world of books to develop new ways in which books and authors reach people. Nowhere is this more evident than perhaps with the tourism, hospitality, and travel industries, which stand to gain a great deal when making e-books part of their strategy for attracting and impressing guests and visitors. For the first time in history, hotels, resorts, restaurants, cafes, and airports, among other entities, are able to enhance their offerings by allowing guests or visitors to read e-books while on the premises. In other words, modern-day technology allows them to morph into open virtual libraries or become extensions of their local libraries.

Why didn’t we think of this sooner? Or why did it take us this long? After all, hotels and airline companies have been providing entertainment services to travelers for decades (e.g., free movies, music). The challenge with e-books, of course, has been the unwillingness on the part of major publishers to experiment with business models that expose their books (including bestsellers) in digital format for reasons already stated. To their credit, the Big Five, while still not making radical changes to how they want their new titles consumed digitally, are showing signs that they are at least willing to consider options other than the one copy—one user model, even if only with older or less popular titles. A good example is HarperCollins’s recent deal with hoopla digital to offer thousands of backlist titles via hoopla’s cost-per-circulation business model, which pays publishers per loan instead of paying fixed fees to acquire titles.⁸

As my experience with Total Boox has shown (one of my main responsibilities while working with the company was to bring new publishers on board and

make them comfortable with the new model), aside from the Big Five, many top-notch publishers are willing to work with alternative models. This allowed us to create a diverse and strong portfolio of tens of thousands of titles by brands known for being open to experimentation with e-books, including Workman (general nonfiction); Sourcebooks (genre fiction and general nonfiction); Berrett-Koehler (business books); Lonely Planet and Berlitz (travel); O'Reilly Media (IT and computer books); Open Road Media (best-sellers from the backlist by a variety of publishers); New World Library and Red Wheel Weiser (top-notch spirituality); Other Press (literary fiction); and Elsevier, De Gruyter, and Wolters Kluwer (academic and professional).

The willingness of these publishers to embrace the pay-as-you-read model has made it possible to attract sponsors for FREZ because it has shown commitment from major players in the industry. It also showed that the collection was populated with books that users in the zones were likely to download and read. The more reading occurs in FREZ, the greater the chance that potential sponsors will consider the project worth their while. And the larger the number of people using the free reading app, the greater the exposure for the sponsor. The strength of this list also made the model more attractive to libraries early on because they'd be able to offer their patrons access to quality literature by well-known brands for which there would be no restrictions.

The Library Connection

Where exactly does this leave libraries? If new technologies are enabling software companies to partner with publishers to develop digital collections, expose them for reading via a patented business model, and then also partner with companies outside publishing, such as hotel chains and airline companies, why would it even be necessary to get the local library involved in the process of implementing FREZ?

As already explained, libraries were at the heart of the project early on. FREZ was first envisioned as an extension of the service provided by public libraries, not its replacement. If libraries choose to participate, they may do so in several ways, depending on their goals, digital strategies, financial standing, and willingness to embrace cutting-edge initiatives supporting literacy and research beyond the confines of physical buildings. These are some possible scenarios:

- *As main sponsors*, in which case the library uses its own budget to turn an entity into a FREZ for the purposes of improving its image and encouraging readers in those zones to use the library for other reasons (e.g., print materials, workshops, etc.). In

other words, the zones may become places where libraries get to communicate directly with potential patrons and promote library services.

- *As co-partners*, in which case the library relies on the funding from a private sponsor (the other partner) to enable reading in the community. This is a good option for libraries with limited budgets and no resources to invest in their digital infrastructure. By reaching out to the businesses in their community, they may find the funding for this project the same way they get funding for other literacy-related endeavors. This is also a good option for sponsors looking to directly support libraries.
- *As main organizers*, in which case the library takes on the role of not only the sponsor but also the driving force behind the whole initiative, with local librarians actively participating in every aspect of implementing a FREZ, including possibly even the development of the library's own reading app (as is the case with the Subway Library initiative by New York City libraries). This is ideal for libraries with sizeable budgets able and willing to develop their own technology (and business models) to be used in the zones of their choice.

If a library chooses to orchestrate its own FREZ, the library then needs to develop its own reading app (which it will own and remain in control of) as well as build its own relationship with the publishing community (this part involves signing publishers, obtaining titles in digital format, renewing contracts, etc.). If a library chooses to rely on third parties but partially finance a FREZ, the library then needs to outsource and make sound decisions about what companies to engage with and use to provide stable technology, a strong and diverse book collection, reliable service, and the most bang for its buck.

The library will also need to develop a marketing and PR strategy—an important part of the process that ensures users are made aware of the existence of FREZ and the free reading app—and remain committed to building relationships with a wide range of companies and organizations in its community willing to take part. Libraries are no strangers to marketing and promotions, and it is crucial that they remain in constant contact with the local media (including newspapers and TV stations) to get the word out about the launch of a FREZ. They may also communicate with patrons directly via social media, as they already do when promoting author and other events taking place at the library.

While some libraries may have the staff and resources to pull off their own FREZ start to finish, most libraries in the United States and around the world do not. A more realistic and sensible approach for those libraries (especially the ones with little to no

experience with e-books and e-book reading apps) is to start small (for testing purposes) and implement a manageable FREZ (e.g., a nearby park, a local school, a hospital) for a short period of time in order to learn from experience and adjust expectations. They may, for example, turn a popular city park nearby turn into a FREZ supported by the library during National Library Week in April, with no-strings-attached access to books during that week.

When the idea to turn an entire country into a FREZ ambushed me (for the lack of a better word) in the summer of 2016, I knew we'd need a pilot first, a testing ground of sorts, because experience has shown time and again that when it comes to technology, things never run as smoothly as one expects before they launch. No matter how carefully you go over every technical detail, things will break where you least expect it and require attention when you least expect it. As I've learned from my IT colleagues over the years, every first launch is a soft launch. And if you don't encounter any problems after you launch a digital product or service, it means you didn't launch it soon enough. Therefore, libraries should treat every first attempt at a FREZ as a pilot and communicate it as a pilot both to the users and the companies involved.

Notes

1. See NSR's Free to Read column at www.noshelfrequired.com/category/free-to-read/.
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6. Mirela Roncevic, "Business of Books 2017: A New White Paper Gives Valuable Insight into the State of Publishing Worldwide and the Impact of Digital and Self-publishing," *No Shelf Required*, July 7, 2017, www.noshelfrequired.com/business-of-books-2017-a-new-white-paper-gives-valuable-insight-into-the-state-of-publishing-worldwide-and-the-impact-of-digital-and-self-publishing. See also "White Paper," Frankfurt Book Fair, accessed July 18, 2017, www.book-fair.com/en/whitepaper, where you can download Frankfurt Book Fair's exclusive white papers.
7. Kate Taylor, "As a Girl She Spent Time in the Library: Now She's Giving It \$20 Million," *New York Times*, March 10, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/nyregion/merryl-and-james-tisch-new-york-public-library-20-million.html?_r=1.
8. "hoopla digital Inks Expanded Content Agreement with HarperCollins Publishers," news release, hoopla digital, June 28, 2017, <http://hub.hoopladigital.com/whats-new/2017/6/hoopla-digital-inks-expanded-content-agreement-with-harpercollins-publishers>.