

what are they?

Definitions of an e-book are unstable and universal agreement does not exist—even for apparently comprehensive definitions of e-books.

In 2011, Armstrong and Lonsdale (p.xxv) defined an e-book as:

“any content that is recognizably ‘book-like’, regardless of size, origin or composition, but excluding serial publications, made available electronically for reference or reading on any device that includes a screen”.

In 2012, Blummer and Kenton argued that:

“the majority of e-books represent electronic revisions of print books ... [including] e-monographs, e-reference, and e-textbooks” (p.65).

Although Armstrong and Lonsdale excluded serial publications from their definition, other researchers have also noted similarities between e-books and serials. In 2009, for example, Armstrong, et al. considered the question “when did (E)-books become serials?” (p.129) and point out that e-books are often acquired “through the subscription of predefined collections” (p.130).

This subscription model means libraries may pay annually for access to e-content that is a one-time, permanent purchase in print format. These authors also identified other serial-like features of e-books including:

- the frequent existence of multiple e-book platforms within a library’s collection (p.134) and
- uncertainty about content stability and perpetual access to e-books (p.131)

As 2013 begins, at least two major e-textbook publishers are poised to stretch the definition of an e-textbook even further.

McGraw-Hill (with Area9) and Pearson (with Knewton) are about to launch e-textbooks featuring adaptive learning technology that responds to users as they interact with the educational product and thus creating a personalized e-textbook (Empson, 2013).

how do they work?

For print books, a “how do they work?” section would be inappropriate—the *YouTube* parody [Monk needs help opening a book](#) comes to mind. Readers of academic e-books, however, may have to figure out how to turn a page, make the font large enough to read, or download the book for offline reading.

Academic e-books are typically viewed on a vendor’s e-book platform but platforms vary in design so learning how to open and use one e-book does not mean you know how to operate the next title you encounter. For example,

- One vendor may offer a user-friendly screen with a table of contents, easy-to-open pdf files clearly visible for reading, downloading, or printing.
- Another may require users to register to download an e-book and take advantage of all its features.
- A user may have to install software to download and read the e-book offline because e-book formats must be compatible with e-reader devices.
- Keyword searching within an e-book or the entire vendor platform allows skip-through browsing and several vendors provide tools to annotate and/or highlight text.

Browne and Coe argue that the currently inadequate e-book navigation methods may improve with the implementation of the International Digital Publishing Forum’s EPUB standard (p.294), but for now the technology tends to disrupt e-book reading.

who’s involved with them?

Library staff, readers, publishers and vendors are all involved:

- publishers and vendors are working out how to present, package, and sell e-books;
- libraries are figuring out how to select, purchase and make accessible the e-books they believe library users want;
- and readers are testing e-books to see if they meet their research needs and reading preferences.

Within libraries, the e-books available in our catalogues and discovery services today have been delivered via complex workflows.

Acquisitions, cataloguing, and systems/IT staff are building e-workflows on a publishing landscape that is in flux.

why are they significant?

E-books extend the reach of a library’s collection and are particularly valuable for students enrolled in distance education and online courses.

The idea of multiple users reading the same book from any location 24/7 is appealing to many, but it is a development that is bringing the role of the library in the academy under scrutiny.

Whether the e-book will be adopted by all disciplines as a format suitable for sustained scholarly reading is still uncertain, but the test has certainly begun.

further reading

Armstrong, C., & Lonsdale, R. (2011). Introduction. In K. Price, & V. Haverгал (Eds.), *e-books in libraries: a practical guide*. London: Facet.

Armstrong, K., et al. (2009). When did (e) -books become serials? *The Serials Librarian*, 56, 129-138.

Blummer, B. & Kenton, J. (2012). Best practices for integrating e-books in academic libraries: A literature review from 2005 to the present. *Collection Management*, 37(2), 65-97.

Browne, G., & Coe, M. (2012). Ebook navigation: browse, search and index. *Australian Library Journal*, 61, 288-297.

Empson, R. (8 Jan 2013). *Techcrunch.com*.

Library Journal. (2012). *Ebook usage in U.S. academic libraries*. <http://www.thedigitalshift.com/research/ebook-usage-reports/academic/>

Rizvi, S.Z., Shafi, S.M., & Khan, N.A. (2012). Environmental concerns in the knowledge industry: literature review. *Library Review*, 61, 526-537.

Staley, D. J. (2012). *Futures thinking for academic librarians: Scenarios for the future of the book*. Chicago: ACRL. http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issue_s/value/scenarios2012.pdf

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Leslie Taylor and Brenda Reed
Queen's University

what are the challenges?

The problematic aspects of e-books cited frequently in the literature include:

- the imposition of Digital Rights Management (DRM) limits the amount of printing, copying, downloading, and sometimes viewing of e-books
- the environmental impact of e-readers, including their short life-span and a carbon footprint that can be as high as that of 50 books (Rizvi, p. 529)
- multiple platforms that cause confusion for patrons and staff
- more staff time required for the management of e-books than for print format
- subscription pricing models lead libraries to repeatedly pay for access
- licenses must be negotiated
- e-textbooks use access codes with expiry dates and cannot always be shared or purchased by libraries
- content (images, tables and equations) may be missing or not readable
- discovery of e-books in OPACS, discovery systems and library e-resource websites continues to require improvement
- e-book records in discovery services often have linking problems
- multiple simultaneous readers are not a given nor is it always clear how many readers may access a book at one time

where are they going?

Library Journal's survey *2012 E-book Usage in U.S. Academic Libraries* reports:

- in 2011/12 academic libraries spent an average of 9.6% of their total acquisitions budgets on e-books, up 2.1% from 2010/11 (p.6)
- "one of the top reasons that some academic institutions do not acquire e-books is lack of demand from patrons" (p.27)
- 56% of libraries buying e-books see a "slight increase" in demand in e-books (p.27).

The library literature of the past 10 years does not reveal entirely the reasons for recent increases in academic e-book acquisition. However, decisions regarding e-book collections seem, not surprisingly, to be closely tied to future directions for libraries as physical spaces and, as Staley notes, "the printed book has been the chief cognitive object of the library for centuries. Changes in user demand for books would therefore have dramatic implications for the library" (p.16). A careful approach to e-book acquisition is advised because academic readers still prefer print textbooks and books when reading cover-to-cover. While space and financial considerations impact collection building, providing efficient, timely access to readable content should ultimately be our goal.

what are the implications for libraries?

E-books play a role in extending academic library collections and services but raise a number of challenges. Librarians can address some challenges by lobbying e-book providers but others, such as changes to purchasing and processing workflows, require libraries to adopt best practices for e-book acquisition and management. In addition, while e-book usage is increasing, many library users may be unaware that their library offers e-books; librarians could develop new promotion strategies to help readers find the e-books they need.

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