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FREE READING ZONES

TRANSFORMING ACCESS TO
BOOKS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Mirela Roncevic

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Free Reading Zones: Transforming Access to Books through Technology

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Free Reading Zones: Transforming Access to Books through Technology

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About the Author

Mirela Roncevic is a professional editor, writer, content developer, and consultant to publishers, libraries, and library vendors. She has written, edited, and spearheaded the publication of a wide range of books, book series, articles, journals, portals, and digital resources. In 2016, Mirela founded the Free Reading Zones (FREZ) project, which brings developers, publishers, libraries, and sponsors together to turn public and private spaces into open virtual libraries, where people have access to books and other content in digital format. She also teaches classes on e-books through the American Library Association, hosts webinars and workshops on e-books and digital publishing, moderates panels at library conferences and book fairs, and speaks internationally on e-books and e-content.

She currently serves as Director of *No Shelf Required*, a portal on e-books and digital content and an organization helping libraries implement FREZ. She was previously Director of Content for Total Boox, Managing Editor of Salem Press's "Critical Insights" series, and Senior Book Review Editor at *Library Journal*.

Abstract

This issue of *Library Technology Reports* (vol. 53, no. 7), "Free Reading Zones: Transforming Access to Books through Technology," explores Free Reading Zones (FREZ), which are designated areas that provide people free and uninterrupted access to e-books through sponsorships. The 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. Roncevic explores how FREZ can empower the e-book industry—consumers, aggregators, distributors, and publishers—by equalizing access to knowledge and education in areas beyond thriving city communities. Describing her experience launching the first FREZ in a small European café and turning the entire country of Croatia into an open virtual library for one whole month, she shows how creating open virtual libraries can make reading more accessible and open. The goal of this report is to both inspire and motivate librarians to embrace the idea of open virtual libraries and attempt similar initiatives in their communities.

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**Books are like imprisoned souls till
someone takes them down from a shelf
and frees them.**

—Samuel Butler

Preface

Free 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.

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 year²—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 embracing 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.

Key Benefits of Free Reading Zones

Empowering Authors, Publishers, and Readers

Since launching the FREZ initiative in the summer of 2016, I have published countless articles¹ and given numerous presentations (at live conferences and via webinars) on the impact of FREZ on society and its various sectors, particularly the book and library industry—including publishers, authors, libraries, book distributors, and all who work with books and encourage or enable dissemination of knowledge in one form or another. I have usually discussed the benefits of FREZ in the context of three distinct branches of society: culture, education, and tourism.

If we think of the book industry as belonging under the umbrella of Culture and Cultural Affairs, we can discuss the benefits of FREZ in the context of promoting arts and creativity as well as enabling reading and influencing lifestyles (e.g., people embrace the idea of reading books on their mobile devices the same way they listen to music on the go). When creating conditions that allow for digital reading of books to become the fabric of life—the way it has already become with other types of content online, including, for example, news portals and blogs—we enable more reading to take place outside the usual and expected settings, and we allow more culture to flow. Reading is no longer tied to physical objects that are carried around, and it no longer needs to be tied only to specific locations (e.g., privacy of one's home, the library). Instead, it becomes an ongoing activity that occurs whenever and wherever users want to experience it. It is, therefore, more spontaneous and more in line with today's on-the-go lifestyles.

As we've learned from the industries that have undergone digital transformations before publishing



Figure 2.1
Image by *No Shelf Required*

(e.g., the news industry, the music industry), the fastest (and perhaps easiest) way to get people used to consuming content in new environments (in this case, digital) is by making the content freely and easily accessible through sponsorships (think of enjoying music on YouTube or reading quality news articles online for free). While *free* does mean readers don't pay for the reading, that does not translate to publishers and content creators not getting their fair share. It

simply means *someone* other than the reader is picking up the tab and doing it because that *someone* sees value in being part of a project that supports culture and sharing of human creativity.

A wide range of businesses and institutions support cultural endeavors of all kinds, usually orchestrated by various government entities (e.g., institutions that exist for the sole purpose of promoting literacy and education). But it is also not unusual for a bank or insurance company to sponsor a book festival or some gathering where people celebrate creativity in literature and arts. Major corporations have entire departments devoted to sponsorships of cultural events. It helps those corporations develop brands with a human face and garner sympathy, respect, and even new customers along the way. When presenting the FREZ project to potential sponsors, I emphasize what is a powerful distinction between supporting typical cultural events and supporting FREZ—the support of not only the creator (author) but also the one consuming the created (reader).

While FREZ benefits publishers, authors, and software companies because those whose work is exposed in the zones get paid through a merit-based business model, it ultimately—and above all—benefits the end user. By supporting a FREZ, the sponsor engages in an unprecedented type of sponsorship that not only helps a very small, isolated segment of the society belonging to cultural circles get the funding it needs to keep its operations running, but also helps the ultimate beneficiary, the reader, by exposing them to more culture, information, and educational content. And by helping the reader, the sponsor actually helps an entire industry because more books are discoverable in FREZ, more authors are promoted, and more opportunities are created for publishers to tap into new revenue streams.

Speaking of publishers, let us not forget that in today's digital age, traditional publishing houses are but one outlet through which authors can publish their work. In the past decade alone, there has been a proliferation of indie publishers and self-publishing services allowing more aspiring writers to get published than ever before in history. Some choose to publish their work in digital format only (the cheaper route), while others embrace a host of services available to them by companies specializing in helping independent authors publish and distribute their work. In fact, well more than half a million new titles published each year do not bear the imprint of an established publishing house. They are self-published. According to a Bowker report, more than 700,000 books were self-published in the United States in 2015.²

When the notion of self-publishing entered the picture, it was perceived by many as challenging, encouraging mediocrity, devaluing the integrity of the editorial process (the backbone of publishers' businesses),

devaluing the price of books (because self-published titles were sold for a fraction of the cost of professionally published titles), and calling into question the very notion of an author and who qualifies to be called an author. According to a 2002 *New York Times* article, 81 percent of Americans said in a survey they “had a book in them” that they wanted to publish.³

Although valid concerns exist about the quality of self-published titles, valid arguments also point to a significant number of high-quality titles produced independently. Traditional and independent publishing now coexist rather than trying to discredit one another, and both need to be given their fair share of exposure through FREZ. This, of course, does not mean that every book ever published can easily be uploaded into the system without authorization (filtering on some level still remains part of the process, and that's certainly been the case with FREZ; in fact, Total Boox's collection has always been curated by editorial staff, myself included, and we did not allow random content to enter it without prior approval or validation), but it does mean that independent publishers and authors are equally welcome to contribute.

When users enter the virtual library inside a FREZ, they are automatically exposed to a wide range of titles in a wide range of categories by a wide range of authors and publishers in a wide range of languages. Because books are always there, ready to be downloaded and read, the collection can be as comprehensive as possible. In fact, the more comprehensive the catalog, the greater the chance that more books will be discovered by more readers. Therefore, this virtual library does not discriminate when it comes to content types. The same readers who enter the library to read for leisure and get lost in books about sports and entertainment may also discover books relevant for their professional development or continuing education.

This virtual library also does not discriminate when it comes to publishers and authors. While various titles get highlighted on the main page (the homepage), and these highlights change frequently and are meant to encourage browsing and promote the breadth and depth of the collection, no special treatment is given to certain publishers, titles, or authors. As already explained, there are no additional marketing opportunities for publishers or authors to pay to get more exposure. Once readers enter the app, they are left alone to browse among thousands of titles in hundreds of categories as they see fit. One moment they may be perusing a highly sought-after title by a reputable New York-based publisher, and the next moment they may be perusing a self-published title by a Texas-based mystery fiction author.

This type of a setting ensures that a fair chance is given to authors whose titles have traditionally not benefited from the standard marketing and PR practices

of well-known publishers. It also ensures readers are given an opportunity to discover literature on their own terms without being influenced by outside forces. One of FREZ's core values is that it places trust in the reader's ability to navigate their way through the maze of reading possibilities in an open virtual library. It encourages them to go on spontaneous reading voyages where there are no middlemen pointing readers in one direction and not another to encourage sales of specific titles. The reader—and only the reader—gets to decide what content to consume and when.

This setting, I believe, empowers readers to become savvy consumers of literature who, over time, develop their own censoring mechanism and ability to distinguish among the options available to them. In addition, a strong message is sent to readers that their privacy is respected and never called into question. If they reach for a book to read at a bookstore or a physical library, they usually do not enjoy the benefits of full privacy. There is usually a counter they will need to walk to, where the physical objects in their hands will be seen by at least one person and logged into the system as a sale or a checkout. The word *free* in FREZ, therefore, has two equally powerful connotations. The first alludes to the reading being free of charge to the user; the second alludes to the reader experiencing true freedom of reading in an environment where a possible discomfort of the physical experience of having to deal with a clerk is eliminated.

Even if this person at the library (or the bookstore) is a complete stranger, and even if the library also protects the right to privacy (as it does), the patron may not feel completely at ease while at the counter. To experience the complete freedom of reading, readers need to be inside a virtual library, where no physical person awaits them at the counter. While reading in FREZ is measured (in aggregate) to determine how much to pay publishers, it is not kept track of in ways it is kept track of in libraries. The system never asks users to confirm their private information or asks them to show an ID. It simply identifies them as readers inside a location determined via GPS coordinates or Wi-Fi network.

Another noteworthy cultural benefit of FREZ is the mixing of literatures for the sake of promoting authors and titles outside their national or ethnic (and geographically limiting) settings. Since the collection of e-books grows constantly and is multilingual, a wide variety of books in languages other than English are also part of the offering. This means that a FREZ in the United States will expose books in French and German, while a FREZ in France and Germany will expose books in English. This also means that various ethnic communities across the United States will be exposed to books in their native tongue, which have always been supplied in limited quality through local libraries.

One of the main reasons the publishing industry trails behind other industries in terms of its ability to transform digitally has to do with the underlying fear of piracy and cannibalization of print sales once e-books *really* take off. Since the advent of e-books, many book publishers, particularly the Big Five (HarperCollins, Random Penguin, Simon & Schuster, MacMillan, and Hachette) have remained resistant to experimenting with business models other than one copy—one user, particularly in the library market (at the time of the writing of this report, HarperCollins had just announced a new partnership with hoopla digital,⁴ which will allow it to test a nontraditional model, and this certainly shows progress). This is why there has been much friction between those publishers and libraries in the past decade. Although publishing has made great strides with e-books, in terms of both their functionality and their affordability, the old notion that digital and print formats compete—that one somehow cancels out the other—persists.

I have argued (and still believe) that those claims have been exaggerated, taken out of context, and persist largely owing to a lack of understanding of the unique benefits of each format. Given that I came of age as a book professional in traditional print publishing, it wasn't until I migrated to the digital side that I began to understand the distinct benefits of each format afforded to readers, publishers, and libraries. Print and digital have, in fact, never really competed. If anything, they complement each other. One of the goals of FREZ is to create conditions for exposing e-books for free consumption while simultaneously creating conditions for marketing those same titles in print so that readers who discover them in electronic format may want to own them (or give them as gifts) as physical objects. Even if readers don't reach for a print version at any point after engaging with its digital counterpart in FREZ, content creators will be compensated for the reading as it unfolds, every step of the way.

In summary, these are the key cultural benefits of FREZ:

- New opportunities for publishers, big and small, to reinvent their businesses
- New opportunities for old or neglected literature to be discovered by new readers
- New opportunities for sponsors and libraries to help preserve cultural heritage
- Empowerment of independent authors and indie presses
- Empowerment of readers and an investment toward their literacy
- Encouragement of creativity beyond traditional cultural circles
- Opportunity for cultural entities (e.g., museums) to enhance their offerings

- Exposure to literature in other languages and from other cultures, encouraging a blending of cultural heritage

Equalizing Access to Knowledge and Education

The power of the e-book, as I see it, is precisely its ability to be available to anyone, anywhere, at the same time. More specifically, the power of the e-book (or digital text, in general) is to equalize access to information and knowledge in ways not possible in the physical world since the advent of the printing press. Our society has largely depended on government entities to provide us with the knowledge and education necessary to thrive as we transition into adulthood. But until the advent of the Internet and online technologies in the 1990s, you needed to live in the right zip code to have access to the world's most affluent libraries (this is still largely the case).

You need not look further than how various libraries have dealt with e-books to see that small budgets have prevented many libraries in the United States from implementing e-book programs. Meanwhile, the most affluent city library systems, such as, for example, New York Public Library (NYPL), continue to reinvent the digital wheel and engage in innovative projects most other libraries in the United States will not be able to for a long time. People living in thriving urban areas have had the privilege of getting free access to e-books via their local libraries for years.

In early June 2017, NYPL announced the release of Subway Library, a new initiative between NYPL, Brooklyn Public Library, Queens Library, the MTA, and Transit Wireless that provides subway riders in New York City with free access to hundreds of e-books, excerpts, and short stories.⁵ The libraries are using their own SimplyE reading app (rather than relying on third-party vendors to supply the platform). This is the perfect example of an innovative FREZ project in which libraries take center stage and act not only as sponsors (in cooperation with other companies, in this case Transit Wireless and the MTA) but also as technology providers and remain in charge of the business model that suits them and their needs.

The innovation we see take place with New York City libraries, however, is not the innovation we witness in the rest of the United States and most of the world, where access to quality literature in digital format remains marginal at best. In fact, most of the world's public libraries—from what my experience dealing with libraries outside the United States has taught me—do not provide access to e-books for the simple reason that they cannot afford it. Likewise, as the recent white paper by the Frankfurt Book Fair, *Business of Books 2017*, revealed, only six countries

continue to dominate the book, and consequently the e-book, business: the United States, the United Kingdom, China, France, Germany, and Japan.⁶

If the true potential of the e-book is to be available to anyone, anywhere, whose responsibility is it to unleash that potential? Clearly, libraries cannot do this alone, if for no other reason than for the simple fact that while they may all be created equal, they do not all have the same means. A library such as NYPL gets more donations and endowment money than hundreds, if not thousands, of libraries around the world combined (see, for example, the March 2017 *New York Times* article revealing a \$20 million gift given to NYPL by Meryll H. Tisch, the former chancellor of the New York State Board of Regents, and her husband, James S. Tisch, the president and chief executive of Lowes Corporation).⁷

The same argument may be applied to academic libraries. How does a library supporting research at Harvard or MIT measure up to a library supporting a small community college in a developing country? Should students not enrolled at Harvard or MIT have the right to the same information and research as students lucky enough to be attending Ivy League schools and other elite schools?

This issue has been at the heart of the open-access (OA) movement, which began on the journals side of publishing and has in recent years spread to e-books (known OA initiatives include Knowledge Unlatched and Unglue.It). Its basic premise is to make scholarly (and other) content available for free (usually in PDF) to users anywhere in the world by relying on support from participating libraries or other institutions to cover the cost of production in advance (so that publishers and authors are compensated for their work). The OA model faced some resistance in its early stages but is today embraced even by the largest scholarly publishers, which now have departments dedicated to producing OA journals and e-books.

Like OA, FREZ seeks to expose scholarly content free of charge to the user (who may read it but not redistribute it for personal gain), but there are key differences. FREZ does not serve as a publishing tool that guarantees some revenue to the author and publisher in advance, regardless of whether the publication gets read or not. FREZ pays publishers, regardless of the types of books they publish (including monographs, handbooks, and other scholarly materials), only if and when any part of the books has been read. These are books usually sold to bookstores and libraries at regular retail (or library) prices or sold online through channels like Amazon for about the same price as their print counterparts.

As already explained, FREZ does not discriminate between publishers, authors, or types of books. It gives every genre equal exposure and allows readers to find their way to the literature that interests them,

which may range from a romance novel and spirituality to travel and cooking and from professional literature to scientific handbooks. As more and more publishers develop OA programs, and more academic books become unlatched and unglued, the greater the impact on the communities with limited access to educational content. FREZ, on the other hand, seeks to democratize access to knowledge by making available all the books of any publisher willing to participate, now. If FREZ includes areas that are home to large numbers of students and academics, the benefits for the education sector are all the more visible.

Leveling the Playing Field

In April 2016, I was invited to speak about FREZ in Osijek, a city in the east of Croatia that, some twenty-five years after the war, still shows visible signs of devastation (bullet-ravaged buildings still populate even the main square). This “forgotten” city, as it’s often called, may still be in the process of rebuilding itself, but it’s a city that recognizes the value of free access to knowledge. Otherwise, its main educational institution, the University of Osijek (UO), wouldn’t have invited me to speak about FREZ. I spoke in an auditorium full mostly of students (but including some faculty) about the importance of free access to knowledge for university students like those at UO, where access to textbooks in print format is very limited and not anywhere near the standards of the universities in other cities in the country, especially in the capital of Zagreb.

I drew their attention to the main goal of FREZ: to level the playing field. To give cities like Osijek and its residents an equal chance at education and success in life. When a city like Osijek, for example, becomes an open virtual library, any person inside the city’s border (including but not limited to those attending UO) could access thousands of books in digital format via a free app regardless of their affiliation. The goal is to uplift rural areas and economically disadvantaged regions where libraries struggle to remain open and where bookstores have long gone out of business (as is the case in Osijek).

During the discussion that followed the presentation, I learned (from the students) that the university library does not provide textbooks in digital format. On average, there are two print textbooks (or required course readings) available for the entire class (usually averaging hundreds of students), and they often perform poorly on exams owing to the fact that they simply don’t get to the materials fast enough (the materials are passed around). This is not the case in the capital, of course, or the most developed parts of the country that have not been affected by the war. This is, however, an accurate portrayal of what higher

education looks like in many cities in Croatia, and in many countries in Europe and all over the world, even the most developed ones, including, of course, the United States.

As our industry continues to explore the possibilities with e-books and e-content, and the wealthiest urban libraries (public and academic) continue to expand their influence (and receive the most funding), let us not forget that the vast majority of libraries around the world are trailing behind. Despite the technological advances of the past two decades, our industry has a way to go before it fully taps into the potential of e-books to equalize access to knowledge in educational settings. FREZ is an attempt to get there in a way that gives credit and compensation where credit and compensation are due.

Aligning Missions with Non-book Industries

One of the most invigorating aspects of digital publishing has been its ability to partner with industries outside the world of books to develop new ways in which books and authors reach people. Nowhere is this more evident than perhaps with the tourism, hospitality, and travel industries, which stand to gain a great deal when making e-books part of their strategy for attracting and impressing guests and visitors. For the first time in history, hotels, resorts, restaurants, cafes, and airports, among other entities, are able to enhance their offerings by allowing guests or visitors to read e-books while on the premises. In other words, modern-day technology allows them to morph into open virtual libraries or become extensions of their local libraries.

Why didn’t we think of this sooner? Or why did it take us this long? After all, hotels and airline companies have been providing entertainment services to travelers for decades (e.g., free movies, music). The challenge with e-books, of course, has been the unwillingness on the part of major publishers to experiment with business models that expose their books (including bestsellers) in digital format for reasons already stated. To their credit, the Big Five, while still not making radical changes to how they want their new titles consumed digitally, are showing signs that they are at least willing to consider options other than the one copy–one user model, even if only with older or less popular titles. A good example is HarperCollins’s recent deal with hoopla digital to offer thousands of backlist titles via hoopla’s cost-per-circulation business model, which pays publishers per loan instead of paying fixed fees to acquire titles.⁸

As my experience with Total Boox has shown (one of my main responsibilities while working with the company was to bring new publishers on board and

make them comfortable with the new model), aside from the Big Five, many top-notch publishers are willing to work with alternative models. This allowed us to create a diverse and strong portfolio of tens of thousands of titles by brands known for being open to experimentation with e-books, including Workman (general nonfiction); Sourcebooks (genre fiction and general nonfiction); Berrett-Koehler (business books); Lonely Planet and Berlitz (travel); O'Reilly Media (IT and computer books); Open Road Media (best-sellers from the backlist by a variety of publishers); New World Library and Red Wheel Weiser (top-notch spirituality); Other Press (literary fiction); and Elsevier, De Gruyter, and Wolters Kluwer (academic and professional).

The willingness of these publishers to embrace the pay-as-you-read model has made it possible to attract sponsors for FREZ because it has shown commitment from major players in the industry. It also showed that the collection was populated with books that users in the zones were likely to download and read. The more reading occurs in FREZ, the greater the chance that potential sponsors will consider the project worth their while. And the larger the number of people using the free reading app, the greater the exposure for the sponsor. The strength of this list also made the model more attractive to libraries early on because they'd be able to offer their patrons access to quality literature by well-known brands for which there would be no restrictions.

The Library Connection

Where exactly does this leave libraries? If new technologies are enabling software companies to partner with publishers to develop digital collections, expose them for reading via a patented business model, and then also partner with companies outside publishing, such as hotel chains and airline companies, why would it even be necessary to get the local library involved in the process of implementing FREZ?

As already explained, libraries were at the heart of the project early on. FREZ was first envisioned as an extension of the service provided by public libraries, not its replacement. If libraries choose to participate, they may do so in several ways, depending on their goals, digital strategies, financial standing, and willingness to embrace cutting-edge initiatives supporting literacy and research beyond the confines of physical buildings. These are some possible scenarios:

- *As main sponsors*, in which case the library uses its own budget to turn an entity into a FREZ for the purposes of improving its image and encouraging readers in those zones to use the library for other reasons (e.g., print materials, workshops, etc.). In

other words, the zones may become places where libraries get to communicate directly with potential patrons and promote library services.

- *As co-partners*, in which case the library relies on the funding from a private sponsor (the other partner) to enable reading in the community. This is a good option for libraries with limited budgets and no resources to invest in their digital infrastructure. By reaching out to the businesses in their community, they may find the funding for this project the same way they get funding for other literacy-related endeavors. This is also a good option for sponsors looking to directly support libraries.
- *As main organizers*, in which case the library takes on the role of not only the sponsor but also the driving force behind the whole initiative, with local librarians actively participating in every aspect of implementing a FREZ, including possibly even the development of the library's own reading app (as is the case with the Subway Library initiative by New York City libraries). This is ideal for libraries with sizeable budgets able and willing to develop their own technology (and business models) to be used in the zones of their choice.

If a library chooses to orchestrate its own FREZ, the library then needs to develop its own reading app (which it will own and remain in control of) as well as build its own relationship with the publishing community (this part involves signing publishers, obtaining titles in digital format, renewing contracts, etc.). If a library chooses to rely on third parties but partially finance a FREZ, the library then needs to outsource and make sound decisions about what companies to engage with and use to provide stable technology, a strong and diverse book collection, reliable service, and the most bang for its buck.

The library will also need to develop a marketing and PR strategy—an important part of the process that ensures users are made aware of the existence of FREZ and the free reading app—and remain committed to building relationships with a wide range of companies and organizations in its community willing to take part. Libraries are no strangers to marketing and promotions, and it is crucial that they remain in constant contact with the local media (including newspapers and TV stations) to get the word out about the launch of a FREZ. They may also communicate with patrons directly via social media, as they already do when promoting author and other events taking place at the library.

While some libraries may have the staff and resources to pull off their own FREZ start to finish, most libraries in the United States and around the world do not. A more realistic and sensible approach for those libraries (especially the ones with little to no

experience with e-books and e-book reading apps) is to start small (for testing purposes) and implement a manageable FREZ (e.g., a nearby park, a local school, a hospital) for a short period of time in order to learn from experience and adjust expectations. They may, for example, turn a popular city park nearby into a FREZ supported by the library during National Library Week in April, with no-strings-attached access to books during that week.

When the idea to turn an entire country into a FREZ ambushed me (for the lack of a better word) in the summer of 2016, I knew we'd need a pilot first, a testing ground of sorts, because experience has shown time and again that when it comes to technology, things never run as smoothly as one expects before they launch. No matter how carefully you go over every technical detail, things will break where you least expect it and require attention when you least expect it. As I've learned from my IT colleagues over the years, every first launch is a soft launch. And if you don't encounter any problems after you launch a digital product or service, it means you didn't launch it soon enough. Therefore, libraries should treat every first attempt at a FREZ as a pilot and communicate it as a pilot both to the users and the companies involved.

Notes

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Setting the Stage for the First Free Reading Zone

The Master Plan

As already explained, the story of FREZ began in the United States, but that's not where it culminated. It culminated in Croatia, of all places, a small country in the southeast of Europe where I was born and where I lived until my teenage years, when I moved to the United States and eventually resettled in New York City. Croatia's capital of Zagreb, however, had always remained a home away from home. At the time that I was helping Total Boox build its digital portfolio, I found myself spending more time on the other side of the pond than I did in New York (for personal as well as professional reasons).

As I often stated in my FREZ-related speeches and writings, there comes a point in every person's career where we crave to turn our jobs into missions, and it isn't enough to earn a paycheck anymore. We take a leap of faith and jump. For me, the "jump" meant that I would relocate to Zagreb, abandon the comfort of a steady retainer (for consulting) or a steady paycheck (for being a full-time employee), and embark on what would become the project of my life: turning an entire country into an open virtual library. It also meant that I would be in charge of every aspect of the project, since no one was waiting there to take on the challenge with me or for me, and it meant that I would be responsible for the cost associated with getting the pilot up and running.

The master plan was to turn Croatia into the world's first Free Reading Zone through the use of the Total Boox app, which would be "masked" as a new app called Croatia Reads. People would be able to use this app inside the borders of Croatia regardless of their location—for example, in the privacy of their home, at the beach, on the city's main square, in

trains and buses, across secluded rural regions—and read to their heart's desire any of the books in the collection housed on Total Boox's website and accessed through the app.

Given Croatia's small size (covering just under 22,000 square miles) and its modest population (4.3 million), the entire country could be managed as a FREZ in its entirety, even on a small budget. The big launch would take place in December 2016, just before the holidays, and the sponsor of the first month of free reading would be *No Shelf Required (NSR)*, the portal (formerly a blog run by an academic librarian) to which I had been contributing as a volunteer for years and which I had the privilege of inheriting from the librarian who used to run it. By 2016, *NSR* had evolved into a multifaceted portal advocating innovation with e-books beyond the one copy–one user model, among its other missions (under my leadership), and it was the perfect platform to expose the project and its development. By mid-2017, and as a result of the Croatia Reads project, *NSR* also became an organization on a mission to help libraries and other entities implement and launch FREZ around the world.

NSR would pay Total Boox for the development of the Croatia Reads reading app (which would be a replica of the original Total Boox app, with some necessary adjustments) and for the reading to occur during the first month of FREZ in Croatia. The two would agree on a flat fee as they would agree with any other sponsor of FREZ, taking into consideration the country's population, likely reading outcomes, and the cost of technological upkeep. The goal (and hope) was that *NSR* would serve as an example to other potential sponsors in the country, who would quickly see the benefits (in practice, not just in theory) and agree to carry on the sponsorship further into 2017.

After signing a contract with Total Boox on behalf of NSR in the summer of 2016, I had four months to pull it all together in a country I hadn't lived in since childhood and whose laws and business ways I had no experience with. Why Croatia, then? There are many reasons why Croatia was the perfect place for such an experiment, none of which have to do with my personal connection to the land and its people, at least not the reasons that made the most sense for the project and its underlying mission:

- It is a country small and compact enough to be turned into a FREZ in its entirety, and as such, it could, hopefully, become the project the Croatian government would take interest in long term because it involved and benefited all its citizens, even its tourists and visitors.
- It is a country visited by 15–17 million people annually (more than three times its population), so there would be interest in the multilingual offering in the collection (most books were in English, but many were in other languages as well, including French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and even Croatian), and as a result, the benefits would be significant for the department of tourism (not only for the departments of education and culture).
- It is a country with many remote areas where access to books and knowledge via libraries is limited at best (especially on the islands in the Adriatic), and through this open library, books would reach people who normally didn't have easy access to books and libraries under the best of circumstances. Aside from several urban areas of the main cities (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, Osijek, Dubrovnik, and Zadar), most of the country could be described as rural.
- It is a country where buying printed books is a privilege that many cannot afford; the average printed book in Croatia costs about fifteen to twenty dollars (similar to what it is in the United States), while the average monthly income of most Croats is a fraction of what it is in the United States (circa \$1000 per month).
- It is a country where libraries function on astonishingly limited budgets and have not taken any steps toward offering e-books in their communities (or digitizing their collections), so the project would directly support libraries and other institutions of knowledge and learning because it would allow them to get involved without asking them to contribute financially (this was part of the plan early on).
- It is a country where e-books have never taken off and e-book reading has not been popular. Not only are e-books not offered through libraries (not even the biggest public library system in the

capital of Zagreb), they have not become popular among consumers or even avid readers (most have never read an e-book on a mobile device). Since one of the project's goals was to show that if the right conditions were created for consumption of e-books, regardless of how much experience users had with e-books, people would consume them, Croatia Reads, if successful, would help dispel the myth that people didn't read e-books because they didn't like the *experience* of it but instead they didn't read e-books because they didn't think they should have to pay for digital format.

- It is a country dependent on the tourism and hospitality industry to drive economic growth and the well-being of its citizens, many of whom are either employed in the tourism sector or depend on it heavily to run businesses geared toward tourists. FREZ was an opportunity to give Croatia a one-of-a-kind venture that would help it stand out globally not only for its physical beauty that has been attracting tourists from around the world for decades but also for technological innovation. Through FREZ, Croatia would become the first country to offer its tourists, anywhere inside its borders, the gift of free reading in their native language (or many others). Tourists that landed in Croatia during the time FREZ was in effect would be immediately able to download the Croatia Reads app and open a Lonely Planet travel guide to Croatia, among thousands of other books in hundreds of categories, and would be able to continue reading and enjoying the open library during their entire stay.

At the time I relocated to Zagreb, the Total Boox catalog had grown significantly, so all the work put into signing publishers prior to ending my consulting work for the company had paid off. The collection was strong, diverse, and multilingual, approaching 100,000 titles and growing weekly. When promoting it to sponsors (and other publishers), I often emphasized the following:

- over 500 new titles added weekly
- emphasis on quality books
- all subjects and categories included
- about 300 publishers represented
- 100 percent of content vetted
- books available in several languages

The reading app, too, had undergone some notable improvements over the course of several years and was generally receiving good feedback from users in the United States. The reading app that people in Croatia would use would have the same interior features and functionalities. The only difference between the

Croatia Reads app and the original Total Boox app would be the icon, the name, and some small technical adjustments throughout to ensure readers weren't charged while the reading was being monitored. Some highlights:

- compatible with Androids and iOS devices
- not compatible with the Windows Phone and dedicated e-readers
- required all e-books to be in (reflowable) EPUB format
- allowed users to sign in manually (using e-mail) or via Facebook
- sent users to the Total Boox website to get books
- required a single click on the Download button to place the book onto a top shelf inside the app
- allowed users to create personal shelves inside the app and make them private or public
- fully adjustable font type, font size, and background color
- allowed users to highlight passages and share them on social media
- allowed books to be searched by keyword or browsed by category or subcategory
- allowed searches to be filtered by popularity, author, title, and language
- allowed users to jump from one part of a book to another through table of contents or by using the percentage line at the bottom of the screen

As far as publishers were concerned, since they already had contracts with Total Boox—which ensured that they got paid any time anyone read any part of any of their titles in the collection, regardless of where the readers may be and who they may be (individual consumers, library patrons, or people inside a FREZ)—Total Boox did not need to ask for their permission to make the titles available in Free Reading Zones or sign new agreements for this or any other potential FREZ we'd work on together. As far as the contracts were concerned, there was no difference between reading occurring on an individual consumer's device, a public library patron's device, or a device of a reader inside a FREZ.

As diverse as the content in the collection was, it did not include Croatian books, so it was necessary to bring Croatian publishers on board to make the collection more relevant and attractive to the residents since many would be interested in reading books in their native language. That said, it's important to add here that Croatian natives are generally multilingual and are used to reading books and being educated in languages other than Croatian, particularly in English. As we later learned, the vast majority would be interested in reading books in English, not their native language, since those were the books not easily found in the local bookstores.

Even though the vast majority of Croatian publishers lag behind when it comes to digitization and many do not have their books available in EPUB format yet, we were able to secure contracts with two major Croatian publishers of high-quality fiction and nonfiction right away, Fraktura and Ljevak, which agreed to sign with Total Boox so that their titles would be exposed in the same collection. The only way into a FREZ in Croatia, in fact, was through Total Boox, so if publishers did not work with Total Boox, they were not able to expose their titles in this FREZ.

Other publishers in the collection, as stated previously, included a wide variety of well-known brands from around the world representing countless subjects and categories, trade and academic, including Workman, Elsevier, Lonely Planet, Berlitz, De Gruyter, Oxford University Press, O'Reilly Media, Sourcebooks, Open Road Media, Berrett-Koehler, Other Press, the Independent Publishers Group, Hay House Publishing, the Red Wheel Weiser Group, Rourke Education, Lerner Publishing, ECW Press, F&W Media, Algonquin, Marshall Cavendish, Chicago Review Press, New World Library, Storey Publishing, Timber Press, Artisan, Triumph Books, the Pelican Group, and many others.

Marketing and Public Relations

Since the technology and the content were under control from the beginning, most of my energy in the months leading up to the eventual launch in December was spent focusing on PR and marketing, building a small local team who'd help on various fronts, and presenting FREZ and its goals to potential sponsors in advance. These included both private corporations in the country and government officials from one of the three ministries: culture, education, and tourism. These also included several Croatian libraries, with which we met on more than one occasion and informed well in advance of what was to happen in December.

While most librarians showed enthusiasm, they were not able to support the project beyond helping to advertise it to their patrons when it launched. I had already been aware of their devastatingly low budgets and was not expecting monetary support from them but felt it was important to notify them in advance out of respect. I agreed to participate in several library conferences and events for the purposes of informing the country's library leaders of what to expect, inviting them to help us promote FREZ to their patrons, and partner with us in spreading digital literacy.

A small team who'd support my efforts along the way formed quickly and, as fate would have it, did not involve librarians. I needed help in four key areas: Croatian content and publishers, IT and technical

support, PR, and a place somewhere in the country's capital to serve as the testing ground for a few weeks leading up to the launch. While I was in charge of holding presentations for the potential sponsors, remaining in daily communication with Total Boox and its employees in Israel and the United States, and acting as the public face of the project when communicating with the media, I relied on a small group of people to cover the areas I had less expertise with. Their enthusiasm for the project, generosity, open-mindedness, and willingness to go the extra mile for no personal gain ensured that I remained focused through some inevitable challenges along the way.

Natalija Mladenović was instrumental in getting the Croatian publishers on board as well as writing and editing the texts that needed to be presented in the native tongue and released to the media (including press releases, social media campaigns, PowerPoint presentations, etc.); Trpimir Šugar was instrumental in ensuring that technical support would be provided to people if they encountered any difficulty while reading (the app would direct users having technical difficulties to contact technical support via an e-mail or by calling Trpimir's cell phone directly); Mate Rončević, a PR consultant, handled the publicity for the project, which involved daily communication with top newspapers and TV channels; and Ana Petričić Gojanović was co-owner of a well-regarded establishment in downtown Zagreb, Café Velvet, which would serve as the place for the first FREZ pilot, both to help the café's own brand and to help FREZ garner publicity in advance and test the user experience. Ana and Velvet co-owner Saša Šekoranja were also instrumental in securing support from local celebrities, who agreed to be photographed reading on mobile devices.

The plan was for Velvet to become the first Free Reading Zone in Croatia two months before the entire country would become a Free Reading Zone. Ana and Saša agreed to come on board as private sponsors (i.e., cover the cost of reading during those two months, which we calculated in advance based on the café's size and average number of daily guests). This meant that Velvet was not only to become the first café in the world (that we were aware of) to be turned into an open virtual library, but it would also become the very first (small) Free Reading Zone, where people would be able to test the app, while remaining unaware that the country would soon be turned into an open virtual library in its entirety.

While residents and tourists were reading thousands of e-books for free at Zagreb's trendy downtown café, the team was busy setting the stage for the launch of the country-wide initiative, engaging potential sponsors, and taking notes directly from Velvet users.

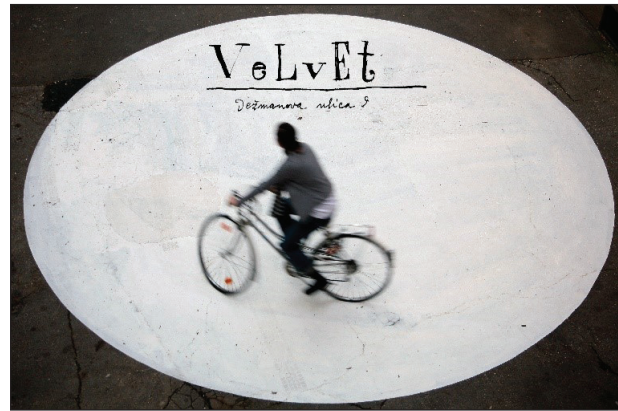


Figure 3.1
Image by Saša Šekoranja

The Velvet Experience

On September 22, news broke out across the Internet that a well-known café in Croatia's capital had become a Free Reading Zone—an open virtual library that could be accessed by its guests and enjoyed free of charge. All they needed was to log into a free reading app via an access code found on the receipt. Within seconds, they were given immediate, uninterrupted access to books in several languages, and once they registered via the access code, they were able to read at the café or continue reading at home through the end of the day (codes change daily).

Many asked how this was possible as soon as we made the announcement. How can a café with fewer than fifty tables on its premises provide free access to a virtual library bigger and richer than the city's main library system can afford its patrons? How can this little business give Zagreb's residents and tourists access to more knowledge than a government-funded institution? We tried to answer these and similar questions in the first official press release, but we also remained available to journalists and the media for further inquiries. We also wanted most interviews and meetings with potential sponsors (for the country-wide project) to take place at Velvet because there we were able to show them firsthand how the app worked and let them test it as actual users.

This was the official press release announcing the launch of Velvet FREZ shared with the media:

Croatia Is Home to the First Café in the World Turned into a Free Reading Zone

No Shelf Required is honored to announce that Café Velvet in Zagreb (Croatia's capital) is the first café in the world turned into a Free Reading Zone. Guests of the café (located in downtown Zagreb, on the iconic Dezmanova Street) can log into a virtual library (via any iOS and Android smartphone and tablet) and access thousands upon thousands of books in several languages,

including English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, and Croatian, among others. The locals may enjoy literature in their native language while countless tourists who visit the country's capital each day can read in other languages. All they need is to log in using an Access Code provided by the café.

The technology is powered by Total Boox, [an] ebook service known to U.S. publishers and librarians for its pay-as-you-read ebook model which makes ebooks instantly available, with no limitations, holds, or expirations, while paying publishers for reading. Readers may browse Total Boox' collection of nearly 100,000 titles, which includes books in all categories—from literary and genre fiction to poetry and philosophy; from cookbooks, arts, and photography to sports, entertainment, and travel; from children's books and YA literature to professional and scientific literature. Publishers represented include an array of world-class brands from around the globe.

The Free Reading Zones project and initiative was launched in 2016—under the leadership of Mirela Roncevic, Editor of *No Shelf Required*, and in cooperation with Total Boox—with the goal to spread reading to various public and private spaces beyond libraries and endow them with culture. These “zones” may be sponsored by private and public institutions, corporations or government entities and include, among others, parks, hospitals, trains, airports, schools, universities, cafés, etc. When Free Reading Zones are sponsored by libraries, users inside the zone access the collection via their active library card; when sponsored by private entities (as in the case of Velvet Café), readers simply log in using an access code and the cost of reading is transferred from readers to the café.

“It's an honor to lead such an important initiative, and to take it outside the United States,” said Roncevic. “It's strongly aligned with the mission of *No Shelf Required*—to educate, enlighten, and inspire everyone inside and outside the book industry about what ebooks and digital content can do for literacy. In short, they can transform the world into a place where access to knowledge flows freely in all directions. There is a way. And we are paving it together.”¹

From that Thursday, September 22, through December 6, 2016, when Croatia became a FREZ, every table at the Velvet Café included a pamphlet that displayed the following text:

Welcome to Velvet, a Free Reading Zone. We invite you to experience the future of reading—free, unlimited, and uninterrupted access to thousands of books.

- Scan the QR code or go to this site: totalboox.com/frez/cafevelvet/signup.
- Sign up with your email and password. You also need an Access Code (see your receipt).
- Install the Total Boox e-reader app in the Apple

or Android app store.

- When you open the app, do not “Sign Up” (since you've signed up before). Simply “Log in” with the same email and password (“Log in with your email”).
- After the app opens, press the “Get books” button to download books.
- You can also download books on the web site, www.totalboox.com.

Immediately upon downloading the app and registering, the guests received this welcome e-mail (displayed in both English and Croatian):

Dear guests,

Welcome to Velvet. We invite you to experience the future of reading—free, unlimited, and uninterrupted access to thousands of quality books from all over the world. From pop fiction and serious literature to spirituality and cooking. From poetry and travel to entertainment and sports. Your reading journey will never come to an end.

All you need is to install “Total Boox” app from any iOS or Android smartphone or tablet. When you open the app, click Log In, not Sign Up (since you are already registered) and enter your email and password. To download books, click “Get Books” inside the app. You can also create Shelves to organize your library.

Café Velvet is a well-known hangout, located on an iconic street in the heart of Zagreb's Old District that's become a major tourist draw in recent years. The moment you walk into the café, you notice that Velvet celebrates art and human creativity in every form imaginable. I certainly wasn't a stranger to it. I discovered it years ago when attending a poetry reading organized at the café. It's also a gallery displaying the artwork of Croatia's well-known artist and florist, Saša Šekoranja, which means that impeccable attention is given to every detail (the official image for Velvet FREZ, showing a woman on a bicycle, was designed by Šekoranja himself; see figure 3.1).

It took one hour with the café's owners for them to agree to turn Velvet into a FREZ. It took a week to sign a short agreement, and another week to set it all up. It can take months of back-and-forth with government employees to get one library to sign a deal with an e-book vendor. Likewise, it can take years to court and sign a publisher hesitant to work with alternative e-book models. As soon as we launched Velvet, I could sense that for the first time in my career I was engaging in a project outside the confines of the book and library industry. It wasn't without its challenges, but it seemed to flow better than I had been accustomed to.

Local celebrities and influential figures—including well-known actors, writers, journalists, and artists—joined forces with Velvet (without receiving financial compensation) to support the opening of the

first FREZ in their country and agreed to be photographed for the media and publicly support the project. The goal here was to get the public excited about e-book reading and to show what was possible with the book in 2016. Once the news got around that the project would create a lot of value for a lot of people, many local authors I got in contact with were willing to offer support as well, regardless of whether their own titles were available from their publishers. They also understood that Velvet was essentially the pilot that would set an example for other Free Reading Zones to follow not only in Croatia but throughout the region. In fact, most people in Croatia expected other zones to pop up around the country soon. What very few knew—and what we decided not to share publicly—was that the whole country would be open for reading just weeks from then.

Right around the time Velvet FREZ launched, we opened a page on Facebook called “Free Reading Zones: Croatia” (which was changed to “Croatia Reads” on the day the pilot launched to match the name of the app) and began educating people about e-books and their true potential. We also used those celebrity photographs to show that a range of regional celebrities were supporting the project. Within the first few weeks, we had garnered over 10,000 likes with a very modest marketing budget, and people from around the country (as well as the rest of Europe) shared their thoughts about e-books, digital reading, tablets, cost of reading, libraries, and so on.

Even though many supporters of the Facebook page did not live in Zagreb and were not located anywhere near Velvet to be able to use the reading app, they were very willing to share their thoughts and opinions on free access to e-books beyond libraries (since the Velvet story encouraged many such conversations) and were intrigued by what was taking place in the nation’s capital. Many also quickly recognized—and this was evident in their comments—that the reason for the Facebook page was not only to raise awareness about Velvet and the power of the technology to morph a small business into a powerful virtual library but also to show potential sponsors that the people out there were ready for this on a larger scale.

The Facebook page was our additional proof to potential sponsors that people wanted this. In my conversations with sponsors, I often referred them to the Facebook page to see firsthand how people were responding to what was happening at Velvet. In other

words, even without us being explicit about it, Facebook users sensed more was in store.

Velvet is a café that residents of Zagreb associate not only with first-rate coffee and cake but also with celebration of human creativity in every form. It is a literary establishment that has hosted countless book events over the years. But it is not the place where books are curated or managed. They simply are there, waiting for the reader to discover them on wooden shelves and on every table. And now books were also waiting to be read inside the guests’ mobile devices. Velvet did not ask its visitors to become members of the establishment. It didn’t preorder titles for them by guessing what they might like. It gave them the freedom to choose what mattered to them at the point of their need and want. And it placed its trust in the collection and the reading app to deliver quality literature for all tastes and ages.

Velvet, however, is not a library. It is a café. It will not stop serving coffee and cake. It will not stop paying attention to all the other non-book details its guests already admire. It will not remove print books from the tables or the shelves because of the existence of the virtual library. Its message to its guests was that it now simply wanted to support even more reading and add another layer to the “Velvet experience.” FREZ helped this café grow its brand. It helped it expand its horizons but remain true to its character. Velvet sponsored its guests’ reading but did not stand between them and their choice of books.

The ultimate message here was that a small private business like Velvet could be turned into an impressive virtual library through the use of technology—the kind of library that allows users to have access to knowledge in ways they couldn’t fathom in the past. This technology can turn any space into a zone where people read freely thanks to the sponsors willing to support it. And thanks to the simplicity of the metered-reading business model, we were now able to help re-envision the book industry and bring it more forcefully into the digital age.

Note

1. “Croatia Is Home to the First Café in the World Turned into a Free Reading Zone,” news release, *No Shelf Required*, September 22, 2016, www.noshelfrequired.com/croatia-is-home-to-the-first-cafe-in-the-world-turned-into-a-free-reading-zone.

A Country as a Free Reading Zone

Croatia as an Open Virtual Library

On the eve of St. Nicholas Day, on December 5, 2016, around 8 p.m. Central European Time, we broke the news on the Free Reading Zones: Croatia Facebook page, which had at the time garnered about 13,000 followers, that Croatia had been open for reading in its entirety. Within the first hours, the news spread to several online outlets that picked up the press release immediately. The next morning, on December 6 (the official launch day), the country's major newspaper, *Jutranji List*, which was given exclusive coverage, would make an official announcement that Croatia was a Free Reading Zone all through the holidays, courtesy of a US portal advocating free access to books and literacy in digital format. It was up to Croatia's officials and private corporations to continue supporting the project further into 2017.

This was the official press release shared globally and published on *No Shelf Required*:

Croatia Is the World's First Country to Become a Free Reading Zone

No Shelf Required and Total Boox join forces in turning the country of Croatia into an open virtual library accessible via a free application—to residents and tourists alike—without a library card or an access code. The growing collection boasts 100,000 titles by top publishers in several languages.

December 5, 2016; Zagreb, Croatia—Croatia has just made history by becoming the first country in the world turned into a Free Reading Zone (FREZ), i.e., an open virtual library accessible to all people free of charge regardless of their location. This includes not only Croatian citizens but millions of tourists from around the world who

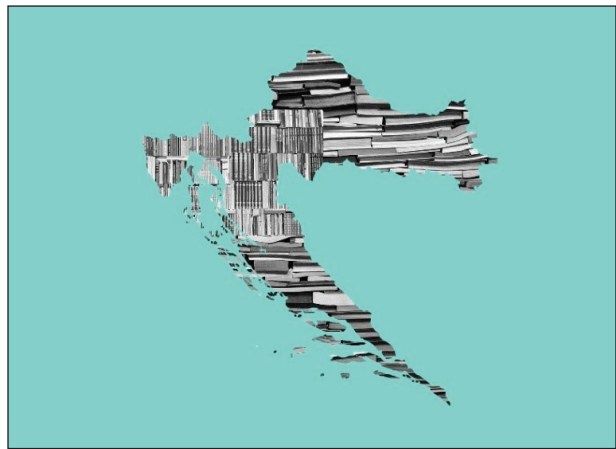


Figure 4.1
Image by *No Shelf Required*

visit the country each year, who may download a free reading app, called Croatia Reads. The app is powered by Total Boox, an ebook service known to publishers and librarians for its pay-as-you-read model, which makes ebooks instantly available—with no restrictions—while paying publishers for reading and affording readers a seamless and uninterrupted reading experience.

“As a web site advocating free access to books and knowledge for all people, *No Shelf Required* is honored to be the first sponsor of this historic project,” said Mirela Roncevic, editor of *No Shelf Required* and manager of the project. “NSR’s mission is to make access to books a right of every citizen, not a privilege tied to institutions and corporate interests, so it is fitting that we stand behind it. It also holds a special meaning to me personally because this remarkable story of books escaping the confines of book stores and library walls is taking place in the country of my birth.”

Readers may browse Total Boox' collection of 100,000 titles, which includes books in all categories of fiction and nonfiction; from popular to academic, from professional to practical. Over 250 publishers are participating, including an array of world-class brands, among them, Lonely Planet, Workman, Sourcebooks, Berlitz, Oxford University Press, F&W Media, O'Reilly, Other Press, Elsevier, Wolters Kluwer, New World Library, Marshall Cavendish, Berrett-Koehler, Lerner, and many others.

The goal of the FREZ project is to spread reading to public and private spaces and endow them with culture. The 'zones' may be sponsored by private and public institutions, corporations or government entities and can be as small as single buildings (e.g., hospitals, cafes) or as big as cities and countries (as in the case of Croatia). "With all due modesty, this is really a world's first," said Yoav Lorch, Founder and CEO of Total Boox. "It's a general open invitation for all people to follow their interests and curiosities, wherever they are, at no cost and with no limitations. It's not just about saving money. It's about making culture and knowledge prevalent, about closing the digital divide, and about allowing the people to enjoy the fruits of the digital revolution."

"With the launch of Croatia Reads, we have created a circle in which all segments of Croatia's society benefit: culture, education, and tourism," added Roncevic. "We have begun the next chapter in the story of the book—the one where the potential of the digital medium is finally used to disperse knowledge to all who want it, when they want it, and how they want it. Croatia stands as an example of what is possible with the book in the 21st century, and what is possible looks a lot like the democratization of the written word we've never seen before—the kind that will finally give books in digital format the chance to show their true potential."¹

Within twenty-four hours, thousands of people across Croatia registered to use the Croatia Reads app, half of them through Facebook, the other half manually, by supplying their e-mail address and first and last name. As was the case with Velvet, readers who registered received a welcome e-mail that briefly explained the project and the mission:

Dear readers,

Welcome to Croatia Reads, a virtual library of nearly 100,000 high-quality books available for free reading. With the launch of this application, Croatia becomes the first country in the world that is a free reading zone—an open digital library accessible to all people inside its borders, without a membership card or a special code. Our mission is simple: to enable access to books and knowledge for all people, regardless of their whereabouts or circumstances, including millions of tourists who visit Croatia every year. Owing to the generosity of the sponsors supporting this effort, we have

created a circle in which key sectors of our society benefit: culture, education, and tourism. All you need to do is read.

We invite you now to experience free and unlimited access to thousands of books from all over the world, right here in Croatia. From pop fiction and serious literature to spirituality and cooking. From poetry and travel to entertainment and sports. From arts and economics to science and technology. Your reading journey will never come to an end. To download books, click 'Get Books' inside the app. You can browse by category and filter your search results by language. You can also create Shelves to organize your personal library. If you have questions, please visit our FAQ page. If you need technical assistance, contact us at support@croatiareads.com.

From the moment the news went viral to the day the Croatia Reads pilot ended, on January 5, 2017, the phones did not stop ringing. In fact, they would continue to ring months after the pilot ended. The official press release gave people a basic understanding of how it all worked, but they had more questions, especially the media. To help as many people as possible gain as much insight as possible into the technical details, we created a universal list of Frequently Asked Questions compiled for users in Croatia as well as anyone outside Croatia to ensure that the media coverage was accurate. This FAQ, available to users in two languages, was shared with the media, and a link to it online was provided inside the app.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Croatia Reads?

Croatia Reads is an attempt to turn an entire country into an open library—a zone in which reading books in digital format (ebooks) is accessible to all people inside Croatia's borders free of charge. As long as you remain inside Croatia (and as long as the initiative is supported through sponsorship by third parties), you may download and read any of the books in the collection. You will never be asked for a library ID or an access code. Regardless of whether you are a resident or a tourist, whether you live in big urban areas or remote rural ones, you will be able to access any book instantly and read without restrictions. In short, Croatia Reads is an attempt to fully democratize the written word, make it accessible to all people, and forever revolutionize how we read books in the 21st century.

What is the basic idea of the Free Reading initiative?

When you are in a Free Reading Zone, the Zone's sponsor pays for your reading. When you leave the zone, the benefit of free reading ends. Sponsors can be private entities (like large corporations and small businesses) or government entities (like public, school, and academic libraries, Departments of Culture, Education, and Tourism, Mayor's offices, etc.). The Sponsor of the first month of free reading

in Croatia is *No Shelf Required*, a portal that advocates digital literacy and free access to books and knowledge. Zones can be physical or virtual. They can be as small as single buildings or parks and as big as cities or entire countries (as in the case of Croatia).

Which devices are supported?

We support most Android devices, iOS devices (iPads and iPhones), and Kindle Fires. If your device is not supported (this may be the case with older models), you will not be able to download the Croatia Reads app from the app store. If you can download the app, then it should work on your device.

How are publishers paid for the 'free' reading?

Publishers are paid quarterly for all the reading of all their titles in the collection (not just in Croatia), since they have a contract with Total Boox. The amount they receive is based on what people actually read; the technology measures all reading and generates reports which show how much was read on any given day. Publishers, and therefore authors, do not make money if no one reads their books, but publishers make their titles available for discovery to anyone who wishes to read them. In Free Reading Zones, Sponsors pay for the cost of reading and technology up-keep (directly to the company hosting the reading, in this case, Total Boox), so that readers don't have to.

Why am I downloading ebooks from the Total Boox website when inside the app?

This Free Reading Zones project is powered by Total Boox, the company that developed the technology used for Croatia Reads. The app is a replica of the regular Total Boox app normally used for reading in other countries, where readers pay for their own reading (or their libraries do, if they work with Total Boox). In the case of Croatia, the burden of paying for the reading is transferred from readers onto sponsors. This is why you are not asked to pay to set up a balance.

You can download as many ebooks as you want from a catalog of nearly 100,000 titles in many languages, for the entire duration of the pilot. The catalog grows weekly as new publishers come on board and new titles are added to the system.

Can I read offline?

Yes. You must be online to download books but you do not need to be online to read them.

What happens if I read offline in a Free Reading Zone?

If you go offline, you can continue reading for a while. Then you will be notified to go back online and refresh your device (we must do this for security reasons). As soon as you do that, your invisible

credit will be refreshed and you will be able to continue reading. Most people will never reach this point because they will likely go online throughout the day (while reading) so their reading credit is always refreshed. As long as you periodically go back online (and almost all people do), we will be able to see what you read while you were offline. This is how we ensure that all reading is always accounted for, so that publishers are compensated.

How do you protect my privacy?

We do not share information about your reading activities or identity with third parties. We use technological methods including encryption to protect your data. You can read more details about our strict privacy policy on Total Boox' website.

What happens if I change to a different device?

We will automatically load your books onto the new device when you install the app and log in with the same email and password. If you go back and forth between devices, your reading will automatically sync.

Can I download ebooks on my desktop?

You cannot read on computer screens but you can certainly log into your account and download books there. Some people prefer to browse on their desktops and download books that way. Your Library on your smartphone or tablet will automatically sync with what you downloaded on the desktop.

How diverse is the collection? What types of books and publishers are represented?

All kinds. From literary fiction to genre fiction; from creative nonfiction to professional literature; from children's books to young adult literature; from arts and humanities to science and technology; from travel and cooking to crafts and spirituality. Our collection is extremely diverse and there are books in it for all ages and all tastes and interests. The collection is also increasingly multilingual.

What are some key features of the Croatia Reads app?

The free reading app is very intuitive and easy to use. You can search books by keyword or you can browse by category (and sub-category). You can also filter your searches by popularity, author, title, and language. You can create Shelves inside your Library and keep them private or make them public (i.e., share with others). You can highlight parts of the books you like, bookmark pages, increase and decrease font, adjust font settings, jump from one part of the book to another through Table of Contents or by using the percentage line at the bottom of the screen.²

Lessons from Croatia Reads

The Croatia Reads project, which did not end up getting the support from the government I had hoped for (but the government remains interested in continuing discussions in the near future), meant many things to many people who got involved. It certainly wasn't about Croatia as much as it was about the power of e-books and open virtual libraries.

In retrospect, and perhaps more than anything, Croatia Reads was an attempt to present the library of the future in all its invisible glory. And this library is able to fully democratize the written word by virtue of becoming completely invisible, thus accessible to all people, all at once. This, I have often argued in presentations and in interviews, is the kind of democratization not even Gutenberg could pull off (although he gave the publishing industry a heck of a start). This is the vision I have for both the publishing and the library industry.

As already mentioned, the project did not involve Croatian libraries. Likewise, it did not involve any government (local, regional, or national) entity. It was solely funded by *No Shelf Required*, in cooperation with Total Boox, whose responsibility was to provide the technology and pay the publishers based on actual reading. An army of volunteers in Croatia joined forces to help me and my small team of volunteers turn Croatia into an open library.

Important to note: Although the Total Boox model was the first to be tested for free reading, the effort in Croatia by no means implies that Total Boox's is the only model suitable for FREZ. It did, however, prove effective because large numbers of contemporary titles were available for instant and simultaneous reading and the cost of reading was reasonable (amounting to about \$30,000 for the entire month of the pilot). Here are some stats we were able to get through Google Analytics:

- 24,000 people registered within the first week.
- On average, 1,000 new users signed up every day.
- By the end of the pilot, 33,000 people registered for Croatia Reads.
- Within the first week, 136,000 e-books had been downloaded.
- Within the first week, 23,600 books were being read.
- Within the first week, users created nearly 4,000 personal shelves.
- 20 percent of the books read were in Croatian.
- The vast majority of books read and downloaded were in English.
- The majority of reading took place in urban areas, especially in the cities of Zagreb, Split, and Rijeka, but a significant amount of reading took place in rural areas of the Adriatic islands.

User Feedback

We've learned a great deal from users of Croatia Reads during the pilot. Readers did not shy away from expressing their likes and dislikes both on the Facebook page—which remained active all through the pilot and became the place where conversations among users continued daily—and through direct contact with users who e-mailed or called us. Here are some of the takeaways:

- Digital content does not need to be guarded; readers are very savvy and able to censor the content they consume; they are also able to quickly learn how to navigate reading apps, even if they have no prior experience reading e-books.
- Readers enjoy reading e-books and are often pleasantly surprised at how easy it is to browse through them and how much the technology of reading apps has improved in recent years.
- Readers appreciate libraries and what they stand for a great deal but are happy to get e-books through other channels; above all, they want to access them freely and without a cumbersome process. Interestingly enough, a significant number assumed that Croatia Reads was an initiative of Croatian libraries.
- E-books have the potential to stimulate more reading among people who don't read much; many users said the app made it convenient for them to read on the go, which increased the amount of overall reading; some even reported the app turned them into avid readers.
- Readers do not want to pay for e-books and do not see them threatening the survival of print books in any way; most said the free reading experience would not make them turn away from print books.
- The vast majority of readers were pleased with the reading experience and the simplicity of the app and do not require a lot of bells and whistles to enjoy the reading experience.
- The majority of readers understood that Croatia Reads was a step toward democratizing the written word in digital format and encouraged our efforts to continue beyond the pilot; their support was overwhelming and at times heartwarming. When the pilot ended, their disappointment was equally overwhelming.

A wide range of regional corporations (e.g., banks, insurance and telecommunications companies) showed interest in sponsoring the reading upon seeing reading stats, as did the Croatian government. I remain hopeful that Croatia Reads will inspire government officials to remain open to the idea of keeping Croatia an open virtual library for months and

years to come (even if it means doing it through other means and other reading apps). It is also interesting to note that several Croatian cities have contacted us about being turned into Free Reading Zones in the near future. Those would be sponsored by local governments and universities. NSR's conversation with them continued at the time of this publication.

Since the country-wide pilot ended, I have had the privilege of giving presentations around Europe and in countries beyond Croatia (including the United States) that are showing interest in following in Croatia's footsteps. The cost of reading will vary greatly depending on their size and overall goals, but I believe the experience in Croatia proved that the cost of reading was miniscule compared to the benefits FREZ afforded to many segments of the society and to many people.

According to our calculations, a country like Croatia can remain an open virtual library, giving all people inside it unlimited access to a vast collection of e-books, for about \$800,000 per year. That covers 4.3 million residents as well as close to 17 million tourists.

Library of the Future

Having spent two decades of my career working with and for publishers and librarians, I am no stranger to the challenges they face with e-books and knew going into this project outside the United States—which is still, and by far, the most progressive country when it comes to innovation with e-books—would be no small task. But this project has challenged me to think outside the box and apply my experience in an uncharted territory. This is the right time, I believe, for my colleagues in publishing and libraries to not shy away from experimenting and to consider if, perhaps, our goals need to be transformed into something that transcends the physical.

Croatia Reads was, in fact, an attempt to show to those who work with books what is missing and what is possible—free, sponsored reading outside institutions, and outside the confines of all that is physical. *Outside*, of course does not mean excluding libraries. It means going beyond their walls. As successful as Croatia Reads was among users, it would have made a deeper impact among government officials had we been able to get more librarians to actively support the project.

Not having librarians on board as public advocates has, in retrospect, limited our options when seeking government support. But the prior experience with FREZ in the United States had also taught me that this was a groundbreaking idea that many libraries may not be ready for. The right ones would come along when the time was right. My hope is that this report finds its way into the hands of the librarians who are ready and for whose libraries the time is right. Even though FREZ can be pulled off without the involvement of libraries (as was the case with both Velvet Café and Croatia Reads), it can reach its highest potential only if led and organized by those whose very mission is to spread reading. Librarians are also the most experienced with seeking financial support from other institutions and promoting digital literacy.

Croatia Reads was a shot at giving the book what it wants in digital format—complete freedom—while allowing publishers and all involved to benefit from it. It was also an attempt to unveil the library of the future through the power of technology. This library is as big as a country, and it doesn't give you a card or a PIN to use with that card. It doesn't charge you late fees. It doesn't tell you what to read, how to read, or when or why to read. But it never stops enabling reading. It constantly grows and welcomes knowledge from all who want to create and share reading (big publishers, small publishers, independent authors). Its job is to encourage dissemination of knowledge, not supervise it. Its mission and responsibility, in fact, is to become invisible. Therein lies its greatest potential.

Notes

1. "Croatia Is the World's First Country to Become a Free Reading Zone," news release, *No Shelf Required*, December 5, 2016, www.noshelfrequired.com/breaking-news-croatia-is-the-worlds-first-country-to-become-a-free-reading-zone.
2. Originally published on a Facebook page that is no longer active. FAQs are currently available at: "Croatia Reads was not about Croatia [but about Free Access to Books for All Mankind]," *No Shelf Required*, May 1, 2017, <http://www.noshelfrequired.com/croatia-reads-was-not-about-croatia-but-about-free-access-to-books-for-all-mankind/>.

Notes

Notes

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R E P O R T S

Upcoming Issues	
November/ December 53:8	Combatting Fake News in a Digital Culture by Joanna Burkhardt
January 54:1	Library Spaces and Smart Buildings: Technology, Metrics, and Iterative Design edited by Jason Griffey
February/ March 54:2	How to Stay on Top of Emerging Tech Trends by David Lee King

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