E-Lending in libraries: what do you think?

Ken Chad Consulting (November 2012)

This is a response by Ken Chad Consulting to the UK Government's Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) call for evidence from an independent panel, appointed by Ed Vaizey, to look at the issue of 'e-lending'. The panel is headed by William Sieghart, and has representatives from all parties affected by e-lending

by Ken Chad, Ken Chad Consulting Ltd
16 Regency Court. Brentwood. CM14 4LU. UK
Tel +44 (0)7788 727 845. Email: ken@kenchadconsulting.com www.kenchadconsulting.com
Twitter: @KenChad

Ken Chad is director of Ken Chad Consulting. He spent over ten years working in public libraries and has worked with library technology for over twenty years. He advises both public and academic libraries and has presented and written widely on matters relating to libraries and technology including ebooks. For example in 2010 he published 'E-books and libraries: which business model?' (CILIP Library+Information Gazette, November 2010) and in 2012 'what's the strategy of your public library' (*Panlibus 25 October 2012*), which touched on the e-lending issue. He is currently undertaking the 'The challenge of ebooks' project for the UK's JISC. He also runs the Local Government Library Technology (LGLibTech) community resource website/wiki which has much information about ebooks and the e-lending debate in public libraries (http://lglibtech.wikispaces.com/E-Books)

Preamble

Definitions

Care needs to be taken over definitions so as not to constrain the discussion and have the outcomes taken over by events and become rapidly irrelevant. ('The laws of disruption' by Larry Downes is a good guide to the dangers of this). I take the panel's term of *E-Lending* to embrace many forms of electronic/digital content. Ebooks are evolving quickly and therefore hard to pin down. Distinctions between journals and books may fade over time for example. Some 'books' like Faber's 'the Wasteland' are more usually defined as 'apps.' In my view we need to take an inclusive view of what ebooks are and not limit the debate to electronic/versions of what we understand a print book to be.

Evidence

At present good evidence is hard to come by and many arguments from publishers and librarians are based on assertion with little or no hard evidence to support them. A recent

OCD report[1] has this to say: *'There is currently insufficient statistical data available to allow governments to monitor the impact of e-books on relevant markets and market players across the book industry. For most OECD countries, there is no central, or official, co-ordination point for such data. Unofficial figures on sales and growth are mostly collected by commercial industry associations and market consultants. Without reliable, relevant and comprehensive national statistics, Governments have no basis for evidence-based policy-making or policy impact assessments in this area. Furthermore, without a recognised, national coordination point organising data collection, international cooperation and coordination to establish internationally comparable subjects and methods of data collection cannot be achieved. At this stage in the evolution of a small, but dramatically expanding e-book market, the organisation and co-ordination of relevant data, at both national and international level, should be considered a priority. Cross-country analyses of various economic impacts, emerging trends and innovative models for commercial and policy adaptation represent vital inputs to effective policy thinking.'*

1. *The **benefits** of e-lending.*

Lending may well become the dominant form of ebook consumption. Commercial providers already see its advantages and offer an increasing range of e-lending services. In some senses this might be considered a *return* to the old commercial circulating library that was a major part of British cultural life in the 18th & 19th centuries. It survived into the 20th and some vestiges remain. It may be due for a revival in a new digital guise. Lending is simply another way to connect 'books' to readers and may take commercial or non commercial forms. The question then becomes what is the *non-commercial, social benefit* of e-lending that *public* libraries represent? Looked at that way, why should the consumption of electronic content be treated differently to print? If public libraries have a value then surely it is a value that applies to electronic/digital 'books' as much as it does to printed books? I suggest that a recent article[2] by Christopher Platt (of New York Public Libraries) makes a good start at setting out that value.

Maybe it could be argued that digital content has special characteristics (maybe in terms of low cost and ease of distribution), that permit commercial enterprises to provide an e-lending service that delivers the benefits of public library provision. I am not aware of anyone who has argued this case yet. The recent OECD report on ebooks commented: 'Some have expressed concern that companies cannot be presumed to be reliable defenders of the "public interest" or of "education", or "open access to knowledge". Yet these are the policy goals for which many library resources were established and funded.'[3]

---

[1] [E-books: Developments and Policy Considerations](). OECD Digital Economy Papers, Number 208. OECD Publishing October 2012 ISSN :2071-6826 (online) DOI :10.1787/20716826

[2] 'The value of public libraries in the e-reading ecosystem.' Christopher Platt. (Panlibus issue 24, Summer 2012)

[3] [E-books: Developments and Policy Considerations](). OECD Digital Economy Papers, Number 208. OECD Publishing October 2012 ISSN :2071-6826 (online) DOI :10.1787/20716826

2. *The **current level and nature of demand** for e-lending in English libraries, along with a projection of future demand*.

It looks like the evidence points to a *transformative* effect. Ebooks have been around for a long time but have only recently become mainstream in the 'trade' sector of publishing which is the main fare for public libraries. The rapid acceleration of demand for ebooks is due, in large part, to improvement in reading devices. The rapid uptake of tablet, smartphone and other devices must surely increase demand for ebooks. From a user's perspective however it can seem as if the public library tries its best to throttle demand by making the consumption of ebooks as hard as possible. A former head of the MLA found his experience disappointing and remarked: **'***those adopting these services should do some proper usability testing and ensure that the entry route for the new user friendly and clear about what can or cannot be done and how the system will function in a wide variety of conditions and configurations*'.[4] Convenience is a major factor in demand and consumers may adopt more convenient (and potentially low cost) commercial services in preference to difficult to use free services from public libraries.

However the issues about specific technologies like reading devices or processes such as downloading are detail and not core to the debate about e-lending in libraries. They are reminiscent of past, largely forgotten debates about library lending of other book formats such as paperbacks. The technology is changing quickly and so will business models and preferences for methods of consumption. The key issue comes back to what unique or special value the public library can add to the 'ebooks ecosystem'. Publishers can deny public libraries ebooks in a way that was impossible with print books. It is even more critical therefore that public libraries better articulate their value to *publishers*.

3. *Current **supply models, barriers** to the supply of e-books to libraries, and likely **future trends***.

A key barrier to the supply of ebooks to public libraries appears to be the fact that publishers are under no legal *obligation* to provide ebooks to public libraries. Indeed it goes further in that publishers are currently able to proactively *deny* ebooks to public libraries. This denial has little commercial impact on their business as public libraries (unlike academic libraries in scholarly communication) are not a major sales channel. Publishers such as Faber for example have the motivation and judge they have the capabilities in the new digital market to deal *directly* with the reader and have done so with attractive ebook 'apps'. In this process they disintermediate bookshops as well as public libraries. If publishers continue to need intermediaries to reach readers (which still seems likely) it is not clear that public libraries offer any clear advantages *to the publisher* over other channels-existing or to be developed in the future.

---

[4] 'It can do yer 'ed in'. By Chris Batt ChB:PhD (blog) 5th June 2011

4. Systems for **remunerating** authors / publishers for e-lending.

From the perspective of many (most?) authors it is questionable whether the print based publishing paradigm adequately remunerated them. And yet there appears to be no shortage of willing creators. It may be that the change to digital publishing will work to the advantage of authors who have new routes to a global market (including self publishing). We just don't know if ebook lending by public libraries will, overall, reduce the creativity capacity of authors.

5. The impact of e-lending on **publishers** and their business models.

Publishers already support *commercial* ebook lending models. The ability of publishers to restrict who is able to license their content means they are likely to eschew any channels they view as not being beneficial to their business. Up to know it seems many publishers remain un-persuaded by arguments that public libraries have this beneficial characteristic. So if there is no positive and unequivocal evidence that public library e-lending is *good* for publishers it is no surprise that they resist it.

*6. Any **unforeseen consequences** of e-lending. For example, the impact on those who cannot keep up with technology, the likely long-term impact on the model of highly localised physical library premises, skills requirements for librarians, etc.*

There are likely to be many unforeseen circumstance because this is a new and potentially disruptive (which can mean good not bad-there will be winners and losers) set of technologies. One *foreseen* outcome must be increasing pressure on locally based provision. Such local, building based provision flies in the face of the economies inherent in a digital format and a global (internet) network.

Public libraries have been slowly working towards a national online catalogue[5] and this initiative might form the basis of a national service for electronic content

Summary

The ebook lending debate is really a debate about the value of public libraries. If the panel concludes they have enduring value then a liberal, inclusive and comprehensive system of ebook lending must surely follow.

Ken Chad 5th November 2012

---

[5] See the 'National Catalogue' page from the Local Government Library Technology (LGLibTech) wiki
http://lglibtech.wikispaces.com/National+Catalogue