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Random Ramblings — A Digital Dilemma for Public Libraries

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An undergraduate student at the library of a local mid-size university didn't like the fact that the only copy of a book she needed to read for class was available only as an eBook. She asked the reference librarian if the library would order a print copy because she preferred that format. The librarian took her request and sent it up the administrative chain. After a bit, the answer worked its way back down to the student. While the response was phrased a bit more politely, its essence was "tough." This academic library, like many, had a policy of not ordering material in multiple formats even if a user specifically requests another version for whatever reason.

This story, which I heard from a student in one of my classes, got me to thinking about how this scenario would play out in a public library. I can't believe that the answer would be the same. In fact, a public library might have the same popular book in multiple formats — book, large print, CD audio book, CD audio cassette, and eBook. The public library would have even bought multiple copies of those items in high demand so that patrons didn't have to wait forever.

Why the difference? The academic library has a captive audience that must complete required assignments with whatever information resources that the library provides unless students buy their own copies or have access to other libraries. If this student has required readings, she had better learn how to manipulate the eBook reader. If she had complained, I expect that the authority figures would repeat the standard response. "By avoiding buying books in multiple formats and in multiple copies, the collection has much more breadth and can therefore support the needs of more users." I might then respond: "but not this one." Finally, one student has virtually no power to change this decision. I'm not even sure that a faculty member could unless the faculty member were particularly powerful or influential within the academic community.

The public library, on the other hand, has to be more responsive. If the public library turned down the user in such a situation, this user would potentially vote "no" in the next millage election, could complain to the mayor or the city manager, might write a letter to the local newspaper, and possibly tell friends and family about the negative experience with the public library. Unlike the student in the academic institution or even in the school media center, a single user has much more leverage in the public library. This leverage has limits since I will admit that a user who wanted the library to purchase a vinyl record, a betamax tape, or even an audiocassette might get turned down; but this decision would rest upon policies that eliminated entire classes of formats rather than not duplicating a permissible format for the user who wanted it.

A corollary from this principle is that moving into the digital age may have more costs for the public library because it can't abandon users who aren't ready for the transition. For early adopters, the public library will be asked to consider eBooks in multiple formats, lots of computers with Internet access, and downloadable films and music. Yet the public library won't be able to abandon the traditional formats for those who want them. This principle may even extend to at least some reference materials for those patrons who will tell the librarian: "I don't like those new fangled inventions like the computer. I don't know how to use one and would like to continue to find the materials I need on the shelves." I doubt that many public libraries will have a good response other than continuing to provide at least the most used materials for pre-computer users.

I also don't want readers to assume that the public library is looking at a generation gap. A modest computer and an Internet connection are luxuries that a family facing foreclosure might decide to forego. (I'll admit that cell phones may be an exception to this rule.) The children of parents who don't like computers may not see their importance for their children. Last week at a local library conference, I heard the story of parents who wouldn't let their children bring home free computers because the parents would be financially responsible for their loss. Given the possibilities of damage or theft, I would judge that the families were making a rational decision to turn them down. Those of us in the middle class are too likely to assume that the rest of the world is just like us.

I don't see any easy answers for public libraries except to wait until the world changes enough that no one will seriously protest taking away the pre-digital products. Doing so will require monitoring use before eliminating older formats. The public library may be able to do so more quickly for less popular items as their use falls or for subject areas where digital expertise can be assumed. The computer books could go digital while the cookbooks would stay in print. Finally, the public library might simply have the policy of saying yes whenever a user, like the student at the beginning of this column, asks for a different format. "We aim to please. How quickly do you need it?"

As an addendum to this column, I asked the readers of the Colleges Libraries Discussion List if their library would buy a print copy of an eBook already in the collection if a reader requested a duplicate print copy. I also asked for comments whether the status of the user (faculty or student) or an explicit mention of a digital divide issue would make a difference. Out of the eleven responses, seven libraries would purchase a duplicate print copy. Four didn't have any conditions. Three did: "after checking with faculty;" "for compelling reasons;" "for a faculty request." One response was "perhaps" with more weight given to a faculty request. Three responses stated that the library wouldn't buy a duplicate print copy. One librarian said that the library would get a print copy on interlibrary loan.

Broader issues included comments on how important eBooks had become because the eBook packages provided so many books at a relatively low cost per title, but one librarian brought up the concern about whether these were the titles needed by faculty and students. One response to a "no" answer asked why the library wouldn't purchase the format that a user wanted, the main point of this column. One library still had a policy of strongly preferring print to digital. The digital divide issue wasn't all that important in the responses but might be a small factor for some. One response indicated that their institution required all students to have a laptop so that the digital divide didn't apply.