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Technology in Practice. Let's Not Borrow Trouble: E-book collection development requires new considerations

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Let's Not Borrow Trouble

E-book collection development requires new considerations

by Meredith Farkas

At my library, I'm in charge of collection development for our largest academic division. Sometimes I find the task daunting as I struggle to find a balance between buying things that will likely get used today and anticipating what might be needed in the future. The choices I make will influence the long-term health of our collection and I feel the weight of that—especially when I'm making decisions about e-books.

I've been getting more and more requests from faculty for specific works in e-book format. We've purchased several e-book collections, but the most recent requests have been for individual works. While I know some libraries are already moving toward entirely electronic reference collections, these requests give me pause because there are so many issues to consider in a market that is operating atop shifting sands. That doesn't mean we shouldn't act, but we should fully understand the issues before making any decisions.

With the growth of the e-book market, librarians involved in collection development not only need to be subject-matter experts, but they also need to be savvy about a variety of technological, legal, and business issues surrounding e-books. Here are just a few things librarians should consider when making decisions about e-books and collections:

■ How will patrons find the

book(s)? Some e-book vendors provide MARC records, while others force patrons to search their own system to find books. How will we make it easy for patrons to understand the variety of options in our physical and digital collections and different ways to access each?

■ What devices can a patron use to read the book(s)? I can order and read a book on my Kindle at the click of a button—not the case with e-books provided by libraries. Some can easily be read on mobile devices in PDF format or with an app, some require a complicated hack to get them to work, and others do not work on mobile devices or e-readers at all. Also, different e-readers read different formats; interoperability is almost nonexistent.

■ Is this accessible? Beyond the topic of interoperability, it's critically important that every library investigate whether its e-book offerings are ADA-compliant.

■ Will the vendor's digital rights management interfere with legitimate use? Patrons want to be able to download books and read them offline. They want to be able to print portions to take to class (or the beach). Some vendors make these things impossible in the name of protecting rights-holders, while others have managed to protect copyright and still allow patrons to use



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e-books however they wish.

■ What about ILL? Interlibrary loan is a critical part of the work of libraries and allows us to offer so

much more to patrons than we could provide on our own. What does ILL look like in the e-book world when currently only a very small number of e-book vendors allow for any sort of interlibrary loan?

■ How do you browse an e-book collection? No matter how good our library search engines become, browsing is still an important part of the discovery process, and this is not something that has been replicated well online. Many possibilities exist, but it's difficult to imagine an easily browsable collection of various e-book platforms and print works.

Over the past year, the e-book market has exploded and blissful ignorance about the impact of e-books on libraries is no longer an option for any librarian who makes collection decisions. We must keep up with the e-publishing world, the e-reader market, and our patrons' online reading habits to make the best possible decisions for our users and the health of our collections. ■

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