Free Reading Zones

An Introduction

Definition and Examples

Free Reading Zones (FREZ) is an initiative to spread reading in digital format beyond traditional libraries and physical institutions and to provide instant, unlimited, simultaneous, and free access to books and knowledge to people in areas predefined as FREZ. In other words, it is an attempt to turn public and private spaces and places into open virtual libraries for the sake of enabling reading, promoting literacy, and exposing books for discovery through strategic marketing. Readers in those areas need to download a free reading app—which identifies their location in several ways, for example, via GPS coordinates, Wi-Fi network, or an app store—allowing them to get free access to books in digital format while remaining physically inside the zone.

The reading is made possible through sponsorship by third parties that agree to participate (i.e., sponsors) and that absorb the cost associated with implementing FREZ for the purposes of paying publishers, authors, and the software companies handling the technology. Different business models for how content creators are compensated may be used in FREZ, depending on what type of content sponsors and organizers wish to make available for reading, how much content is to be made available for discovery, and how many people are anticipated to be using the service in the designated area.

FREZ can be as small as a single building and as large as a city or an entire country. It also can be virtual and not bound by physical constraints, in which case the zones become "virtual FREZ" and users (not required to be in a physical location) are authenticated (or pre-authorized) by a special code, password, or e-mail address. The basic idea is to open books for

Figure 1.1
Image by Pero Mrnarevic

reading in digital format to people in the areas in which sponsors have a vested interest in having exposure. Here are some examples:

- A public library sponsors free reading in public spaces in the city, town, or community it serves by allowing people to access its virtual collection in designated areas throughout the city (e.g., city parks, trams, buses or trains, etc.) without a library card. The library may use its own funds to sponsor a FREZ, or it may partner with a business or an organization in the community to share the

cost of technology upkeep and reading. *Users in this case are local residents or visitors to the city who find themselves in those areas.*

- A corporation (or government organization) affords its employees free access to books, limiting access to professional literature only or allowing full access to a varied collection including trade books and leisure materials, available for free inside the workplace or outside it via remote authentication. This is an example of both a regular FREZ and a virtual FREZ. *Users in this case are active employees of the corporation. They may also include prospective clients and partners.*
- Patients, visitors, and caregivers inside a hospital (or hospital campus) are given free access to e-books while on the hospital's premises. The hospital enables reading both for pleasure for its patients and their visitors as well as for professional development for its staff and caregivers. *Users in this case are patients, their visitors, caregivers, or hospital staff.*
- A museum affords its visitors free access to its "art book" collection, enabling them to learn about the exhibits they are experiencing firsthand as well as other materials in related categories. The participating museum may choose to expose a variety of books for reading for its visitors, or it may choose only certain collections based on their relevance (e.g., fine arts, photography, natural history). *Users in this case are museum visitors as well as museum employees.*
- A hotel chain makes free reading possible on its premises (including, for example, pools, beaches, hotel rooms, conference rooms), across locations and, if desired, in multiple countries. *Users in this case are hotel guests.*
- An airline company sponsors unlimited free reading of leisure titles for passengers while they are onboard a flight (similarly to how passengers are given free access to movies and other entertainment). *Users in this case are passengers onboard an aircraft.*
- An airport sponsors unlimited free reading for passengers in transit throughout the airport or in certain areas of the airport (e.g., business lounges). *Users in this case are passengers in transit or airport visitors.*
- A country's tourism board sponsors FREZ for tourists while they are vacationing in certain locations inside the country (e.g., urban parks and beaches). *Users in this case are tourists, the country's visitors, as well as residents.*
- A small business, such as a café, allows its guests to read freely on premises via Wi-Fi authentication or access code supplied by staff. *Users in this case are café guests.*

A FREZ gives users the ability to read an e-book from cover to cover without interruption. Thus, the experience of reading books is not shattered by the distraction of an "ad." The benefit for the sponsor is likewise superior because it can get its brand name in front of the customers without offending them in any way. The reading app that is used in the zones does not allow sponsors to "embellish" it with pop-ups or unexpected advertising (as is often the case on sites like YouTube). Instead, the sponsor may only greet the user with a simple statement at the moment the user enters the app. Beyond that point, there is no other opportunity for the sponsor to "invade" the reading.

By honoring the initiative's mission to provide access to books and knowledge without expecting readers to buy products, FREZ empowers the sponsor to provide a benefit of true value. It is a gift of culture for its customers, and everyone's customer is a reader in one way or another. For publishers and authors, too, benefits are unique and multilayered. They can get their books in front of multitudes of people who would otherwise never get past the decision-point barrier of buying or not buying. FREZ can help them create monetary opportunities not afforded to them in physical environments where authors get a few seconds, it seems, to make an impression before their books are replaced with titles from the ever-in-demand "new" catalog.

When libraries are the main sponsors of FREZ—on their own terms or in cooperation with local sponsors (public libraries are no strangers to partnering with a range of organizations in their communities for the benefit of spreading literacy, so this part should be rather familiar to them)—they, too, seek to expand not only their missions to bring books to people but also to play more active roles in their changing communities. Public libraries have struggled with e-book models for a number of years—namely the limitations of the models that don't allow simultaneous access—so by engaging in cutting-edge initiatives like FREZ, which do allow for instant, simultaneous, and uninterrupted access to digital books, they reaffirm their relevance in the highly mobile twenty-first century and show not only true leadership and willingness to embrace change by stepping outside their comfort zones but also willingness to be fully transformed by technology.

Mission and Vision

The goal of the FREZ initiative is to endow geographic areas—including a wide range of public spaces as well as private properties—with culture through the act of reading. E-books accessed in FREZ should represent a rich variety of genres and interests so that readers can always find something interesting or inspiring to

read, regardless of their education background or status. Titles in the collection may range from historical biographies and books of poems to travel guides and cookbooks; from illustrated books and computer manuals to business books and spirituality; from literary fiction and memoir to thrillers and romance; and from children's books and YA fiction to professional literature and scholarly monographs.

Reading is always instant, simultaneous, and unlimited, owing to a business model that allows for seamless discovery of content through the use of sophisticated technology that measures the reading of each user. The model is designed to pay participating publishers and suppliers of books based on what is actually read, not merely downloaded. In other words, the app "recognizes" when a person is actively engaged with a text, versus when they are quickly flipping through the pages, and is able to show what percentage of the book is read at any given time. The app keeps track of reading "behind the scenes," and these numbers are shared with participating publishers and sponsors. Readers' privacy, however, is protected at all times.

What forms is a circle in which everyone benefits:

- *People in the zones*—because they are given free access to knowledge and the written word and are able to discover books they didn't know existed and that may not have been available through their library in print or digital format.
- *Sponsors*—because they are given an opportunity to support a valuable project benefiting a lot of people inside a particular community, thus supporting literacy, education, and preservation of cultural heritage. If sponsors are public libraries, they are given an unprecedented opportunity to cement their reputation as the quintessential enablers of reading and supporters of digital literacy. Libraries may also use the app's versatility for reader's advisory and book recommendations (entire virtual shelves may be created supporting certain authors, book series, library events, or subjects).
- *Publishers*—because they are paid for every reading and given an opportunity to revitalize their backlist and therefore generate more long-term revenue for the titles that don't get bought by bookstores or libraries. They are also given an opportunity to gain useful insight into how their titles are read via the available metrics (note: publishers are not able to pay for additional PR and marketing).
- *Authors and content creators*—because new conditions are created for their work to reach more people than through the traditional print channels, which limit their options and provide a narrow window of opportunity for promotion. This includes both authors being represented by established publishing houses as well as indie authors self-publishing their titles through alternative channels and remaining in control of copyright.
- *Technology companies*—because they are given an opportunity to participate in the building of technologies (i.e., reading apps, e-book features, etc.) that are transforming ways in which people read books online and help build new ways in which content creators are compensated for their work.
- *Society at large*—because conditions are created that allow knowledge to detach itself from institutions and to flow freely in ways not seen before. Various parts of the society see immediate benefits, including those connected to culture, arts, and creativity; the education sector; the publishing and library industry; and the tourism, travel, and hospitality industries.

When an organization supports a FREZ, it allows the creation of a unique advertising, marketing, and branding opportunity that instills desired brand values and creates numerous intersections between the sponsor and the people inside FREZ. Whether the sponsor is a government entity such as a public library or an institution supporting literacy and education or a large private corporation such as a bank or an insurance company, whether the sponsor is a small business looking to create added value for its customers or an entire city wanting to endow its residents with free access to knowledge and culture within city borders, it will likely be perceived as

- Generous—by sponsoring a project not necessarily or directly connected to its commercial interests
- Forward-thinking—because it values technological innovation and knows how to use it to create tangible benefits for people
- Pioneering—because it is ready to step ahead of the pack by taking part in groundbreaking initiatives
- Valuing culture and education—by making an investment toward advancement so various people can reap the benefits regardless of their status and financial means
- Valuing the individual—by providing a service directly to users and customizing it to the needs and interests of each user
- Eco-friendly—because it understands and embraces the environmental value of digital books

The Reading App

Anyone entering a FREZ with a smartphone (iOS or Android) or tablet (iOS, Android, Kindle Fire) is able to download, for free, the reading app—whose name

is usually determined in cooperation with sponsors—and instantly access its catalog. Sometimes the app accessed inside a smaller zone may have the name of the original provider (the IT company) because it's too costly for the business owner (e.g., a small café) to order a new app built just for its customers. If a FREZ involves an entire city or a country and is supported by government entities, the app may carry the name of the designated city or country (e.g., Croatia Reads). It is also possible (but not recommended) that the app carry the name of the sponsor (if, for example, a sponsor is willing to invest in keeping the app open for free reading for a long period of time). If the last is the case, the sponsor will still not be able to introduce advertising inside the app itself, since the goal to preserve the look and feel of a true library must be honored.

The catalog provided via the reading app need not be static and include only a predetermined number of e-books, but it can grow weekly or as often as new publishers come on board and release new titles. In most cases, a FREZ collection grows and users are notified of new additions if they choose to subscribe to weekly e-mail updates.

The user experience includes these basic steps and features:

- Immediately after downloading the free reading app, users may begin adding e-books to their device.
- Users need to register upon first entry into the app either by supplying an e-mail address or, in some cases, by logging in via Facebook. Note: they will not be authenticated further via e-mail address but will receive a welcome e-mail giving them an introductory overview of the project and the collection in the virtual library.
- A short greeting by the sponsor will appear, not in the form of an ad or commercial but a simple message resembling this text: "Welcome to [Name of the App]. Your free reading is made possible by [name of the sponsor or the library if the library is the main sponsor], [description of the sponsor's background]. Enjoy your reading."
- Users' reading will not be interrupted by any other messages or advertising while they are using the app or while they are downloading titles and building their personal collection. The short text-only greeting is the only interaction between the sponsor and the reader. This is because it is important to establish a level of trust between the two and ensure that users and readers in FREZ do not feel that their reading is "owned" in any way.
- The virtual library inside the app is a library in the truest sense, not a place where books are marketed to users or where users are converted into customers. Even libraries that sponsor FREZ are discouraged from using FREZ as a method of attracting new patrons to the library. It is an important part of FREZ's mission to preserve the freedom of access by not authenticating users if they are already inside the reading zone.
- The library features only full titles and never samples of books that publishers wish to expose to encourage print sales. Sampling of any kind is not permitted.
- When users begin reading, the charging system built into the app—designed to monitor reading—will identify or recognize that users are within the borders or boundaries of a FREZ, resulting in no charge to the users. The system, however, continues to monitor the value of users' reading in real time, which is used to calculate the amount owed to publishers.
- Users will never be asked to supply their credit card numbers or other personal information in advance. The app 'cares' only that users are in the right location, physical and/or virtual.
- Since users cannot access books for free unless they are inside a FREZ, those downloaded books will not be available for free reading once a user has left the FREZ. There are exceptions, and they must be coordinated with sponsors in advance. They include scenarios such as, for example, when a hotel wishes to give its guests an added week of free reading upon their return home from vacation (courtesy of hotel) or if a FREZ is virtual and includes a virtual rather than a physical group of readers (e.g., a pharmaceutical company sponsors free reading of medical books for the physicians across an entire country, supplying FREZ with their credentials for authentication).
- The mission and goal of FREZ is to provide free reading to users, not to convert them into paying customers or into library patrons once they leave the zones (this was the concept of the original FREZ, which I do not endorse), so although it is possible with some apps to continue reading outside zones by paying for it (this can be activated at any time with simple adjustments), the ultimate goal is to keep the sponsorship active for as long as possible and to establish a strong connection and level of trust with the user.
- Users do not need to be online to read what they have downloaded. They can read both online and offline. However, they must be online to download titles.
- Important to note: A download is not considered a read; therefore, if users only download titles and place them on their virtual shelves inside an app, without actually opening the books and reading them, the system will not place value on that activity and publishers will not get paid for mere downloading of their books.

- Books are pulled into the app via the site or server that houses the titles (in the case of Total Boox, which was used for the world's first FREZ experiment, the site where books were accessed was www.totalboox.com). Any time users click Get Books inside the app, they are taken to this site, where users continue browsing and finding titles they are interested in downloading.
- When a user downloads titles and returns to the app, the titles will appear on the user's Recent Downloads shelves. From there, they may be moved to various other personal shelves the user creates inside the app.
- The shelves the user creates may be kept private or they may be made public, in which case, they will be visible to others (who may be able to download entire shelves with one click).
- Regardless of how many titles users randomly or impulsively download into the reading app while inside a FREZ, they will not be able to continue reading those books after exiting the zone physically (unless, as already explained, certain conditions are created that allow for this in advance) or once FREZ ceases to be active because a sponsorship has run out or been canceled.

The Business Model

Various business models may be used in FREZ, the choice of which largely depends on the technology company providing the software (i.e., the reading app) and its capabilities. For the purposes of this report, I will describe the model used in our initial efforts—the pay-as-you-read model first introduced to libraries by an Israeli start-up, Total Boox. Like other e-book models that libraries have experimented with in recent years, the metered-reading approach of the Total Boox model is not without challenges, but it is one of the models that work best in FREZ, owing largely to its ability to provide instant and simultaneous access to any number of titles to any number of users at any given time.

Why is it important to have a sound business model for FREZ? Can't a bunch of books be digitized, grouped together, and made available for reading on mobile devices through a simple reading app? Not really. In order for top-notch (and contemporary) content to be exposed for mass consumption for free via sponsored reading, a lot of pieces need to fall into place for all players to commit to the project. As Peyton Stafford puts it in his *No Shelf Required* article, "K–12 Ebook Business Models and Why You Should Care about Them,"

> In order to be effective, the business model must work for both seller and buyer. It will usually involve compromises for both parties, and to some

extent it may be negotiable. When you read the terms and conditions under which you buy [or consume] ebooks, you are reading an explanation of how the business model plays out in life. If you understand the basic model, the basic concept, then all the verbiage becomes easier to understand.[1]

Indeed, without a sound business model in place that clearly outlines what the specific benefits are for all in the circle—readers, authors, publishers, tech companies, and sponsors—no idea or concept can materialize, certainly not one that involves opening up massive amounts of new books by top publishers for free reading. In the case of FREZ, the initial idea was to use (or test) the Total Boox pay-as-you-read model for consumption of e-books. This model was originally conceived for consumers and later adapted for libraries, and its key distinction in the sea of e-book business models is that it never guarantees a full retail price of a book for any reading to the publisher. The publisher is never compensated in advance for simply supplying books (in EPUB format). Instead, the publisher must earn its revenue, and this cannot be influenced in advance.

Through my work with Total Boox, I've come to recognize this model as the closest to *the ideal one* for FREZ because it had many more advantages than drawbacks. It required everyone (publishers, tech companies, and those paying for reading) to place the trust in readers and their ability to decide what they want to read without any influence. For context, this is how Total Boox was promoted to libraries when it first entered the library market in 2014:

- Total Boox is an e-book service that gives library patrons unlimited simultaneous use of titles, while libraries pay only for what their patrons read.
- E-books are available for instant download, patron access to them never expires, and no restrictions are imposed by participating publishers or libraries.
- Total Boox's entire collection (backlist and frontlist) is made available to library patrons for instant discovery, without limitations.
- Patrons download e-books onto their Android, iOS, or Kindle device and read them (online or offline) using Total Boox's free reading app.
- Total Boox keeps track of all reading, charges libraries for parts read (not pages, actual percentage), and shares all proceeds with publishers quarterly.
- If a patron reads 50 percent of a twenty-dollar-e-book, the library is charged ten dollars for that reading. The patron may read the rest of the e-book at any time in the future as long as their library card is valid. If and when the patron

completes the e-book, the library is charged 20 dollars.

- All content paid for by the library remains on the patron's device indefinitely.
- The library is never charged for e-books that are downloaded but not read by patrons.
- The library remains in full control of the budget because it determines in advance how much it wishes to allocate for reading via this app over the course of a year (or longer).
- If the budget is reached before the year is over, the library must replenish its balance or the patron will lose access to the collection.
- If the library never reaches its budget, the remaining amount is rolled over into the following year.
- Libraries are able to gain insight into their patrons' activities throughout the process by logging into a dashboard and tracking usage in real time.
- Libraries may also generate reports that allow them to spot trends; gain a better understanding of the types of titles, subjects, and authors their patrons are interested in; and make more accurate predictions about what to buy for the permanent collection as well as make decisions if and when their balance runs low.

The concept of the Total Boox model is a radical one for libraries because it invites them to completely remove the idea of buying and owning content from the equation. Instead, libraries are asked to embrace the idea of providing access in a world that sees well over a million new titles published every year[2]—a staggering statistic that makes it challenging, if not downright impossible, for libraries to keep up through traditional methods of acquiring. This is a radical departure from what is at the heart of the library profession: collection development and curation.

With this model, librarians are invited to re-envision their professional identities and perceive themselves not as representing institutions that amass content and make it available to the public through varied channels (print or digital) but as representing institutions that do not purchase digital content (in this case, e-books) or engage in the act of thoughtful curation as has been the case with print materials but simply expose content for discovery and then get out of the way (of reading).

In essence, this model asks libraries to act as distributors of content that gets downloaded onto patrons' devices via a third-party app, and if that content is actually consumed (i.e., read), and the technology can track usage, it eventually belongs to the patron (not the library). What a patron or reader reads via the Total Boox app remains on that person's device indefinitely. In other words, the library has paid for each reading, as it occurred, and transferred the ownership over to the patron in the process. The library, then, has not bought any content. It hasn't invested in a permanent collection either. It has instead made an investment toward giving its patrons access to what they wanted (remember, the library did not buy anything in advance; it allowed Total Boox to expose the entire collection to patrons, giving them the impression that their library owns all that content) and allowed them to read it. Put simply, the library became the middleman and merely distributed the content.

When patrons walk into a library offering this type of a business model, they are immediately able to access thousands of titles (nothing is withheld from them and nothing is unavailable or subject to waiting lists or restrictions imposed by publishers). Suddenly, their local library appears powerful, given how many titles it is making available for instant consumption. This is an illusion, of course, since the library never purchased any e-books in advance from the vendor (as is the case with many e-book models, including the one copy-one user model). Instead, the library simply agreed to a model that stages the books for reading (i.e., exposes them all at once without requiring the library to pay up front or second-guess what may be of interest to readers); monitors patrons' reading as it takes place; and will pay only for what the patrons wanted.

If a library is uncomfortable with unpredictability, worrying that the cost of reading may escalate dramatically, it may opt to commit to a flat fee for a certain period of time, to which the vendor will agree after it has had the time to evaluate the size of the library and its population served. Bottom line for the library: all money is always spent on reading, and patrons never have to deal with waiting lines, holds, and expirations. In addition, the library can set a budget for reading that must be honored by the vendor, which will make recommendations in advance based on population and type of community served and its digital behavior (e.g., certain parts of the country see much greater use of e-books than others).

One wonders, then, why publishers would agree to participate in what is just as much of a radical departure from the norm for them (given that they must give up counting on the full price of the book regardless of whether it's read or not) as it is for libraries. After all, with this model, they do not make any money in advance, making it difficult to anticipate revenue and protect bottom lines (especially when it comes to the revenue earned from the frontlist). They are also no longer guaranteed to earn predictable revenue from unit sales. Instead, they get paid only a percentage of what is read, and in some cases, particularly in the case of modestly priced mass market titles, that does not amount to much revenue.

While it may seem that the benefits of this model for publishers aren't as obvious as they are for public libraries—which get to provide more content through

this model than any other and eliminate the frustrations they have been facing with e-books, particularly in relation to waiting lists, holds, and disappearance of titles from devices—the benefits do become more apparent once we take the time to understand the business of publishing, particularly the challenges on the digital side and the challenges the industry continues to face in a world rapidly adapting to technological innovation.

Let's first explain how the model works for publishers:

- Upon signing an agreement with the distributor or tech company, the publisher uploads its full inventory into the catalog in EPUB format.
- The publisher decides the price of each e-book; in the vast majority of cases, the price is the retail price of the print counterpart. This is a sensible approach that has proven to work well with the model, making the cost of reading for libraries (as well as individual readers) affordable and manageable.
- Publishers get paid for each reading based on how much of each book is read; for example, if the book is read in full, the publisher is paid the full retail price for that one reading; if a book is read partially, the publisher receives partial payment for that book's reading (i.e., a percentage of the retail price).
- No matter how many people read the same book at the same time, the publisher always gets paid for each reading, resulting in incremental revenue that grows over time.
- Publishers are sent reports (and payments) quarterly that show reading activities of readers. Publishers may also log into a live dashboard to track usage in real time and have full insight into what to expect revenue-wise.
- Like libraries, publishers gain valuable insight into how their titles are read, allowing them to spot emerging trends and understand the impact various titles are having on readers.
- Publishers get paid each time someone reads (whether an individual subscriber or a library patron), regardless of how many people may be reading the same book at the same time. The books are always available for reading to anyone using the service.

One of the key benefits of this model for publishers is the ability to create sales where sales would not have otherwise occurred. The reality of the publishing market today is such that the vast majority of books published (worldwide, not only in the United States) never make it into bookstores or libraries, leaving them in the dark and out of reach of potential readers. What bookstore or library could possibly order

everything ever published when the world is seeing such rapid growth in the number of books published each year and is, according to Worldometers, already at well over one million?[3]

The publishing market has been saturated for decades, while traditional methods of promoting and marketing new titles upon publication have left many authors with limited options. This model allows publishers to expose backlist titles for discovery (and rediscovery) and reach new readers, resulting in new revenue streams and monetization of the backlist.

In addition, publishers are compensated fairly because any time any part of any book is read, libraries pay for it on behalf of patrons (or, in the case of FREZ, sponsors pay for it on behalf of users in the zone). In the vast majority of cases, libraries would never purchase such a book for their print collection or consider investing in it in advance for the simple reason that there is only so much money they can spend on acquiring new titles. In other words, this model gives books, their authors, and their publishers a second chance to make the first impression.

Here's a rundown of the key benefits for publishers:

- Expose books for reading that are no longer making sales in print
- Expose books for reading that are not found in bookstores and libraries
- Create new revenue streams by getting paid each time someone reads
- Monetize backlist by giving old titles a new life
- Use reading reports to gain insight into how and what people read
- Position the publishing brand as one fully bracing digital innovation
- Strengthen their relationship with libraries by remaining open to non-traditional models

In short, the pay-as-you-read model is a win-win scenario in which both libraries and publishers stand to gain. Librarians give their patrons instant, simultaneous access to thousands of titles they wouldn't otherwise purchase for permanent collections. This augments the library's offerings significantly, allowing it to provide superior service, while allowing publishers to monetize their backlists. Libraries are given an opportunity to improve curation, Reader's Advisory, and discovery of content, while publishers get to do more with the content that gets forgotten too quickly and has a very short life span unless given another chance in digital format.

Early Challenges

So how exactly did this game-changing e-book business model, which promised to alleviate the

frustrations public libraries have had with e-books for years, get chosen for FREZ? It didn't. It actually inspired it. The model wasn't originally conceived as *the* model that would bring *free* books to people inside certain zones. There certainly was no mission attached to it. The model was conceived by an Israeli company as an idea for how individual consumers or libraries should pay for e-books, and the premise of it from the beginning had been that people (or libraries) shouldn't purchase e-books in advance but should instead pay for them only if and when they are read.

The simplicity (and strength) of the model was that it worked equally well for the consumer market as it did for libraries. It was a public library director, in fact, who discovered it one year when attending a digital book conference, recommending that it be tested in libraries. His library (Westchester Library System in New York) would eventually become the first library pilot in the United States.[4]

The original idea of FREZ was, in fact, tied to the libraries working with Total Boox in the United States who were invited to go beyond the confines of their walls and into their communities by using this model to spread more reading and attract more people to the library. In other words, any library that signed with Total Boox was able to pick an area in its community outside the library and designate it as a FREZ sponsored (or brought to people) by the library (e.g., a nearby park, hospital, airport, etc.). The money the library had already set aside for reading through this model would also be used in the zone, which meant the library did not need to spend additional money to implement a FREZ.

People who happen to be in that zone would be able to access the local library collection without restriction. If they wanted to continue reading outside the zone, they would log in with their library credentials, or they would have to get a library card and become patrons. As soon as they did that, they'd be able to use the app anywhere. In essence, the original Free Reading Zones were to be sponsored by local libraries, and they were to serve as promotional vehicles not just for the Total Boox app and its growing digital collection, but, more importantly, for the library itself, as they would promote the library as people-friendly, innovative, taking part in cutting-edge projects that bring books to people, all resulting in people signing up for library cards.

As attractive as this sounds in theory—and, as my experience shows, not difficult to pull off in practice—getting libraries that already implemented Total Boox to cooperate was no easy task. It still isn't (the Total Boox model remains a viable option, among other alternative models, including those offered by hoopla digital, Odilo, OverDrive, and 3M, now owned by bibliotheca). From the onset, it was my responsibility (I was in charge of both content development and library marketing for Total Boox at the time) to help participating libraries understand that they had nothing to lose and everything to gain through this experiment. All they really needed to do was find a location, get permission (if necessary), partner with other organizations in the area (if they wanted them to absorb the cost of reading), and let Total Boox do the rest (the start-up's IT professionals would handle the technological management to ensure the app was functioning properly inside the zones, etc.).

Still, libraries in the United States dragged their feet. The company had, at the time, several major deals under its belt, including one state-wide deal and some affluent urban libraries, and I decided to engage the leaders among them first, hoping they'd act quickly and lead by example. Although my library contacts showed enthusiasm early on and understood it was an add-on service that would help them and Total Boox enable more reading and open up new opportunities for how e-books reached readers in their communities (and outside libraries), they had difficulty committing. For a number of months, my colleagues at Total Boox and I tried to implement FREZ with the libraries we worked with to no avail. After numerous face-to-face meetings, phone conversations, e-mail exchanges, and conference dinners, it became obvious that the US libraries we worked with were not going to jump on it as quickly as I'd hoped.

The more they pushed back—without really explaining why, other than to say they were overwhelmed tackling other issues at the library—the more certain I became they were missing out. Really missing out. Why wouldn't they want to spread reading outside libraries if they had the model that allowed them to do just that? They were already paying for it, and we were offering to do all the extra work for them. Why wouldn't they want to make the most of the budget already set in advance? Why wouldn't they want to let us help them do something innovative? Have they really taken the time to understand the real potential of e-books?

In my opinion, and now that I've had time to reflect, most librarians I talked to simply didn't give it enough thought because other library-related issues got in the way or staff changes took place that directly affected the project (e.g., a librarian who was going to launch the first library FREZ in the United States involving a local hospital was given a new role at the library in the midst of FREZ negotiations, which resulted in the person who replaced him canceling the FREZ). Then there was the issue of devoting time and people to the project. Any time a library director decides to embark on a new project, they know it will take a lot of time, energy, and manpower. Given how understaffed and underfunded many libraries are, library directors must choose the projects they wish to support carefully.

It must have been that very frustration that led to a lightbulb going off in my head one day when I was explaining the benefits of FREZ to a librarian at a conference outside the United States, who seemed intrigued but said his library had no money to even start investing in e-books, let alone engage in innovative e-book projects. I brought up the possibility of partnering with another organization to share the cost of reading. That's when it hit me: Why should libraries be the only ones paying for this reading? There are a lot of businesses and institutions out there that could get involved and get a lot out of the endeavor. And why only the United States and the affluent areas? What about the rest of the world? And why only parks, hospitals, or airports near libraries? Why not any public or private space that wants to be endowed with culture? We've got this e-book model that allows people to read instantly and simultaneously, while paying publishers and authors, and with the support from businesses willing to sponsor reading and support literacy, we can take the collection anywhere.

At this point, a new vision for FREZ began to emerge—both the project and the initiative—and it no longer involved only libraries, the United States, or affluent areas we usually associate with innovation. I envisioned it as a global initiative spreading reading wherever books in digital format are welcome; finding sponsors willing to support access to books and knowledge in their communities; embracing the idea of a child or a young student in a small developing country having free access to the exact same collection of books as a child or a young student in New York. An initiative centered around the idea of turning remote rural places around the world into open virtual libraries as well as the idea of turning businesses (like hotels, cafes, etc.) into places where culture is abundant and knowledge flowing freely for the purposes of marketing and advertising. An initiative bringing the profits and the nonprofits together in a joint effort to tap into the power of technology to transform the very notion of open libraries.

The central idea of the project was thus born: when it came to access to books and knowledge, we could all be equal. No shelf required. No pass required. Pure availability of books. And not just old books already available for free online (i.e., public domain titles), or unpopular books publishers are willing to give away or test waters with for marketing purposes, but new, relevant, and sought-after titles by the world's top publishers and authors who would get compensated for their participation. A world in which libraries are at their most powerful when they become invisible.

On the heels of ending my contract with Total Boox, I had found a new project that would keep me connected to e-books and digital publishing for a while longer. Except this time, it wasn't just another project. It was a calling.

Notes

1. Peyton Stafford, "K–12 Ebook Business Models and Why You Should Care about Them," *No Shelf Required*, May 4, 2017, www.noshelfrequired.com/k-12-ebook-business-models.
2. Worldometers, "New Book Titles Published This Year," accessed July 3, 2017, www.worldometers.info/books.
3. Ibid.
4. See Mirela Roncevic, "Total BooX, a New Ebook Platform for Libraries, Launches," *No Shelf Required* January 21, 2014, www.noshelfrequired.com/total-boox-a-new-ebook-platform-for-libraries-launches.