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Showcasing E-Book Platform Features

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Abstract

Faculty, students, and library staff are making increasingly nuanced use of e-book collections, but the variance in e-book attributes between publishers and platforms necessitates much more specific information about the various features of e-books in order for patrons to make informed decisions. Librarians have been increasingly tasked with fielding questions ranging from the stability of links in syllabi, to the number of simultaneous users, download formats, software requirements, and support for assistive technology. These new information needs have led the North Carolina State University (NCSU) Libraries to develop a public-facing Web tool designed to help make the features, permissions, and use of our collection a little more transparent and accessible to patrons and library staff.

The Problem

The NCSU Libraries purchase e-books from 29 major publishers as of September 2017. Because of this, patrons accessing e-books can potentially meet 29 different methods of accessing materials, each with its own user interface and specific quirks. In addition, each platform may have different allowances for downloads, page views, and type of viewer available. This is particularly problematic for faculty, who may wish to use e-books for course reserves. In fall 2017 alone, faculty at NC State placed 1,425 monographs on reserve, 19% of which (270) were electronic copies (see Figure 1). While students may not be especially concerned about PDF vs. ePUB format, or how many users a platform allows, these factors could influence a faculty member's decision to use an e-book as a textbook.
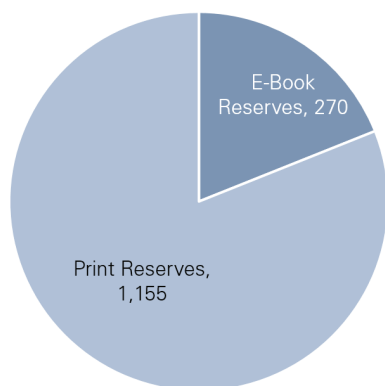
Figure 1. Course reserves for the fall 2017 semester placed at the NCSU Libraries. Of the 1,425 monographs placed on reserve by faculty, 270 were in electronic format.

Project Goals

This project began with the intent of producing a tool that faculty, students, and librarians could use to quickly understand the differences in the e-book platforms used by the NCSU Libraries, thus enabling those groups to make educated decisions regarding the use of e-books in their work and studies. Because of the wide user base for this tool, it was intentionally designed to be as accessible as possible, with limited field-specific "jargon" that could confuse nonlibrarian audiences. In addition, the tool needed to be easy to maintain and edit, in response to the ever-changing nature of academic e-book platforms.

Design Process and Considerations

The team considered three main user groups when beginning the project: faculty, students, and librarians. Each group was seen as having a different set of priorities and information needs, and those were used to inform both the content and presentation of the information in the table. Information needs were scoped through informal interviews with frontline staff and student workers, and through our experience working with faculty and students.

For students, the top priorities are to get immediate access to the materials and to understand the differing usage restrictions for e-books from different publishers. Frequently asked questions from student users tend to focus on the ability to download a book and the variations in whole book and chapter download permissions.

Faculty often prefer to have long-term accessibility to the materials and to have stable URLs for course reserves so that they can use them repeatedly. In addition, allowing multiple users to access the materials simultaneously is another highly desired feature when faculty choose materials for classroom reading.

These two groups inform the needs of most librarians, as we typically need to be able to quickly help students and faculty find the right materials and help them understand the limitations of those resources.

Our experience from working with faculty and students has also revealed that digital rights management (DRM) constraints have limited patrons' ability to use the digital contents; therefore it's valuable for our patrons to know whether a provider has DRM constraints. It can also inform our selectors when they decide on a new resource to purchase.

While this is a simplification of the needs and concerns of these three user bases, it was enough to begin framing what kind of information might be necessary to show for an e-book platform comparison tool.

We are indebted to the work of the University of North Carolina Libraries and the Yale University Libraries, who in early 2017 created and shared an "E-Books Platforms Recommendations" form, an internal-facing Excel sheet showing the positive and negative features of various e-book platforms. While the spreadsheet was useful, the enormous number of platforms the NCSU Libraries utilizes made a similar solution at NC State unwieldy. We also wanted to make sure the data could be placed in a public-facing area, and thus needed to be as user friendly as possible.

After further consideration, the required features for the tool were distilled into the following:

- The tool must be accessible, intelligible, and intuitive for students and faculty, and cannot require internal library knowledge to understand.

- The full Excel dataset must be downloadable for those who want a more holistic view.

- The data should be formatted into a "Q&A" format for easier readability.

Eventually, we developed a public-facing tool on our library website. As shown in Figure 2, a provider can be selected from a drop-down list, and features for the provider are presented as a set of Q&As.

The spreadsheet containing all providers is linked and downloadable on the Web. Here is the URL to the tool: https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/guides/ebooks/content

Future Projects

After feedback from colleagues, in the future our group plans on examining methods of offering this information to our patrons on a subject basis. We would also like to explore the possibility of embedding this information directly in the catalog record for the individual e-books, removing the necessity of having an extra page for patrons to reference. The Acquisitions & Discovery team at the NCSU Libraries recently added simultaneous user limits data to all e-book records in our catalog with multiple user limitations, demonstrating that such an approach may be possible.

Choose your platform:

ProQuest (Aggregator) ▾

ProQuest (Aggregator):

Is there DRM (Digital Rights Management) on the ebooks?	Yes
Can multiple Users view the ebooks simultaneously?	Varies
Do we have perpetual access to the ebooks?	Varies
Can the ebook be put on E-Reserves?	Yes
Are the ebooks available for interlibrary loan (ILL)?	Yes
Can I use the ebooks for scholarly and educational use?	Yes
Can I download chapters/sections PDF?	Yes
Can I download the whole book PDF?	Yes
Can I download the ebooks in EPUB format?	Information Unavailable
Do I need additional software to download the ebooks?	Information Unavailable
Do I need additional login to access the ebooks?	Information Unavailable
Is there an Accessibility Statement or VPAT?	Accessibility Statement
Do they support Assistive Technology for Visual Impairments?	Mostly Supported
Do they support Assistive Technology for Cognitive and Learning Disabilities?	Mostly Supported

Figure 2. E-book platform feature screenshot.