Chapter 7


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ABSTRACT

The academic world is rapidly embracing the use of technology in most of its activities. Information resources, including books, are increasingly being digitised. Global trends indicate an increased use of the digital format of books and journals in universities. This chapter explores these trends with a special attention to Kenyan universities. It analyses the acquisition models in use; the intellectual property issues surrounding the use of e-books; prospects and challenges encountered by universities in the use of e-books. Finally, the chapter addresses the possible future direction that universities in Kenya are likely to take in relation to the use of e-books while recommending some of the important proactive measures to be taken by stakeholders in the country to ensure ethical use of e-books in the country.

INTRODUCTION

The academic world is rapidly embracing technology in the generation, management and use of information. The breakthrough in the digitisation of information resources, and the wide use of the Internet in particular, brought a revolution to the nature and usage of library resources. This usage was promoted by technologically-savvy university students who prefer the use of digital (online) resources to visiting the library to use the traditional print resources. In essence, they may not be aware that by accessing the digital resources facilitated by a university library they are in fact utilising library services. Journals and
books are increasingly being made available in the digital format. While the main concern of university libraries is to provide the required content to the user community, publishers aim at making a profit out of the intellectual content.

The term e-book (also referred to as electronic or digital book) has been defined in different ways. They are generally perceived as the digital versions of printed books. However, the term may also refer to resources which are solely electronic, with no print counterpart (Lynch, 2012). Furthermore, the term is also understood to refer to digital objects specifically designed to be accessible online and read on either a handheld device or a personal computer (Johnson, 2009). The diverse views of what constitutes an e-book end with a futuristic provision: an e-invention yet to be imagined (Soules, 2009).

This chapter is important in two ways. First, as suggested by Bakkalbasi and Goertzen (2015), the e-book landscape is rapidly evolving and a wide range of factors impact on how university library user communities discover e-books for research, teaching and learning activities. The understanding of this landscape assists libraries to properly design information services. Anson and Connell (2009) further suggest that libraries need to be better prepared for a future in which e-books may be as important, or even more important, than print books. Secondly, the proprietary nature of e-books cannot be ignored by university libraries. The legal concerns surrounding the use of e-books, just like in the case of other digital resources, should be understood by information providers and users alike.

E-BOOKS MARKET

The e-books market is dominated by the international players, mostly from developed countries. Consequently, libraries from developing countries heavily rely on the supply of e-book contents from these international publishing firms. This section of the chapter is intended to shed some light on the major players in the e-book market globally.

Amazon

Amazon was founded as an online bookseller in 1995 in Seattle, Washington, United States of America. In the recent past, it has branded itself not exclusively as a specialist in books, but as the “earth’s most customer-centric company,” supplying to “four primary customer sets: consumers, sellers, enterprises, and content creators”. Economically, the company statement reveals the ambition of Amazon to adopt a vertically-integrated service provider perspective. Thus, it has a broad number of business roles that conventionally had been the territory of a wide array of separate businesses, especially bookseller/retailer, used books store, library, publisher, service provider to authors, as well as publisher (including print on demand), ecommerce platform, and marketplace (Wischenbart, 2013).

The current situation of e-books globally can rationally be termed as having been triggered, either directly or indirectly, by the inauguration of Amazon’s Kindle reading device in 2007. This device was the part perceived by the consumers as the most visible, in a much more complex and proprietary, highly integrated system that consisted of Amazon’s leading online platform for selling (printed) books in the world (Wischenbart, 2013).