



## Electronic Book Collection Development in Italy: a case study

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### Abstract

*The paper reports the results of a research project that aimed to investigate how academic librarians are managing the integration of electronic book collections in their library holdings and focuses on the selection criteria and collection development issues. The background is represented by the Italian academic libraries that have been lately involved in electronic book collection development projects, and by the Italian digital publishing e-books offer.*

### Purpose of this paper

The research project aimed to investigate how librarians are managing the integration of electronic book collections in their library holdings, focusing on the selection criteria issues. The main intent is to identify the gap between the plurality of access and business models of electronic book collections offered by publishers and the issues that academic librarians are tackling in terms of selection, collection management, analysis of users' needs and budget limitations. The paper describes the case study carried out by the researcher for the dissertation of the International Master in Information Science, jointly delivered by Parma University – Parma, Italy and Northumbria University – Newcastle upon Tyne, UK.

Two interviews and a questionnaire were done between February and July 2008 whereas the analysis of the results were carried out between September 2008 and January 2009.

### Background

#### *Electronic book collections in Academic Libraries*

The implementation of electronic book collections in the academic library holdings has been growing in the last few years and many universities show electronic books in their library

collections (Ashcroft and Watts, 2004, p.285). Different studies have been carried out so as to investigate how libraries have integrated electronic book collections in their holdings and how electronic book collections have been proposed to users. Sutton (2003) reported the success of the patron-driven access model at the Wayne State University, while Armstrong and Lonsdale (2005) analyzed focus groups' opinions about the integration of e-books in high education libraries in the United Kingdom in 2005. Bennet and Landoni (2005) as well as Qari (2005) analysed the use of electronic books among students in UK Universities and focused on the importance of the organization of training courses and specific seminars.

### ***Electronic books and collection development issues***

Even though different issues have been analyzed and discussed in literature such as access and business models, quality of contents and users' needs (i.e. Anuradha and Usha, 2005 Su, 2005; Safley, 2006; Rice,2006), and different projects have been carried out (i.e. Langston, 2003; Park, 2007), electronic book collections are neither included in liaison with academic department programmes nor related to course reading lists, and they seem not to be a part of a conscious collection development strategy (Ashcroft and Watts, 2004, p.285).

It is difficult to point out the data librarians mostly take into consideration and how these data influence their collection development decisions. Usage statistics from vendors, feedback from academic staff as well as from students (Blake and Schleper, 2004), cost, licensing and digital rights management issues, the influence of library consortia (Miller, 2002, p.98), can all be considered influencing factors during the evaluation. These issues lead to new collection development approach and management. Librarians no longer acquire and keep products physically but subscribe to services characterized by licenses limited to a given period of time. They no longer keep the property rights of the products purchased but subscribe to license that offer archival rights which can change when publishers purchase, sell, or transfer products (San Jose and Pacios, 2005, p. 193). In this regard, new professional and management skills are required for librarians (Ashcroft and Watts, 2004, p. 290). They have now to analyse products taking into consideration the quality of the contents proposed not only in relation to the users' needs but also in relation to their price and to the level of control there is over the products they are subscribing to (Guijarro, 2000, in San Jose and Pacios, 2005).

### ***E-book Collection Development in Italy: which projects and which policies?***

In Italy the issue related to the diffusion of electronic books in academic libraries and to the electronic book collection development policies is still in its early stages. Even though the management and the negotiation of electronic journals have commonly been accepted and consolidated, some reservations still remain. The review of the literature reveals that only a few Universities have lately carried out projects about the integration of electronic book collections into their holdings. These projects have been presented in two seminars held in 2005 and 2006 on the occasion of the Italian Library Meeting, Bibliostar, and they have been published by the Italian Librarianship Journal *Biblioteche Oggi*.

### ***Politecnico di Milano***

Politecnico di Milano is one of the major Polytechnic Universities in Italy with more than 15,000 full time equivalent students (FTE). In 2004, the central library division of Politecnico di Milano (SBA - Sistema Bibliotecario di Ateneo) undertook a pilot project about the

integration of electronic book collections as a tool to support teaching and research activities. A scientific committee was set up to focus on the following:

- analysis of publishers' proposals;
- evaluation of contents;
- evaluation of access and licensing models.

This phase of the project was supported by the teaching staff who gave suggestions about the evaluation of contents for the different subject areas. Their help was useful during the acquisition phase and pertinent to the users' needs. The result was the development of an electronic books collection offering contents by different publishers. This heterogeneity came up as a weakness during the evaluation phase of the project, especially for the library management workflow. It was common to find overlapping titles, especially among collections that were subscribed in bundles, without a title per title selection. Another issue was related to the usage statistics. At the time of the implementation, formats and data of the usage statistics provided by publishers were widely different and hard to compare. As the evaluation of the project was mostly based on these data, the lack of standardization limited a pertinent analysis of the usage of the resources. The project ended in 2006 and when the librarian in charge of the SBA group delivered her presentation in 2007, she reported some issues that still remained under discussion, such as the definition of collection development policies peculiar to electronic book collections (Cirulli, 2006).

### *Università degli Studi di Bologna*

The University of Bologna is one of the most ancient Universities in Italy, with many Faculties dedicated to different subject areas: Humanities, Social Sciences, Maths, Engineering, etc. The electronic book collection development project was carried out by the library of the Faculty of Engineering as a new tool to support teaching and research activities. The project started in 2002 and was carried out with the financial support of the central library. The first step of the project was the selection and then the subscription to an engineering handbook database. In this phase no scientific committee was set up and the choice of contents, access and licensing models was totally carried out by the librarians of the Faculty. The selection focused on a Science, Technology and Medicine (STM) handbook collection, identified as a good reference tool for students and researchers. The second step of the project (called "communication strategy") aimed to promote the collection among the users of the library and proceeded as follows:

- setting up specific reference plans for students working on their dissertation;
- information about the new collection through the Library Website and through specific leaflets;
- e-mail messages sent to students, librarians and lecturers.

This strategy reported some weaknesses, especially due to the high number of students, lecturers and researchers of the Faculty of Engineering. To get over this issue, librarians decided to undertake a programme of semantic and descriptive cataloguing for each title to fully integrate the collection in the library OPAC. This way of proceeding was successful as the usage statistics recorded a high number of accesses to the database from the OPAC during the project time (from 2002 to 2004). The analysis of the usage statistics revealed also that some titles were heavily consulted whereas others less or never. This brought the attention to the selection criteria used to evaluate the contents proposed by publishers, and focused on the

necessity for more flexible licensing models that allow librarians the title per title selection instead of the acquisition of predefined packages or databases. (Zani, 2006)

### ***Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore - Piacenza***

The project about the electronic book collection development started in 2005 and was carried out by the library staff of Piacenza University, one of the five branches of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. The project aimed to increase the library services providing a new tool to support teaching and research activities. The evaluation of the contents was only made by the library staff and no scientific committee was set up. Librarians considered the following criteria during the selection:

- title per title selection for the subject required (Economics and Agriculture);
- agreement for an annual fee based on the number of titles subscribed;
- MARC record for each electronic book;
- multiple concurrent access;
- full text searching and title browsing;
- making notes and highlighting text tools;
- usage statistics reports.

Those selection criteria helped librarians to identify two electronic book collections that were subscribed to, at the end of a 30 day trial period. Different “strategies” were undertaken by the library to promote the new collections to the users. A specific link on the library website was set up; leaflets describing the new contents were distributed among students; interviews and questionnaires were carried out in order to gather patrons’ impression and feedback. The latter, along with the analysis of the usage statistics represented the data on which the University decided to continue or discontinue the subscription to those collections. At the end of the project (2006), the data gathered showed high number of accesses, especially to the electronic books of Agriculture subject. These results led librarians to a more accurate title per title selection focusing on the higher consulted subject area titles and laid the basis for the current Piacenza University electronic book collection development (Fiorentini, 2006).

## **Methods**

### ***The methodological approach and the unit of analysis***

A case study was set up and the methodological approach was selected according to a combination of multiple techniques, drawing on data obtained from two interviews and a questionnaire (Pickard and Dixon, 2004). In order to focus on the Italian scenario in depth a small-scale survey was created to collect data from librarians that had been involved in the acquisition of electronic book collections, and had decided to subscribe to the Italian collection Editoria Italiana On-line (EIO) by Casalini. The interviews with two key informants, Paola Gargiulo, Information Specialist at Caspur Consortium (Rome) and Tommaso Giordano, Library Deputy Director at European Institute (Fiesole), and with the Italian publisher Casalini, helped the researcher to better delineate the context of the research and to focus on the Italian academic libraries background.

### *The research questions*

The research project aimed to answer the following research questions:

- which criteria do librarians consider during the evaluation and selection of electronic books in Italy?
- what do the Italian academic librarians expect from electronic books?

### *Methods of data gathering*

Data were gathered through interviews and through a structured questionnaire. The use of different research techniques allowed the researcher a complementary view of the phenomenon studied (Lambert and Loisel, 2008, p. 230). The table below (Table 1) shows the research techniques used in correlation with the study objectives.

Table 1. Research objectives, research techniques, data sources.

<b>Research Objectives</b>	<b>Research Techniques</b>	<b>Data Sources</b>
Identify the major issues concerning the diffusion of electronic book collections among the Italian Academic Libraries	Interviews	Key Informants
Identify the Italian publishers' electronic book proposals and models	Interviews	Casalini
Understand which criteria librarians take into consideration during the evaluation and selection of electronic book collections	Questionnaire	Librarians
Identify librarians' expectations concerning e-book in terms of contents, usability as well as interface	Questionnaire	Librarians

### ***Interviews and questionnaire design***

The interviews were set up according to the following steps: preliminary explanation of the research project to the interviewee and definition of the key issues to be covered according to the guidelines of the semi structured interviews (Pickard, 2007). Since descriptive information was collected through the interviews, close-ended questions and questions with answers in the format of *Likert-scale* were included in the questionnaire. Participants could choose among a set of alternative answers or could rank the options proposed (Pickard, 2007). Particularly, librarians were asked to indicate the influencing issues related to the electronic book collection development as well as the electronic book collection evaluation and selection criteria. The scale adopted was made of six points (1 being the lowest, 6 being the highest). The main variables considered were:

- the elements affecting the acquisition of the electronic resources particularly focusing on the electronic book collection;
- librarians' expectations about electronic book collections (in terms of contents, acquisition models, usability, etc);
- librarians' considerations about the project *Editoria Italiana On-Line (EIO)*.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data were analyzed following the guidelines described in literature. On the one hand, the pertinent statements reflecting the answers to the interview questions were transcribed (Pickard, 2007, p.245). According to the constant comparative analysis (Boeije, 2002) findings were categorized in order to identify the main themes and issues that would describe and explain the phenomenon under study (Melia, 1997, p. 31 in Pickard, 2007, p.241). On the other hand, data gathered through the questionnaire were reported using a variable – base method with a focus on the different types of interval variable (Pickard, 2007, p.252). As a specific software for quantitative analysis was not available, all responses to questions were entered in a database and were included in specific categories.

### **Findings**

#### ***Electronic book collections into the Italian academic libraries collection development policies***

The results reported that although the management and the negotiation of electronic journals have been accepted and consolidated, some reservations still remain about electronic book collection development. This attitude emerged from the analysis of the literature and it was confirmed both by the interviews with the two key informants and by the librarians' responses gathered through the questionnaire. Even though collection development guidelines for electronic resources were set up by all the libraries involved in the case study, the analysis of the results revealed that the diffusion of the electronic book collections does not keep pace with the one of the electronic journals. Considering the above issues, how do librarians manage and plan the subscription to electronic book collections? The interviews with the two key informants clarified how in Italy the issues related to the electronic book collection development policies are still under discussion. Monographs purchased as e-books are often considered as an addition of the same titles in print format, already available in the library holding, or they are subscribed to by individual university faculties. Focusing on the matter related to the budget limitation, the key informants paid attention to the business models

proposed by publishers to the academic libraries. Apart from few examples, publishers offer libraries to purchase or to subscribe to defined subject e-book collections and do not allow any “pick and choose” option. In this way, acquisition librarians cannot freely choose which titles should or shouldn’t be acquired or subscribed to and consequently cannot fully develop good-quality e-book collections. In this regard, the key informants reaffirmed the importance of the consideration of a new collection development approach that leads librarians to deal with new issues, involving:

- the problem of finding a good balance between the collection available both in print and in electronic format;
- the evaluation of users’ needs in spite of the increasing budget limitations;
- the lack of customized electronic resources management systems (ERMS) that support librarians for the integration and management of a new e-resource in the library workflow (selection, orders, cataloguing, etc.).

The role of Italian library consortia was also discussed. According to the key informants, library consortia should be more active in analyzing the consortia members’ needs and work with them on a set of negotiation guidelines. These should consider: the consortia members’ needs, a clear definition of electronic book collections licensing policies, the analysis of contents offered also by small-size publishers, and the development of a consortial platform for the integration and access of different electronic contents.

### ***The selection criteria used by librarians during the evaluation of an e-book collection***

The analysis of the librarians’ responses revealed that the selection process is mainly influenced by two issues. On the one hand, a deep analysis of the contents offered by publishers is still being carried out in order to give the subject area represented by the library adequate coverage. On the other hand, as the lack of competitive acquisition models (packages vs pick and choose) is considered a limiting issue to the subscription to electronic book collections, great attention is paid to publishers’ proposals offering cost-effective business models that do not tie up the budget management of the library. The selection process is turning out to be challenging not only in terms of budget but also in terms of “choice of contents”. Some studies confirm that receiving titles that would not be chosen for the collections, but which come as part of the package, librarians have ceded some of their selection control to publishers and vendors (Soules, 2009, p.17). Titles that are part of a package are chosen by specific committees on the basis of different criteria, as copyright; availability of a specific title; publishers and vendor shifts and other changes (Soules, 2009, p.18) and they are not necessarily selected on content – based criteria. The librarians’ responses confirmed how all these issues represent a threat to the development of customized electronic book collections and influence the guidelines that should be followed during the selection and evaluation processes:

- the importance of the evaluation of users’ needs;
- the real and potential use of the collection;
- quality, in terms of contents and update.

## ***A comparison between Editoria Italiana On-line and librarians' management issues and expectations***

The case study revealed that librarians have great expectations from electronic book collections in terms of updated contents, timely publications, easier access, cost-effective acquisition models as well as usability and effective platform research functionalities. These expectations do not often match publishers' e-book proposals that do not always offer updated and high quality contents in standardized formats, and establish too many restrictive limits to the print, copy and download functionalities. The information gathered through the interview with the publisher Michele Casalini revealed an interesting approach to the development of the project Editoria Italiana On-line (EIO), which aims to offer academic libraries, Italian high- quality- scholarly contents in original language. The analysis of users' needs carried out by the Casalini Digital Division team, led up to consider the importance of offering a fair business model that, on the one hand, allows libraries to choose either among different subject collections or among different type of publications (e-books, e-journals, proceedings). On the other hand, it allows libraries to customize the collection, changing up to the 20% of the titles or moving to a small collection in case of budget limitations. This approach could be considered an important key point of the project, especially in the light of what Michele Casalini stated talking about EIO's guidelines:

*“Contents available in electronic format have been initially proposed by big publishers and mostly in English language. There was a monopolization of the resources dedicated to Academic Libraries and a threat to the variety of contents that should characterize the collection of each library. The project started from the analysis of this consideration and led to the development of a single interface so as to optimise the access to Italian high quality scholarly contents in original language”* (Michele Casalini, July 2008).

But does this approach fully meet librarians' needs and expectations? The questionnaire showed that the features librarians mostly considered during the evaluation of Editoria Italiana On-line were:

- permanent access to the contents purchased;
- the opportunity to integrate the records into the OPAC and link them to other resources;
- multiple concurrent access;
- high quality contents.

All the above issues are related to the contents offered both in terms of quality and updated as well as in terms of content management. Since EIO is considered an *“ongoing challenging project”* by Michele Casalini, all the publisher's efforts are now focused on the evaluation of new titles to offer, on a new interface and content management tools to be developed, in order to follow the new market trends and keep EIO up-to-date in terms of contents and technological infrastructure. All these efforts aim to meet librarians' requests but mean for the publisher a big technological investment to move from the old formats to the newest ones. Furthermore, it represents for libraries (even with the purchase or subscription model) a way to begin to pay an annual platform fee. As the literature confirms, this is particularly troublesome because most librarians are not in a position to commit to ongoing costs (Soules, 2009, p.18) especially with the latest budget restrictions. The questionnaire responses revealed that librarians' primary consideration during the renewal evaluation of EIO will be

related to the cost of the new contents offered and not to the users' requests or to the usage statistics. This represents a threat for the development of electronic book collections that fully meet users' needs. In this scenario, the literature can be linked up to what the key informants' advanced: acquisition librarians should understand that traditional categories will no longer entirely hold (Soules, 2009, p.18). They need to develop a new collection development approach, fully considering users' needs and beginning to participate in negotiating contracts dealing with library consortia and developing with them new tools for the evaluations of new contents focus on libraries' needs and mission.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the research revealed some interesting issues concerning the acquisition and selection of electronic book collections. These issues are presented in relation to the objectives of the study.

### ***Electronic book collections in Italian academic libraries***

Italian academic libraries' interest in electronic book collections has lately increased but some reservations still remain. The study reported that the unwillingness to subscribe to e-books refer mostly to the lack of: competitive business models, update contents, standardized formats, customized electronic resources management systems (ERMS) as support to the library workflow (selection, orders, cataloguing, etc.). Findings revealed that librarians deal with new issues that required new professional and management skills but they are not supported by collection development policies peculiar to electronic book collections. This represents a limit for the diffusion of e-books in academic libraries and focuses the attention on the development of a new collection approach.

### ***Italian publishers' electronic book collections***

The study reported a lack of Italian scholarly contents available as e-books in the international publishing industry. Literature reported only few examples of electronic book collections by Italian publishers. Among these, Editoria Italiana On-line(EIO) by Casalini gathers a collection of Italian electronic publishing allowing the on-line access to full-text works by different publishers, through a specific interface. The project aimed to offer high quality scholarly contents in electronic format and in original languages. Librarians can select among works from small-medium sized publishers which are not included in big publishers' proposals. Particular attention is paid to the quality of the contents offered in order to avoid any threat to the variety of contents that should characterize the collection of each libraries. Librarians appreciate EIO because of the high quality contents offered in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences but some reservations still remain concerning the usability of the interface.

### ***The evaluation and selection of electronic book collections***

The analysis of electronic book collection includes the consideration of different factors such as evaluation of contents, cost, licensing issues, recommendations from faculty members and often influence of consortia ( Brody, 2001 in Miller, 2002, p.98). These issues implicate important changes in the selection process of electronic contents if compared with the one of print materials. Librarians focus on the evaluation of users' needs; the analysis of contents (quality and update), business models, archival rights, etc. but they are mostly influenced by

budget issues. Findings revealed that, during the selection process, librarians are more influenced by the cost of a collection than by users' requests. This threatens the development of electronic book collections relevant to the users' needs and leads librarians to ask publishers for more flexible business models.

### ***Librarians' expectations concerning electronic book collections***

The study revealed that librarians have great expectation about contents in electronic format. Focusing on e-book, they refer to update contents, timely publication, easier access as well as competitive purchasing models, and effective platform research functionalities. These expectations do not often match publishers' e-book proposals that do not always offer updated and high quality contents in standardized formats, and establish too many restrictive DRM limits. These issues represent a limit to a wider diffusion of electronic book collections into academic libraries and focus on the role of Italian library consortia which should be more active in the development of set of negotiation guidelines that fully meet the library consortia members' needs.

### **Limitations**

Being a small-scale research undertaken by a single investigator, some limitations can be considered. On the one hand the phase of evaluation and selections is only one aspect of the library collection development of e-books that involve other important issues. On the other hand, the unit of analysis was restricted to a small group of Italian librarians and to only one Italian publisher's proposal. Moreover, the results of the research are strictly related to the moment in which the case study was carried out. As the situation of electronic services and products is continuously evolving, the same research undertaken in two years' time may give different outcomes.

### **Recommendations for further research**

The analysis of the results revealed new interesting issues to be analysed. As a matter of fact, there are many complex collection development issues surrounding the selection, the acquisition and promotion of electronic book collections (Armstrong and Lonsdale, 2005). Data gathered from the interviews and questionnaire suggested that some new aspects should be investigated. For example, the analysis of the quality of contents offered by publishers, the role of academic library consortia offering new guidelines for collection development projects (Albanese, 2009), and, due to the recent budget restrictions, the analysis of the return of investment (ROI) issues (Kaufman and Watstein, 2008).

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