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Publishers Join Forces to Sell E-Books to Libraries

By Jennifer Howard

E-book readers are just as well suited to scholarly books as they are to the latest Jane-Austen-meets-zombies literary sensation.

University presses understand that some scholars want the option to buy monographs in electronic form, and they know how to sell to those scholars: one book at a time, straight from the presses' Web sites, or through a vendor like Amazon.com.

What's been harder to figure out is how to market digital books to academic libraries. For those customers, who are used to buying lists of books from just a handful of distributors, the single-sale approach doesn't have much appeal. But many presses lack the technical and marketing resources to sell e-book packages designed for libraries. So they've decided to experiment with a strength-in-numbers approach.

One group of midsize university presses is moving ahead with a proposed consortium that would sell e-book collections directly to libraries. Next year, Project MUSE plans to expand beyond journals into digital monographs with a venture called MUSE Editions. And JSTOR is having its own conversations with press directors about the feasibility of its building a mechanism to get scholarly e-books into library hands, as it already does with journal content.

No one knows yet whether any of these projects will succeed or how many e-book consortia the scholarly publishing world can handle. Libraries are impatient, though, for university presses to make their e-book talk a reality. Vendors such as NetLibrary and other library-oriented distributors have been offering digital-monograph options, but "there's broad dissatisfaction in the library community" with those options, says Garrett Kiely, director of the University of Chicago Press.

He has been involved in the JSTOR conversations, and he's also kept close tabs on the consortium project being led by New York University Press, Temple University Press, the University of Pennsylvania Press, and Rutgers University Press. "The nirvana for me would be to be able to offer our book and journal content on a single platform," he said.

That doesn't appear likely to happen any time soon. Still, conversations with people involved in these three e-book explorations indicate an active desire to come up with solutions that are multi-institutional if not universal.

Listening to Librarians

"Librarians want to buy e-books, and they want to buy them now," Alex Holzman, director of Temple University Press, told an audience in June at the Association of American University Presses conference in Salt Lake City. Mr. Holzman spoke on a panel organized as an update on the e-book consortium his press is helping to put together. The planners expect the consortium to be up and running by the fall of 2011.

They have two rounds of grant money, for \$125,000 and \$47,000, from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. With the first grant, they hired consultants to study business models and conduct in-depth surveys of academic librarians about what e-book options they want. The second grant will allow the presses to work out the specifics of a business plan and what features to offer users. This month the organizers will issue a request for proposals from potential partners to host the platform for the consortium's e-books and help market them.

More than 50 university presses have expressed interest so far, according to Mr. Holzman and others involved. As a next step, "we want to enlist them in a formal consortium, and that will involve presenting something more formally this fall," he said in an interview.

The organizers are also setting up an advisory board to help run the show. Mr. Holzman emphasized that the consortium will be a group effort in every sense. The four presses "want to get this up and running and then fade into the background," he said.

Mr. Holzman said he did not think competition from other e-book collaborations would be a problem. "The libraries can handle a few vendors," he said. "They just don't want to do business with 50 individual presses, buying e-books from all of them."

Chicago's Mr. Kiely has talked with the organizers and says he wishes the venture well, but that it sounds best suited to presses of a certain size—not, perhaps, to a press like his, which already has a number of e-book options in place. "From what I can tell, this makes sense for a lot of smaller publishers that don't have the size list or the resources to throw at rights clearance or the development of an e-book program," he said.

'Keep It Simple'

Another entrant in the race to group-market digital monographs is Project MUSE. Run by the Johns Hopkins University Press, MUSE is a nonprofit, subscription-driven service that provides online access to scholarly journals in the humanities and social sciences from 110 publishers. MUSE Editions aims to do for scholarly monographs what Project MUSE does for journals. The hope, according to Project MUSE's director, Dean J. Smith, is "to keep it simple, scalable, and solvent."

Mr. Smith took over as director in March. Adding e-books strikes him as the next logical step in expanding what he calls the "content community" of MUSE. "This is the second phase of MUSE's

evolution," he said of the Editions project.

MUSE Editions "will be an integrated platform" that will allow users to access e-book and journal content simultaneously in search results.

MUSE Editions is scheduled to make its debut on July 1 next year. The plan is to offer libraries a collection of somewhere between 250 and 500 titles from the fall-2011 lists of a pilot group of presses. Backlist titles will eventually be included; textbooks will not. "This is really driven by the scholarly monograph," Mr. Smith said. E-books will be available at the same time as the print versions, and libraries will own the content rather than just paying for access to it. The program's cost structure will be similar to that of Project MUSE, according to the director, with discounted, tiered pricing for different types of institutions. Publishers will select the titles they want to include and set prices for their lists.

For the first round, MUSE Editions has been in discussions with about 25 publishers who already participate in Project MUSE, according to Mr. Smith. Several have already signed contracts, and he expects the total number of first-round participants to rise to about 20. Eventually any nonprofit scholarly publisher in the humanities and social sciences will be able to join.

Publishers will provide digital files of the books but will not pay to participate, nor will their MUSE Editions contracts be exclusive. These days, Mr. Smith said, it's unrealistic to expect partners to lock their content into one partnership. (That view is shared by the people involved in the other projects.)

The *Chronicle* asked Mr. Smith how the existence of other consortial e-book experiments might affect MUSE Editions. "We're all learning, we're all experimenting," he said. "We're hoping the roads merge and we can all do this together, but we have an obligation to do this for our client base right now."

Moving Cautiously

At JSTOR, a service run by the nonprofit Ithaka, which helps academe with changing technology, the e-book talk has turned serious but for now is just talk. "It's important to note that this is an investigation, a business-development project to determine whether or how something could be done," said Michael Spinella, managing director of JSTOR. He is also executive vice president for global content alliances at Ithaka.

JSTOR preserves and offers access to scholarly journal articles from a number of publishers on a subscription basis. It has been having in-depth conversations with directors of several university presses, including Chicago, and those at Princeton, Yale, and Harvard Universities, the Universities of North Carolina and of California, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, according to Mr. Spinella. "If we together can come up with a compelling service and business model, our intention is to move forward together," he said.

Like Mr. Smith at Project MUSE, Mr. Spinella sees e-books as a logical extension of what JSTOR already does. Although JSTOR has not yet dealt with books, "we do have a lot of expertise in user interface and in business-modeling things in a sustainable way," he said.

He expects that JSTOR will figure out by year's end whether it wants to move forward with some kind of collaborative digital-monograph project. "Don't expect an e-book platform in January," he cautioned.

Whichever project or projects move forward, they will have to contend with the fact that the library share is only one piece of an increasingly diversified e-book market. For instance, Chicago's Mr. Kiely reports that his press has seen more growth in e-book sales to consumers than in its sales to libraries. "A lot of our attention, frankly, has been turned to making sure we can get books on the Kindle and the Nook and the Sony Reader," he said. "We've seen a great deal of uptake of our scholarly books on those."

Eighty percent of Chicago's e-book sales last year came from consumer sales through so-called e-tailers and only 20 percent from sales to libraries, according to Mr. Kiely. That's probably not a typical split for university presses, but it is a reminder that libraries are by no means the only or even the chief driver of presses' e-book sales. And if Google Editions, the company's long-awaited online bookstore, does make its debut this fall, the consumer portion of the equation will become a bigger factor still.

Still, Mr. Kiely welcomes the various e-book experiments aimed at libraries. "In a perfect world, we'd all be combined together, and we'd all be offering all of the content that scholarly publishers offer to libraries and to academics," he said. "But that's just not reality at the moment."

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