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# Whither eBooks - For Libraries

eBooks are a  
conundrum

promise tremendous reach

yet pose significant  
technical challenges

arguably a threat to  
commerce in books

if libraries can do well  
with eBook platforms

why buy when one can borrow?

it's a fair question



but ...  
multiple  
quiXotic  
issues

publishers see books  
as a commodity

libraries see books  
as a service

access to information

two opposing views of ebooks

to place a different argument  
about culture (national)  
in a new context

“eBooks are files,  
wrapped in a license,  
surrounded by technology,  
delivered by a contract”

Michael Tamblyn  
Kobo Books

“eBooks are books,  
wrapped in cultural life,  
surrounded by readers,  
delivered by history”

Michael Tamblyn  
Kobo Books



yet, weirdly,

publishers  
have an advantage  
over libraries

retail / distribution platforms  
(however the books are sold)

providing contextual services  
(a different kind of metadata)

social reading:  
sharing thoughts  
on a platform

libraries value privacy

social has been monetized  
(because social is valuable)

“[digital] transforms the book  
from isolated vessel for text  
into a shared interface”

Craig Mod



“Digital marginalia is a  
collective conversation”

Craig Mod

so in that light

libraries can buy books  
and then lend them

without seriously impacting  
business models

and ensuring  
a basic level of service  
(access to books)

that's what we want to do  
at the Internet Archive

buy books and  
then lend them

we're old fashioned that way



greatest commercial  
value of ebooks is

not really  
the book  
itself

but the conversation  
around and through  
the book

people  
will exchange  
money for

the social life  
of books

for experts' glosses and  
the thoughts of friends

a digital book  
is a centroid on  
the social graph

“At MIT, his office ... was crammed with books, most overdue from the college library. Dr. Lettvin claimed he did not return them because the library would send him the students who wanted those books, and he would interview them as potential assistants.”

**Jerome Lettvin; MIT professor with passion for ideas, a good debate**

by J.M. Lawrence, Boston Globe, May 15, 2011.



selling a book is

selling a ticket to  
that conversation

and let's be real  
(for a second)

libraries are already less than  
5 percent of the book market

and rather sadly we  
keep getting poorer

we're not going to buy,  
and not going to lend

enough books to impact sales

but we can add connections  
among those conversations



publishers might  
call it “marketing” aka  
*targeted impressions*

maybe we should get  
a commission on sales

Alexis Madrigal  
said it more holistically  
in The Atlantic

<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/print/2011/06/what-big-media-can-learn-from-the-new-york-public-library/240565/>

“The library has become a social network  
with physical and digital nodes.”

*(emphasis added)*

but there's one more problem

a problem in the future

for everyone (pubs and libs)

that we'll have to  
solve together



because books are  
moving to the web

and if a book is not  
a container of things

but a collection of links  
to places on the web

interactive experiences  
across the network

there's nothing to download

and I don't know what it means

to buy or borrow

access to the web



particularly

if books can change

where I read them  
when I read them

who reads them  
who has read them  
who I read them with

these will be  
the new books

thanks!

“Centroid”, Flickr!, CGehlen



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@naypinya