

# Preface

**F**ree Reading Zones (FREZ) is the name of the project and the initiative that I have been involved with as a library and publishing consultant for the past couple of years. It was first launched by an e-book company, Total Boox, as an extension of the service provided to libraries in the United States. Total Boox wanted to make its e-book collection available to library patrons through its instant-simultaneous-unlimited-access model available outside library walls (with library cards) in specific geographic areas designated as “free reading zones,” defined clearly through GPS coordinates or Wi-Fi networks, among other methods. When I became the manager of the project for Total Boox in 2016, I quickly saw the possibilities of the model to transform access to books in digital format even beyond libraries and library cards. I saw an opportunity, in fact, to go global with it and use it to spread reading wherever it was welcome and especially in areas where access to libraries and bookstores was limited or nonexistent.

The FREZ that I eventually launched as an independent project (in cooperation with Total Boox) provides people in the “zones” free and uninterrupted access to e-books through sponsorships, which may or may not involve libraries. It does not require the use of library cards or ask that users be library patrons. FREZ simply leverages technology to reduce the cost of reading to zero (for the reader), but it also leverages technology to create new revenue streams for publishers. It aims to do this outside libraries—but in cooperation with libraries as well as other organizations willing to sponsor reading—so that as many people as possible get access to as many quality books as possible. To my knowledge, FREZ is the first industry attempt to support long-form reading of current titles through sponsorship.

The idea to re-envision the original FREZ concept did not come to me overnight. It was the product of years of working with e-books and e-book vendors, publishers, and libraries of all types (particularly public), and it was the product of learning from a long list of trial-and-error ventures involving e-books and e-content. It was also an idea built on the ideas of other people who envisioned e-book possibilities long before I did.

This report sheds light on what FREZ is, how it came about, who’s behind it, and what its short-term and long-term goals are. Chapter 1 (“Free Reading Zones: An Introduction”) is an overview of the mission, vision, and business model. Chapter 2 (“Key Benefits of Free Reading Zones”) aims to clarify the benefits of FREZ by zooming in on the many ways in which it empowers all who create, distribute, and consume e-books, ways in which it equalizes access to knowledge and education in areas beyond thriving city communities, and ways in which it allows those who participate, including libraries, to align missions with other industries and form new partnerships to mutual profit.

Chapters 3 and 4 get more personal as I delve into describing the experience of launching the first Free Reading Zone in a small European café in September of 2016, which, two months later, led to the launch of the ultimate Free Reading Zone and the project that would define my career—the turning of the entire country of Croatia into an open virtual library for one whole month (December 5, 2016–January 5, 2017). These two chapters give details on how the project was envisioned and how I went about executing it with help from a group of locals who joined forces with me to ensure the pieces necessary for the project’s success fell into place. It was going to take a village, I knew

from the start, and, as the chapters reveal, it did take a village. Most of all, it took a small group of dedicated individuals who understood my vision and without whose work, expertise, and trust the project wouldn't have been the success that it was. They include publishing consultant Natalija Mladenović; IT consultant Trpimir Šugar; PR consultant Mate Rončević; and the open-minded owners of the Velvet Café, the first to “open” its doors to the new and improved FREZ—PR consultant Ana Petričić Gojanović and artist/florist Saša Šekoranja.

It is my hope that this report both inspires and motivates librarians in the United States and around the world to embrace the idea of FREZ and attempt the same or similar initiatives in their communities. This is the story of how I became part of FREZ, what I learned from it as a publishing and LIS professional as well as a reader, and what I believe the future holds for e-books, libraries, and the area in our industry where the two meet.