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## Despite youths' tech comfort, e-textbook demand slow

By Anick Jesdanun, Associated Press

Brown University junior Stuart Thompson jumped at the chance to save $30 and become a digital pioneer when his school bookstore offered a discounted, electronic version of an American history textbook.



Larry Carr, director of the Brown University bookstore in Providence, R.I., which carries only three e-books.

By Stephan Savoia, AP

But after making the purchase, he noticed a few things amiss: He couldn't run a highlight marker over key points or jot notes in the margins, nor could he curl up with the tome without printing out the pages.

He won't rule out another e-book, but he's not completely sold, either.

So much for the belief that this generation of youths is comfortable with everything digital: The publishing industry has been talking about electronic textbooks for a decade already, but sales remain minuscule.

"If you're reading a 100-page book, staring at the computer that long — I don't think a lot of people would find that a better way to read," Thompson said.

Of the 100 or so students enrolled in the course where Houghton

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Mifflin Co.'s "A People and a Nation" is assigned, Thompson was the only student to buy the electronic version.

Brown is offering two other e-textbooks this semester, but none of the 150 students in those classes have bought one, even at 35% off the price of a new printed copy.

Students are going to have to see more value in e-textbooks before they take off, said Larry Carr, Brown's director of bookstore and services.

For now, it is mostly a curiosity.

"Students are pretty conservative when it comes to their grades," said David Serbun, director of partnerships for Houghton Mifflin's college division. "Our research has indicated they don't want to do anything that's a lot different than their peers."

Others, however, say the publishers are the ones that are conservative, doing little more than adding some hyperlinks and search capabilities. Tools are available for note-taking and highlighting, but Thompson said those are no substitute for marking up paper.

For the most part, e-books are merely electronic representations of the printed pages.

"It's like taking a book and ... trying to turn it into a movie just by trying to read pages," said Alexander Pereira, chief operating officer of Xplana Learning Inc., an education software company that delivers e-books. "It's a different medium."

C. Sidney Burrus, former dean of engineering at Rice University and an e-book author, said technological changes typically come in two phases: Replication of older technology, followed by innovation.

"We're in the first phase, with electronic doing what the traditional paper has done," he said. "Nothing's really novel."

How can e-books be more than print?

Imagine a biology e-book showing video of DNA's double helix coming to life, rather than the two-dimensional illustration typically found in printed books.

Or think of a math book with a built-in calculator or spreadsheet so students can try out formulas as they read. Waterloo Maple's Maplesoft, for instance, is now making completely digital an advanced mathematical textbook that used to come with a CD.

Lewis Mandell, a University of Buffalo professor who writes and publishes his own e-textbook, said he's able to update his finance books more frequently.

"The investment world is changing on a weekly basis," he said. "Tax rates change every year."

Publishers say that demand for digital-only editions and features isn't strong.

More importantly, professors are demanding consistency with the printed versions so page numbers match and readings are easier to assign, said Sandi Kirshner, chief marketing officer for Pearson PLC's higher education group.

Perhaps that'll change as e-book sales continue to grow, but publishers say there's not much incentive when e-books remain in the single digits as a percentage of printed books.

Their biggest selling point for now is price, and even there, publishers say they feel constrained.

"A lot of people's perceptions is that e-books, that can't cost publishers anything," said Ginny Moffat, vice president for course content delivery at McGraw-Hill Cos.' Higher Education unit. "Most of the publisher's cost is not in paper, printing and binding. Most of it is in editorial, reviewing content, making sure it's accurate."

Yet with students spending hundreds of dollars a semester on books, they are looking for deep savings on something they wouldn't be able to sell back at the end of the term.

Even the 35% markdown for e-books at Brown is only slightly less than the 25% discount for used printed copies.

And e-books come with additional restrictions: They are encrypted to prevent sharing, and the ones from Thomson Corp. are even designed to expire in a year and prevent printing more than 100 pages a week, said Jeff Cohen, advertising and promotions manager for MBS Textbook Exchange, which distributes e-books from several publishers.

Publishers say they are willing to accept lower margins on e-books for now while they figure out the technology and learn more about the market, but some say the current discounts can't last forever.

Another challenge is getting students to even know about the e-book option.

MBS started a pilot last fall where e-books from several publishers are sold in bookstores of 10 universities, so students wouldn't have to know to go to a publisher's website to buy them. Brown and about 40 additional schools joined the program last month.

Cards are placed next to the printed books on shelves. Students grab one, pay for it at the register and use the code on it to activate and download the e-book.

E-books are also popular at predominantly online colleges like Kaplan University, said David Harpool, Kaplan's chief operating officer for academics.

"They've chosen this format for learning," he said. "They are so used to doing everything else online."

But Kirshner believes it could take as many as 10 more years for e-books to become as commonplace as print. Then again, she made that prediction a decade ago, she said, "and those 10 years have come and gone."

"I personally might have thought that this change would be happening sooner and faster than it is, but there's no doubt it is happening."

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