

## **Ebook Readers in Australian public libraries – are they REAL-e worth it?**

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***Abstract:***

*Hand-held ebook readers present many challenges for Australian libraries that want to integrate this emerging technology into their library's service. In 2001, both Toowoomba City Library and the Brisbane City Council Library Service embarked on such projects. This paper reports on the differing experience of these two public library services, outlining difficulties encountered, customer reactions to the technology, and the central issues that acquiring and circulating these readers pose for public libraries in Australia.*

# Background

An ebook is a book in electronic form. This paper uses the term ‘ebook reader’ to refer to hand-held devices. Ebooks may replicate print-books or use media such as audio, video and live hyperlinks. They are available online over the Internet, through email file attachments or direct via modem link. For an overview of the ebook industry, see <http://www.ebookmap.net/maps/web2001-04.html>

The profile of the ebook has been raised by:

- Publicity surrounding Stephen King’s (2000) work *Riding the Bullet*. Over 400,000 people downloaded the title. (Jackson 2000 )
- Improvements in reading technologies both handheld and onscreen.
- Much discussion of ebooks in professional and trade literature

## Why ebooks?

All the ingredients necessary to produce technological change exist with ebooks.

- Problems in book publishing and distribution mean an industry ready for change.
- A convergence of technologies exists namely digitisation of text together with new delivery possibilities via the Internet
- Development of handheld reading technologies including dedicated, multifformat devices with MP3 capability.

Ebooks are triggering major changes in information delivery as digital products and distribution channels force the ‘logic of the network economy’ on the book publishing industry suggests Hilleshund (2001).

The development of epublising and ebooks is impacting on the information economy. Lugg and Fischer (2001) quote the following figures (Table 1) indicating the relative value of epublising now and in the future.

**Table 1. Ebook publishing projections**

Print books in 2000	\$US32 billion globally
ebooks in 1999	\$US12 million -Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC)
ebooks in 2000	\$US367 million (PWC)
By 2005: Print on demand texts, ebooks	\$US5.4 billion of publishing market. (PWC)

Hand-held devices offer the following advantages for readers

- Portable, lightweight with ability to store several titles in each reader
- Backlit, changeable font size and orientation
- Searchable text, built-in dictionary, annotate and bookmark

# Australian public libraries and ebooks

Public libraries are looking beyond the limitations of print to source reading material. Books are costly to print, publish, warehouse and distribute. They can be lost, damaged, defaced and stolen. Storage of large quantities of books is expensive and preservation can be problematic. Books in print form impart only linear or one-dimensional information. They are not interactive and unlike electronic publications, do not permit hypertext. Success in searching and retrieving information from books is generally only as good as the indexing. (Hawkins 2000, p.15)

Digitisation means 24 x 7 remote access is possible; anywhere, anytime. Public libraries want to offer users equitable access to expensive ebook technologies that would be otherwise out of reach. Australian libraries as early adopters, have embraced ebooks using both online and hand-held technologies. At the time of writing, Maroochy, Toowoomba and Brisbane City Councils are three Queensland library services circulating ebook readers.

Toowoomba City Library and the Brisbane City Council Library Service are keen to share their experience and knowledge gained in an Australian context with the broader library community

## Issues for Public Libraries

Despite the advantages offered by dedicated ebook readers, significant barriers exist to their seamless introduction into Australian public libraries.

### Content

Apart from a plethora of ebooks available via the Internet of varying literary merit, lack of quality content is a disappointing feature of current ebook publishing. Large publishers, obviously afraid of a Napster-like heist of their product, have been reluctant to sell rights to producers of proprietary devices or online readers. (Boulton 2001)

As encryption technology improves, so will the availability of bestsellers and quality texts. While many thousands of public domain titles exist in digitised form through the efforts of Project Gutenberg (2001) public library customers want bestsellers.

Large US publishing houses are digitising their backlist and releasing ebook versions through online booksellers such as Powells.com but Greg Bain (2001) marketing manager of University of Queensland Press (2001) says UQP could raise no interest in their product from North American outlets. "Australia, where's that?" was the comment from one.

### Standards

Despite the efforts of the Open eBook Forum (2001) to promote a common standard for ebooks, a multiplicity of standards exists. The tech giants are jostling for market share similar to the old VHS versus Beta shakeout (Trundle 2001, p. 14). It seems unlikely this dilemma will be resolved anytime soon.

Each device or software has its own proprietary standard, incompatible with the other. Public libraries wishing to embark on this method of information delivery have to choose a reader. The choice made then dictates the content available although titles are increasingly being offered in a range of standards.

## **Encryption**

Encryption levels demanded by publishers makes management of ebooks, especially handheld ebook readers, difficult for libraries. Each device must be registered with the manufacturer. Titles acquired belong to that unique registered device only and cannot be shared between readers. However, in the event of loss or theft of a reader, Gemstar Corporation permits registration of titles to another device acquired by the original owner.

Producers of handheld or onscreen readers can potentially force migration to updated software or devices by raising encryption levels or requirements for operating systems.

## **Cost and payment**

Users want greater flexibility in the way information is distributed to them but access to ebook reader technology currently depends on money – and lots of it. Many public libraries circulating ebook readers have done so by obtaining grant money. Readers circulated by Toowong and Chermside Libraries in Brisbane have a replacement value of \$A1,000.00. Bestseller ebooks are as expensive as their print equivalent.

Ebook reader management depends on sufficient connectivity and up-to-date operating systems. Acquisition of titles for ebook readers requires the use of a credit card; an impossibility for most public libraries

## **Copyright**

In the digital world, technology combines with new legal frameworks to operate under contracts and license agreements rather than traditional copyright law. (Lynch 2001)

The implications are profound. In a print environment, books may be copied (within the bounds of fair use), borrowed on inter-library loan, lent to others and even resold. These rights are compromised in the digital world. Downloading a library's ebook titles to a patron's own device is impossible. Reading to one's self is only *one* of the rights compromised in this new paradigm of information delivery.

## **Operational Issues**

Important operational issues face public libraries considering the circulation of ebook readers. These include:

- time required to administrate and co-ordinate the project
- demands of staff and customer training
- limited technical support for customers outside the United States
- ‘promise’ of the readers versus the ‘reality’ – e.g. capacity to store sufficient content without purchase of extra memory; possibility of loading personal HTML files
- circulation of products designed for individual not library use.

## **Experiences of Libraries**

### **Toowoomba’s Experience: Sue Hutley, Electronic Services Librarian, Toowoomba City Library (TCL).**

In September 2000, the author won an international competition sponsored by ebooknet.com and received ten Rocket eBooks. Distributed to ten public library services in South-East Queensland in November 2000, these became some of the first readers circulated in Australia.

Subsequently, TCL obtained a grant from the Library Board of Queensland to extend their ebook lending. The “Libraries, ebooks and the future” Project began in April 2001.

The Project faced several difficulties:

- sourcing the hand-held readers with no Australian supplier in existence at that stage
- obtaining titles for the readers without the credit card necessary for conducting online purchases
- downloading titles, a procedure requiring Windows 2000 operating system, which is unavailable within Council.

These factors meant that TCL sought the support of Brisbane company, Peter Pal Library Supplies, which undertook these services for the library.

The devices arrived several days before launch date on 17 May 2001. All that remained was the loading of recently acquired bestsellers. Unfortunately, the titles had a newly increased encryption level, unsupported by the existing software on the readers. What should have been a simple task of downloading the new supporting software was impossible. The producer’s website was inaccessible to overseas customers. The launch went ahead as scheduled despite the technical problems during Library and Information Week in May 2001.

A reporter from the Age newspaper described the experience.

“In any other circumstance, the sorry array of technical failure, inept design, customer neglect, and myopic corporate greed that led to her less-than-perfect digital debut might have been comical. Unfortunately, it illustrates why you should be very careful about buying an e-book just yet.” (Wright 2001).

It was five months before some devices with bestsellers were available for loan. As at November 2001 the project is still not fully implemented.

Latest updates are available at:

<http://www.toowoomba.qld.gov.au/Visitors/Library/Ebookproject/index.html>

## **Brisbane's experience: Wendy Horwood, Librarian, Collection Team BCCLS.**

With the fortunate timing of their launch, Brisbane City Council Library Service (BCCLS) avoided the disappointments experienced by Toowoomba.

Brisbane City Council Library Service Manager, Christine Mackenzie, brought a Rocket ebook reader back to Brisbane from the States in June 2000. Foreseeing the potential for BCCLS customers, a decision was made to launch the devices at the opening of the new Toowong Library in March 2001.

The project aligned with the Brisbane City Council's 2010 vision for Brisbane as an 'e-enabled community'. The Library Service viewed the project as an opportunity to support the Council's strategy by actively embracing new technologies and introducing ebooks to BCCLS customers. The aim was to add ebook delivery to the existing portfolio of electronic services available online. The Collection Team, headed by Collection Coordinator Fiona Emberton, formed an ebook sub-team to implement the decision.

The following outcomes were optimistically envisaged.

- The immortal book that would never go out of print or be lost damaged or defaced.
- Multiple titles could be stored on one device.
- Bestsellers that could be downloaded in real time, any time.
- Stock management issues solved.
- Hopes for reduced costs.
- A solution to Australian distribution and publishing problems.
- Information available 24x7 servicing a wider range of customers.

There were obstacles to overcome. The most tested library model available was the Rocket ebook reader. After the team reached the decision to purchase this device, the producers were taken over and production ceased. The Team subsequently settled on the RCA REB 1100, the only model available in January 2000 that would meet library requirements. It soon became clear that the new model was very different from the Rocket ebook reader. The REB 1100 has a built in modem and tighter encryption levels. Software permitting the loading of personal HTML files was no longer available.

Obtaining twenty readers, downloading and purchasing of titles and the handling of encryption and technical support issues were managed by Peter Pal Library Suppliers, BCCLS' major supplier of library materials. The role Steven Pal in particular played in delivering the ebook readers ready for launching on Toowong's opening day was crucial to the success of the project.

Challenges included:

- preparing documentation
- structures to help manage risk with such a valuable item
- choosing content from a very limited range with mixed selection of genres purchased for each reader.
- creating catalogue records
- publicity to politicians, the media, staff and the public
- technical support issues
- staff training.

BCCLS relied on the experience of US libraries, recounted widely in the literature, (Burk 2000, Gibbons 2001) to guide the implementation.

### Customer Responses

It was the intention of the Collection Team to revisit the project at the end of three months to evaluate the project with particular emphasis on formally assessing customer reaction, primarily through the use of survey sheets distributed with the every loan. The true test of success would be customer feedback. (See Table 2.) Users at Toowong Library found the ebook reader experience generally positive and around forty completed the surveys.

**Table 2 Toowong Library - Customer survey results**

<b>Question 1.</b>	<b><i>Difficulties using the reader?</i></b>
Response	YES: 6%      NO: 94%
Customer comments	“Still learning ...” “ <i>Better in landscape than portrait mode..</i> ” “Larger fonts would be good ...”
<b>Question 2.</b>	<b><i>What’s good about reading with this technology?</i></b>
Customer comments	Reading at night with back light ... <i>Search for text, bookmark, dictionary ...</i> Portable, multiple books in one device ... <i>Lightweight, large font ...</i>

<b>Question 3.</b>	<b><i>What kind of material would you most likely read on an ebook?</i></b>
Response	Leisure: 25 'How to': 12 Reference: 14
Customer comments	"...Biography, travel, text books .." "More public domain books .." "I don't think atlases would work ..."

<b>Question 4.</b>	<b><i>What format do you prefer?</i></b>
Response %	Paper: 48.3 eBook: 37.9 Both: 13.8
Customer comments	" I love the smell of books ..." "The ebook is great in bed." "Depends on the content not the medium ..."

<b>Question 5.</b>	<b><i>Demographics</i></b>
Customer comments	Gender: <i>Male</i> 39.45% <i>Female</i> 60.6% Age: <b>18-25</b> <u>12%</u> <b>26-35</b> <u>6%</u> Age: <b>36-45</b> <u>12%</u> <b>46-55</b> <u>20%</u> Age: <b>56-65</b> <u>31%</u> <b>66+</b> <u>19%</u>

While many of these responses were unsurprising, the average age of Toowong users was informative, destroying the myth of 'technophobic' seniors.

At this time, Emberton was approached by Dean Mason of C-2-C Project (a team examining technology drivers in the book supply chain) with a view to conducting a focus group of patrons who had borrowed and read an ebook. Michael Coburn, Peter Burrows and Daria Loi from the C-2-C Project, Interactive Information Institute at RMIT University led the group. The detailed findings of this study are reported in *Print and electronic text convergence* (2001).

In general, there was a very positive response to the ebook reader project. Patrons enjoyed the ebook experience and felt privileged to have an opportunity to try such a new product. Most participants viewed ebooks as just another format rather than as a replacement for print. Dissatisfaction with the range of content available was an issue of frustration. Some patrons reported discomfort with the cumbersome checkout procedure.

Many ebook issues challenging staff and customers are factors over which libraries have no control. It was time to change what the library service could exercise control over. After staff

and customer consultation, the loan period was lengthened from two to four weeks. The documentation was revisited to streamline the loan process. While it remained a requirement for patrons to sign a loan agreement (considered necessary with such a valuable resource) a friendlier, less threatening tone was adopted to remove the 'fear factor'. More titles have been purchased. Ten of the ebook readers have been located at Chermside Library to broaden access.

## **Future perfect**

Major issues are yet to be resolved before ebook technologies match the dreams that libraries and users have for the product. Some improvements the authors would welcome include:

- adoption of open ebook standards to improve interoperability
- production of a device robust enough to meet corporate and individual requirements.
- satisfactory technical support
- realistically priced devices and content
- resolution of technological and content issues
- development of a library-friendly model including the ability for patrons to select what titles *they* want loaded onto the devices.

Chris Rippel (2001) is a systems analyst who works for Central Kansas Library System and maintains a list of dozens of libraries online that are offering ebook readers for loan. Rippel claims that libraries are 'one of the best marketing tools ebook manufacturers and publishers have' emphasising that those groups could do a lot more to help libraries 'proselytise' for the cause by developing an inexpensive reader for library use.

## **Conclusion**

Many difficulties are encountered managing products created by and designed primarily for the North American market and not with Australian libraries in mind. No satisfactory library model is yet established. As libraries reposition themselves to deal with new paradigms of information delivery, the challenge is how best to integrate existing ebook technology for the benefit of users.

Lynch (2001) claims that 'the future digital book will take us far beyond today's printed books and publishing industry, in many and different and sometimes unexpected directions.' Microsoft's ebook evangelist Dick Brass argues that print is a generational bias (Weeks 2000). The cyber-generation now expects hypertext and multimedia, which will change forever how society views books. The possibilities with immersive and interactive media - video, photographs, music and live links - are exciting.

While the authors are confident that ebooks and ebook readers will be an integral and exciting part of the future of reading, they note that this is a product in the early stages of development and expectations should be realistic. Despite the challenges of implementing and managing an evolving technology, those libraries able to make the commitment in time and money required will find ebook readers rewarding for staff and patrons. The authors are continuing this pioneering journey with positive anticipation

# APPENDIX A

## Useful sites for Australian libraries.

Technology in libraries – ebooks.

<http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/publib/infotech/ebook.htm>

Electronic Book Web – eBookWeb.

<http://12.108.175.91/ebookweb/>

Triconference 2000: Can ebooks improve libraries?

<http://skyways.lib.ks.us/central/ebooks/libraries.html>

Electronic books in libraries (University of Rochester, USA)

<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/main/ebooks/index.htm>

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Nov. 2001.

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