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To offer ebooks in libraries: a way to break down physical barriers to knowledge and culture

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Abstract

As institutions of public service, libraries play a major role in providing a democratic and egalitarian access to information and culture. Their missions are defined in several manifestos and codes of ethics (UNESCO, 1994; IFLA, 2012; IFLA, 2014). In such a context, integration of digital resources into libraries collections has created new difficulties, due to:

- the complexity of organizing and making these contents easily available;
- visibility and promotion aspects.

This, not only because the mission of libraries cover access to every kind of resources, digital or not, but also because it is one of the patrons' expectations.

Based on the results of a research project held in collaboration with some french and swiss libraries (Epron, Pouchot, Dillaerts and Prinz, 2014; Pouchot, Vieux, Peregrina, 2015), the aim of the poster is to set out some solutions to better integrate ebooks solutions into libraries' offer and to optimize the communication actions about

this kind of resources. Our suggestions are divided into two kinds of recommendations: on one hand, those dealing with content access, on the other hand, the ones regarding communication.

First, patrons may have difficulties to identify, find, access and read ebooks. Their needs and wishes here may concern the devices as well as the content selection and providing.

We encourage libraries to:

- Supply the patrons with preloaded reading devices;
- Offer personalized access to ebooks;
- Propose downloadable lists of ebooks.

For example, specific contents can be selected according to topics such as civic engagement or social development.

Then, given that ebooks have appeared quite recently in libraries' collections and that this kind of resources are intangible, this offer is often little-known by patrons. Furthermore, users do not always have sufficient technical and informational knowledge to access and read ebooks. Thus, it is necessary to inform them about:

- the simple fact that this digital offer exists;
- the scope of the offer;
- technical aspects and constraints linked to these digital documents' use (e.g. formats, devices, access protocols...);
- the support provided by their library (help, training, workshops...).
- Some actions can be undertaken to develop the ebooks' potential and use:
- To deliver appropriate and accurate information about ebooks by developing new services based on information literacy, use of ebooks and digital reading devices advice ;
- To train patrons and to encourage them to self-study in this field;
- To efficiently communicate to highlight ebooks.

In this way, libraries should offer a wide access to knowledge, regardless the medium, especially since digital contents break down physical barriers and can reach people with disabilities or far from (digital) reading (elders, prisoners...).

This short paper presents the results of a research project aiming at testing the ways patrons perceive and evaluate a whole digital offer (contents and devices) in some french and swiss libraries (Epron, Pouchot, Dillaerts and Prinz, 2014; Pouchot, Vieux, Peregrina, 2015).

Providing ebooks may support them to accomplish their missions but raises some issues. Thanks to a literature review and lending reading devices experimentations, we

propose some solutions to better integrate ebooks into libraries' offer and to optimize the communication actions about this kind of resources.

Digital influence

As institutions of public service, libraries play a major role in providing a democratic and egalitarian access to information and culture. Their missions are defined in several manifestos and codes of ethics (UNESCO, 1994; IFLA, 2012; IFLA, 2014).

In such a context, integration of digital resources into libraries collections has created new difficulties, due to:

- the complexity of organizing and making these contents easily available;
- visibility and promotion aspects.

This, not only because the mission of libraries cover access to every kind of resources, digital or not, but also because it is one of the patrons' expectations.

Some guidelines

We listed and explained the basic aspects that must be taken into account by a library wishing to provide ebooks: they concern organizational matters and management support¹. The technical aspects are also discussed (open format, hardware/software requirement, etc.) as well as the human resources significance. Our suggestions are divided into six recommendation sheets collected into two groups: on one hand, the advices dealing with content access, on the other hand, the ones dedicated to communication. Each sheet presents the context in which the action is relevant, general problems to solve, possible answers, recommendation for the implementation, impacts for the team and some specific promotion ideas. Concrete actions are also suggested, they may vary depending on the type of library (academic, school or public).

Facilitating access to resources

First, patrons may have difficulties to identify, find, access and read ebooks. They express wishes and needs that may concern the devices as well as the content selection and providing. For example, they would like to be informed about digital resources and loan conditions, to

¹ A mindmap of the results is also available

online:<https://www.mindmeister.com/fr/559963687/recommandations-pour-la-mise-en-place-d-une-offre-de-ebooks-en-biblioth-que>.

have an instant, easy and/or personalized access, and to have the opportunity to test and discover several devices types.

We encourage libraries to:

- Supply the patrons with preloaded reading devices with a selection of ebooks on a specific theme, literary genre or a chosen target audience. In that way, users no longer have to worry about difficulties they may have to find and download contents or about technical problems.
- Offer online personalized access to ebooks based on the patrons profile and/or interests. Libraries must adapt and overcome some of their practices by providing an access not only by type of document (printed vs. digital), but based on the expectations and needs. For example, depending on the type and role of the library, the contents can be organized by:
 - Levels of study
 - Language ability
 - Hobbies, interests o etc.
- Propose downloadable lists of ebooks. For example, specific contents can be selected by type of topics such as civic engagement or social development. As it is difficult for a library to offer downloadable files because of the restrictions imposed by publishers, they can offer digital shelves and sets of contents via streaming aggregators. An alternative to this commercial offer is proposed by download platforms². They offer a selection of free ebooks organized by themes and/or ages that can be used by libraries.

Informing to encourage the use

Then, given that ebooks have appeared quite recently in libraries' collections and that this kind of resources are intangible, the offer is often little-known by patrons.

Users are facing several barriers while experiencing digital reading. Among them, the economical factor (digital devices are expensive), difficulties related to information literacy or aspects related to the intelligibility of the offer. Furthermore, users do not always have sufficient technical and informational knowledge to access and read ebooks: many of them think they know how to proceed but only few of them really have all the required skills. Thus, it is necessary to inform them about:

- The existence and nature of the offer; as for printed books, it is for example essential to inform and communicate about what is available and to promote new acquisitions;

² For example <http://bibebook.com> or <http://ebookenbib.net>.

- The extent and scope of the offer;
- The added value of digital contents; for example the screen settings or the possibility to increase the font size. Moreover, many users ignore the fact that there are applications allowing to handle, manage, read and annotate digital documents.
- How to access ebooks; depending on publishers, several access mode exists. Full text paper are available via wi-fi of the institution, from outside via the VPN or only by asking a librarian. Moreover, search interfaces are different from one to another. The way of searching and finding the ebooks may also differ.
- The restrictions and DRM; it is necessary to install a dedicated software on reading devices to open and read ebooks. There also might be constraints linked to these digital documents' use (e.g. formats, devices, access protocols).
- The support provided by their library (help, training, workshops...).

Some actions can be implemented to develop the ebooks' potential and use:

- To deliver appropriate and accurate information about ebooks by developing new services based on information literacy, use of ebooks and digital reading devices advice;
- To train patrons and to encourage them to self-study (for example using video tutorials) in this field;
- To efficiently communicate to highlight ebooks. relying on marketing techniques to highlight digital resources and using social media to create a community.

Moreover, both, in physical and virtual spaces, communication actions can be undertaken. For example materializing and making ebooks visible by using QR codes pointing to the online versions or making them more visible on the website (list of favorites, new acquisitions...) or on social networks.

Removing barriers

In this way, libraries should offer a wide access to knowledge, regardless the medium, especially since digital contents break down physical barriers and can reach people with disabilities or far from (digital) reading (elders, prisoners...). Libraries do have a real role to play to fight digital divide. If some countries such as Canada have already reached an advanced level, some others cautiously begin the ebooks integration process (for example Switzerland). It is one of the big challenges today and it needs to be integrated and supported by the collaborators.

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