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Article information:

To cite this document:

Erin E. Kerby Kelli Trei , (2015),"Minding the Gap: eBook package purchasing", Collection Building, Vol. 34 Iss 4 pp. 113 - 118

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/CB-06-2015-0008>

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Minding the Gap: eBook package purchasing

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to highlight practical considerations to be made when choosing an eBook package for an institution. Many academic libraries purchase eBooks bundled in packages, either as a time- or cost-saving measure or to build a new subject collection.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors searched the Web sites of six major publishers for information on eBook packages, including subject coverage, digital rights management restrictions and usage allowances. The analysis also includes a potential overlap between related subject collections and the ability to purchase titles individually.

Findings – Usage allowances, digital rights management restrictions and purchasing options vary considerably from publisher to publisher. There was title overlap between related subject packages found in some publishers. In response to user preferences and needs, many publishers are loosening restrictions on their eBook content, which make purchasing packages a more attractive option for libraries.

Originality/value – The landscape of eBook publishing is rapidly changing, which can complicate purchasing decisions. The detailed comparison provided by this study can be used to assist collections developers in making purchasing decisions best suited to their library and avoiding pitfalls such as duplicate purchases.

Keywords Acquisitions, eBooks, Package deals

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

While title-by-title purchasing is attractive to many libraries due to the control it offers, eBook package deals from publishers offer discounted pricing and often save time for the selector. Many articles have explored the complicated landscape of eBook publishing, including issues with both purchasing and usability. This study examines eBook offerings from six major publishers and reveals specific digital rights management (DRM) standards, usage allowances and title-by-title purchasing availability. Additionally, the study evaluates the likelihood of overlap of titles within related subject collections. Lastly, the findings are used to establish guidelines for purchasing eBook packages, which can be used to assist collection managers in making informed decisions.

Literature review

Usage

The literature has touched upon many issues facing collection developers when it comes to supplying eBooks to their patrons, but the focus has been less on patron demand for eBooks and more on access issues. This is likely because comparing circulation statistics of electronic and print books is tricky depending on how “usage” is defined. For example, does a single use constitute reading an entire book or only a single chapter? Furthermore, whereas some eBook platforms allow multiple patrons to view an eBook at the same time, a

print book may only ever be checked out to one patron at a time. Though the demand for eBooks appears to be growing, the evidence that patrons prefer them is inconclusive.

Marshall (2014) discovered that veterinary medicine researchers preferred the electronic format when both options were available due to speed and accessibility. Frame (2014) found that use of eBooks was higher for health sciences patrons compared to other disciplines. Rose-Wiles (2013) found that eBooks and print books in the sciences “circulated” at about the same rate, defining circulation as ten pages viewed. Although these studies indicate a slight preference for the electronic format, a number of studies indicate a preference for print. One study of undergraduate students at Southwest Baptist University found that students preferred print when both versions of a title were available (Walton, 2014). Additionally, 61 per cent of faculty and graduate students at the University of Kansas stated a preference for print books in a survey conducted in 2012 (Waters *et al.*, 2014), while Lamothe (2013a, 2013b) found a much greater preference for electronic books by doctoral and masters students than faculty and undergraduates. Notwithstanding the difficulty in comparing usage of electronic and print books, some patrons clearly prefer eBooks. At the least, eBooks are used comparably to print materials in some settings.

Usability

The preference for print by some users may be related to usability, awareness and variations in platform. A study of undergraduates found that the preference for print was primarily due to better retention of the information, as well as the ability to take notes and highlight text (Mizrachi and Bates, 2013). Wilson *et al.* (2014) found that 65 per cent of

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Collection Building
34/4 (2015) 113–118
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited [ISSN 0160-4953]
[DOI 10.1108/CB-06-2015-0008]

Received 5 June 2015

Revised 10 July 2015

Accepted 11 July 2015

medical researchers in their study anticipate using a mix of print and e-resources although eBooks were favored due to the ability to search the full-text. A survey of faculty, staff and students at the University of Northern Iowa indicated full-text searching, and immediate access was attractive, especially for textbooks or when working on research projects (Rod-Welch *et al.*, 2013).

A lack of awareness by patrons and outreach on the part of librarians seems to affect usage as well. In a study conducted at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, Shelburne (2009) found that a little over half of survey respondents were aware that the library offers eBooks. In fact, the majority of respondents who had not used eBooks were those who were not aware of their existence. The study also indicated that users were not always aware whether they were accessing eBooks as opposed to journal articles. A study in 2012 continued this trend, showing that users who might be aware of the existence of eBooks remain unaware of their functionality (Cassidy *et al.*, 2012). The Waters *et al.*, 2014 study also identified the problems of the perceived lack of relevant eBooks and an unawareness of what eBooks were actually available.

DRM standards and access restrictions were mentioned frequently in the literature as a barrier to usage. Simon (2014) mentions DRM restrictions as a problem in general when purchasing e-content. The users in the Cassidy (2012) study indicated a preference for eBooks that could be downloaded as PDF's, which would suggest that DRM-free content is preferred. Vasileiou *et al.* (2012) found that perpetual access was the most preferred model. Lamothe (2013a, 2013b) found that, although individual titles typically were accessed more often than bundled titles, Springer was an exception. This is likely due to the combined e-resource content on the Springer platform, and the ease with which one can download entire books and articles without DRM restrictions.

Yet another barrier to eBook use is the variability in publisher platforms, which creates an inconsistent experience and subsequent confusion for users. A study by Vasileiou *et al.* (2012) also noted the frustration users have with the differences between models used by various publishers and the desire that they were more similar. In her 2014 study, Frame (2014) acknowledges that the platform had a significant effect on usage, although whether this is from ease of use or familiarity with the platform is unclear. A recent study at San Jose State University focused on usability of 16 aggregators and publisher eBook platforms by persons with disabilities (Mune and Ann, 2015). The study found browser compatibility to be pretty uniform except for Safari, which required additional clicks to get to content. However, the authors noted that PDF files were less likely to allow for note taking. They also noted that publisher-based platforms were more likely to offer flexibility and features than content aggregators. Although aggregators may attempt to solve the difference in platforms by providing a single access point for content from multiple publishers, there are multiple aggregators as well, each with its own platform.

Hodges *et al.* (2010) maintain that if certain issues were resolved – especially lack of uniformity between publishers in regards to DRM restrictions, accessibility and publishing practices – libraries would be more likely to acquire eBooks.

As the authors explore in this paper, the extent to which eBook publishers are explicitly addressing concerns about DRM and access issues varies. Although the problem of awareness and outreach needs to be addressed on a grand scale, this research can shed some light on the variance between publisher platforms and encourage conscientious practices by collectors in serving their patrons.

Acquisitions

To try to answer the question of whether to purchase electronic versus print materials, librarians have focused on eBook usage and the preferred models and platforms, with less attention given to the differences in publisher packages. Librarians often express concern about usage of package purchased materials. Some studies have shown that books purchased through patron-driven acquisition were accessed more often than those purchased in packages (Schroeder and Wright, 2011). Proctor (2013) discusses the problem of duplicate purchasing with regards to eBook archival materials. She highlights the conundrum of ownership by pointing out that many libraries already own the content in print, despite the fact that finding storage space for print materials has become a challenge.

Though some studies suggest that patron-driven models are used more frequently, package deals have advantages. While Simon (2014) talks specifically about the lack of control over content when purchasing packages, he also acknowledges that individually purchased eBooks are often more expensive than eBooks included in a package or in print. Many large publishers give discounts on the per-book list price when procured in a package (Newman, 2010). Jackson (2007) posits another advantage to buying packages – they fill collections that have been lacking in either historical content or sheer numbers of titles. Lamothe's study also discusses the size of eBook collections and found larger collections are used more frequently. This factor carries more weight than student population, though he does caution against a possible "critical mass" of eBooks (Lamothe, 2013a, 2013b, p. 55).

Due to differing institution size and funding, cost is a major factor when making collection decisions. Cost needs to be weighed against the expected level of usage and completeness of the collection. A study comparing demand-driven acquisition eBooks to print books found that, although the initial cost of eBooks was higher, the cost evened out because they were used more than their print counter-part, with indication that the eBooks would actually cost less in the long term (Downey *et al.*, 2014). The information from prior research and the guidelines discussed in this study will arm collection managers to make the best eBook purchasing decisions for their institution.

Aims

The primary aims of the study are:

- To determine eBook package purchasing options for six major publishers;
- To evaluate eBook access, usage allowance and DRM rights for each publisher;
- To evaluate the likelihood of overlap when purchasing multiple eBook packages; and
- To establish clear guidelines regarding purchasing eBook packages.

Methodology

Publishers initially were selected for this study primarily based upon the authors' personal experiences as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subject librarians with the availability and content of their eBook offerings. In fact, although some eBook platforms contain a great deal of social science and humanities content, many are heavy in STEM fields (Remy, 2013). Some authors have discussed eBook publishers in conjunction with aggregators such as ebrary, but this study directs the focus to large individual publishers. This is because licensing agreements between the aggregators and publishers may often contain terms that are quite restrictive, for example, limiting the number of concurrent users. To keep the comparison consistent, aggregators were excluded from the analysis.

Each publisher's Web site was searched for information on subject coverage, available packages, title-by-title purchasing options, DRM and usage allowance (Table I). The publishers were asked to clarify the meaning of ambiguous phrases and terminology. Statistics for subject area coverage were sometimes available, but when that information was not readily found, it was calculated by counting each title in STEM subject areas. To gauge overlap between packages, the authors manually compared titles in packages from related subject areas for Elsevier, CRC and Springer (Table II).

Findings

Subject area coverage

Our primary aim in analyzing subject area coverage was to determine how easy it was to find information on content in different subject areas. All six publishers have content in STEM fields, although Cambridge, SAGE and Wiley also publish in the humanities and social sciences. There was some uniformity amongst the publishers in the way they categorized content, especially in broad subject areas such as life sciences and medicine. In sub-categories, however, there was some variation in the language used and placement under broad

categories. For example, veterinary titles fell under either sub-category of veterinary medicine or veterinary science, and then under either life sciences or medicine, depending on the publisher. In some cases, content appeared in unexpected places. For example, we discovered that SAGE Knowledge lumped all STEM titles into the Business collection and had to contact the publisher to know this.

Package and title-by-title availability

While all of the publishers offer eBook packages, only half allow title-by-title purchasing (Table III). Wiley, Elsevier and Cambridge allow individual title purchases, although Cambridge first requires a minimum purchase of 25 titles. This information was not always easy to find, and it appears to change rather frequently. For example, Elsevier provided a great deal of information about packages, including complete title lists. Navigating the Web site to find this information was challenging, however, possibly because of the large number of titles and packages offered by Elsevier.

Package overlap

Upon first inspection, it was difficult to discern any overlap between eBook packages from a single publisher. Very few of the publishers made this information readily available, so an analysis was performed using CRC Press, Elsevier and Springer as models (Tables IV and V). There was no overlap between the two Springer packages that were compared. In CRCnetBASE, the authors found up to 22 per cent overlap between the collections that were examined. Finally, in Elsevier's ScienceDirect subject collections, there was overlap up to 29 per cent between these collections. The publishers did not provide any explanation for package overlap, but one possible reason is that they are attempting to provide both general and specialized collections to meet the varied needs of their library customers.

Table I List of publishers

| Publisher | Platform | Website |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|---|
| Cambridge University Press | Cambridge Books Online | http://ebooks.cambridge.org/ |
| CRC Press | CRCnetBASE | www.crcnetbase.com/ |
| Elsevier | ScienceDirect | www.sciencedirect.com/ |
| SAGE | SAGE Knowledge | https://knowledge.sagepub.com/ |
| Springer (Science + Business Media) | Springer Link | http://link.springer.com/ |
| Wiley | Wiley Online Library | http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/ |

Table II eBook packages used in overlap analysis

| Platform | eBook packages analyzed | Webpage |
|---------------|---|--|
| CRCnetBASE | Animal Science Veterinary Science Veterinary Medicine | www.crcnetbase.com/page/librarian_resources |
| ScienceDirect | Animal Science and Zoology Veterinary Science and Medicine | www.elsevier.com/solutions/sciencedirect/content/ebooks |
| SpringerLink | Biomedical and Life Science Medicine | www.springer.com/gp/librarians/marc/marc-records-tool |

Table III Purchasing options

| Platform | Title-by-title purchase | Subscription access | Package purchase |
|------------------------|---|---------------------|------------------|
| Cambridge Books Online | After minimum purchase of 25 titles, may purchase items title-by-title | No | Yes |
| CRCnetBASE | No, platform access only | Yes | Yes |
| Elsevier ScienceDirect | Yes to anything available through ScienceDirect, minimum order required | No | Yes |
| Springer Link | No, except for eReference work titles | No | Yes |
| SAGE Knowledge | No, except reference titles | Yes | Yes |
| Wiley Books Online | Yes, through Wiley Online Bookstore, perpetual access purchase only | Yes | Yes |

Table IV CRC overlap in animal and veterinary medicine packages

| Subject collections evaluated | No. of titles | % Animal Science package | % Veterinary Science package | % Veterinary Medicine package |
|--|---------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Animal Science and Veterinary Science titles overlap | 4 | 22.2 | 11.1 | |
| Veterinary Science and Veterinary Medicine overlap | 7 | | 19.4 | 7.4 |

Table V Elsevier ScienceDirect overlap in animal and veterinary medicine packaging

| Subject collections evaluated | No. of titles | % of Animal Science collection | % of Veterinary Science collection |
|--|---------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Animal Science/Zoology and Veterinary Science/Medicine overlap | 30 | 29.1 | 11.9 |

Digital rights management

On the whole, the publishers were forthright regarding any DRM restrictions, and almost all said there were none (Table VI). CRC Press is the exception, indicating that approximately 25 per cent of their eBook titles are restricted, without making it clear which ones. All of the publishers outlined some additional useful terms regarding the copying and pasting of text and printing pages and chapters. Such terms are an important consideration because they have significant bearing on user experience, and the publishers appear to understand this.

Usage allowance

Similar to DRM, the publishers were generally upfront about usage allowance, although there was not much consensus amongst them. Some indicated unlimited concurrent usage, some said it varied and Elsevier stated they allow “multi-user concurrent” access (Table VII). We contacted Elsevier to ask for clarification and were informed “pricing is based on the

number of FTE at the institution, which allows for uninterrupted and unfettered access via ScienceDirect” (Mr N Joshi 2014, pers. comm., 26 September). As with DRM, usage allowance is a critical factor in the user’s experience, but the evidence indicates some publishers are still not comfortable with allowing unlimited usage.

Implications

While publishers have made a concerted effort to improve the process, purchasing eBooks continues to be a murky undertaking for librarians. The size of the library, the scope of its collection and the size of the budget all have an impact on how the librarians approach the complexities of the eBook market. A large budget allows librarians more latitude to experiment with purchasing options, whereas a smaller library with a modest budget may not have the resources to purchase large packages. Having more options, however, does not necessarily make the path clear. By establishing clear

Table VI DRM terms and conditions

| Platform | DRM restrictions | Additional terms |
|-------------------------|------------------|--|
| Cambridge books online | None | You can copy and paste one chapter or up to 5% of a title, whichever is greater. You can print one chapter or up to 20% of a title, whichever is greater |
| CRCnetBASE | Varied | 75% of the eBooks are DRM free |
| Elsevier, ScienceDirect | None | Portable content available on other platforms (e-readers, mobile phones, etc.) |
| SAGE Knowledge | None | It will not be the print-ready PDF, it will be generated from the XML so as not to provide a direct replica of the print version |
| Springer Link | None | No DRM restrictions on downloads and printing |
| Wiley Books Online | None | No DRM restrictions on downloads and printing |

Table VII Usage allowances

| Platform | Usage options | Additional terms |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|---|
| Cambridge Books Online | Varied | Some titles on Cambridge Books Online were sold on a limited-concurrency model prior to May 2014. The majority of titles allow multiple concurrent users. However, some titles are restricted to a maximum of six concurrent users |
| CRCnetBASE | Varied | Concurrent (with limited seats) or unlimited access subscriptions are available |
| Elsevier, ScienceDirect | Multi-user/concurrent | "All eBooks are priced based on the number of full time equivalents (FTE) at an institution and because it is as such, all individuals with ScienceDirect access will have unfettered and uninterrupted access to the eBooks that have been purchased" (CITE) |
| Springer Link | Unlimited concurrent | |
| Sage Knowledge | Unlimited concurrent | |
| Wiley Books Online | Unlimited concurrent | |

guidelines for purchasing eBook packages, the process can become less daunting and fraught with indecision.

Guideline 1: consider disciplinary and institutional preferences for usage

While scientists tend to be quite receptive to using eBooks, this is not the case for every discipline, or even at every institution. The literature demonstrates that users are all over the map – some prefer electronic, some prefer print and some are neutral. Are your patrons more likely to read single chapters or do they want to read the entire book? Are the books they are interested in mostly text or do they contain a lot of picture or images? Do you anticipate that many patrons will want to access the same books at the same time? Are the titles your patrons are interested in even available in a package? These are only a few examples of questions to ask about how eBooks might be used, but such questions are a good starting point when considering package purchases. In some cases, purchasing a large package with a smattering of content in a broad content area may make the most sense, particularly if interest and usage will be low to moderate. In other cases, buying several smaller but more specialized and comprehensive packages may be the best fit, especially for an institution with research programs in specific disciplines.

Guideline 2: consider how any terms or restrictions would affect usage

This study demonstrates that publishers are loosening restrictions on their eBook content, trending toward DRM-free and unlimited usage; however, this does not hold true across the board. As evidenced in this analysis, usability is also better on the publishers' platforms. Only CRCnetBASE places DRM restrictions on eBook content, while the majority of platforms allow unlimited concurrent usage. Springer even allows users to order bound print copies of entire books for \$24.99. Collection developers at any institution must consider carefully such restrictions and be open to the possibility of title-by-title purchasing.

Another consideration is interlibrary loan, which has long been unsupported by licensing of electronic books. Some publishers are seeking new ways to adapt their models. Springer has allowed downloaded eBook chapters to then be scanned by the holding library and sent to the borrowing library, but, unfortunately, this requires more staff and time

than many libraries have. Recently, in a collaborative effort put forth by Springer and Occam's Reader project, strides are being made to streamline this process. Occam's Reader project has begun a pilot program with the Greater Western Library Alliance to share chapters and entire eBooks from Springer through the Occam's Reader software ([Springer launches eBooks interlibrary loan pilot with Occam's Reader project, 2014](#)).

Guideline 3: weigh cost and budget constraints against collection needs

eBook packages can be particularly attractive because of cost and time savings, but care should be taken when making multiple purchases. This study is the first to look at overlap within related subject collections. This is an important factor for collection managers to be aware of, to either work together to acquire collections with overlap or to discuss the possibility of customization with the publisher. We found enough overlap amongst subject-specific packages to warrant some caution; ideally, publishers should allow some package customization to avoid this problem. If customization is not possible, it may make more sense to purchase eBooks on a title-by-title basis. Unfortunately, not all eBook titles are available for individual purchase. In some cases, it may be necessary to continue to purchase print books to work around the aforementioned issues. Buying print is also a way to work around usage restrictions, especially if librarians anticipate heavy classroom usage for those titles.

Conclusion

On the whole, the eBook market demonstrates some striking similarities to the electronic journal market a decade or more ago, particularly in STEM publishing. Both markets have grappled with the emergence of package deals, challenges with access and usage and the question of subscription versus ownership. Where the journal market is now predominantly electronic, it remains to be seen if the book market will follow suit. Nonetheless, eBook publishers appear to be aligning themselves more with each other by responding to user needs and preferences.

This research has provided librarians and collection developers with concrete information about six eBook publishers specializing in STEM content with which to make purchasing decisions. While not every library has the resources

to purchase these collections, understanding the restrictions or freedoms commonly associated with each publisher also will assist in title-by-title purchasing decisions. Librarians must keep themselves informed of current publishing practices and affect change based on what users want and need. More clarity, purchasing flexibility, customization and access should always be the goal. Future research should include assessing the understanding of these resources by the users, cost analysis of packages, including usage patterns and assessing the importance of collaboration between subject specialists.

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