SPARKS Episode 16

DIERDRE BRENNAN: Welcome to the 16th episode of Sparks. My name is Deirdre Brennan. I am the Executive Director of RAILS, the Reaching Across Illinois Library System. We developed this podcast to spark conversation and even debate about current trends and issues affecting libraries. Today we're going to talk about e-books, both specifically in Illinois and generally about the landscape; the industry in general. I have two guests today. One guest is Veronda Pitchford. She is the Director of Membership Development and Resource Sharing at RAILS and Mitchell Davis is the CEO and founder of Biblioboard. Specifically, today we want to talk about what RAILS and Biblioboard have done in partnership to advance the cause of e-books in libraries. So, I think I'm going to let Veronda maybe give us a little history of how RAILS got into the e-book business and why and then how we started partnering with Biblioboard.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Happy to do so. We got into the e-book business with the start of a statewide grant from the Illinois State library for $985,219.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: And no cents?

VERONDA PITCHFORD: No cents! I was in charge-there was no cents involved. In that project we had three goals: 1. Expand e-content to Illinois residents. 2. Make more types of content available to libraries of all sizes. 3. Explore other options for content. In that goal three we did a lot of research and eventually came up with what we call the RAILS E-content Strategy, which had the vision of experimentation and innovation around e-content to bring more (when I say e-content in this specifically I'm talking about e-books and e-audio) to bring more access to Illinois residents electronically to e-books and e-audio. For us that's really important at RAILS. They're almost 700,000 residents in Illinois who are not taxed for public library service. We wanted to find ways we could support and serve them. Dee, I think you have a passing interest in this issue…

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: I have a very great interest in the unserved, as that issue is known.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: I was just kidding about the passive, as you will not stop talking about it ever! (Laughs)

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: (Laughs)

VERONDA PITCHFORD: So, in part, to serve unserved residents, also this experimentation and innovation comes with us working with Baker & Taylor, at least for the RAILS version of the eRead project. Our friends at the Illinois Heartland library System work with the Cloud Library to serve their share automation group. Both platforms find that in working with the top five publishers we are limited to a one book, one user model, which gives us access to all of the top popular content. We also have varying experiences with the user experience for the public, meaning lots of logins, platform switching, etc. So a lot of what they call in the biz “friction,” the way people have a very varied experienced with getting to content in libraries versus a retail experience. I think many of you out there, library people listening, always hear, “Well, when I go on Amazon it's so easy to get an e-book, whereas with the library experience there's the issue of logging in. I have a $0.20 fine; I can't get a book,” etc. So, how can we support libraries in serving people and in eliminating that kind of issue? That's how we came upon our, now, good friends at Biblioboard who have helped us and we've become a development partner with to work on those issues. One other issue I want to mention is for libraries and it's served through e-books, is lots of folks are really interested in self-published content and it's hard for libraries to find a way to get self-published content in their workflow. Especially when they're not a lot of reviews about things or there’s the question of, “Who's going to read all of these books? How do we get them on the platform?” I mean, the list goes on. “What if it's something that doesn't agree with our collection development policy?” etc. So, we needed a partner to support all of these issues. The way e-book supports that self-publishing issue is, first, you're not taking up space on the shelf and you can make things readily available. But there's some other issues that we'll talk about that get solved through working with a partner like Biblioboard around this that we wanted to work on in our e-content strategy. So I want to introduce Mitchell, my pal, my brother from another mother!
MITCHELL DAVIS: Having fun is an important part of this.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Yes-the whole time! So, why don't you talk a little bit about who you are and how you got to this gig, to being the founder and CEO of Biblioboard and how much I've learned from you. Talk about that too.

MITCHELL DAVIS: So I think I sort of stumbled into software. I guess right in the mid-nineties; I went to college in the mid-nineties and stumbled into software right as the internet was sort of becoming a thing, when Netscape first came out. I can remember just being completely overwhelmed at the time at what this internet was going to do and I just always had a deep interest in books and reading. So I ended up starting a small web development company that was creatively very successful but as a business was not successful at all, as any mid-20’s person running a business finds out but it definitely set me on a path. So I had an experience in the early two-thousands of being involved in the founding of a company that became Create Space in Amazon. It was a self-publishing company.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: What does that mean?
MITCHELL DAVIS: Meaning that we had a vision to use digital printing to print books on demand and so we started the service where authors could give us an unpublished book and we would format that book, create a cover for that book, and then put it up for sale in the world. At the time even if people were saying they did print on demand, no one was actually printing books after they were sold on the internet. So we actually developed a manufacturing system that could print books after they were sold.

VERONDAPITCHFORD: Wow

MITCHELL DAVIS: It definitely pushed me headfirst into a life of publishing and exposure to libraries that I never really realized I would have and it's an incredibly inspiring place to work. So I did spend a couple years at Amazon and then when that was done, started Biblioboard with the same folks that I had done that company with. I also think that's important, just working with people that are fun and inspire you in sort of whatever you're doing is a big part of making life enjoyable. To have been able to work with really the same group of people for the last 20 years is pretty special. So we started this business, we were doing some work with the British Library on some of their 19th Century Collections and actually launched a consumer iPad app, right when the iPad first came out, that was a big success. It got downloaded almost a half-million times.

VERONDA PITCHFORD So was is it a print on demand app?
MITCHELL DAVIS: No, this was digital, thanks for clarifying that. So I was out of Amazon and now we had started this new company, Biblioboard, and we were working with libraries and launched this app. I think it gave us some sense that we we're good at this and that people really resonated with what we were doing and so it started us on this path. As many libraries I think know, this is not an easy industry to start a software company in. There's a lot of really big companies that tend to sort of dominate the landscape and so we've really had to pick our way and find what we're good at. I think what we ended up doing with you guys was really what we ended up doing well. The first thing we ended up working on together was the Soon-to-Be-Famous and being able to work with self-published books. So I think we've got a part of our business that works with self-published authors. We let libraries have software that let them work with self-published authors, let them write books in the library, and submit books to libraries. We have a curation partnership with Library Journal that actually provides a readers advisory for libraries on the best self-published books. So that's worked and we've been able to sort of build a business off of that. The things we got involved with you guys, with the Soon-to-Be-Famous, is really the next step for what I think we can talk about in a little more detail later.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Right, we’ll talk about that a little bit. So interesting journey Mitchell, that’s for sure. I knew about the Amazon piece a little bit. I didn't know about the British Library.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Not too shabby, yeah.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: So we launched e-Read in like 2013, end of 2013, so here we are almost five years later and eRead is very successful. Pretty stable membership at this point.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Yeah, around 400 libraries.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: I think, from my perspective, having eRead and Axis 360 is a way of providing access to those hot items in multiple copies, which has always been a big thing for us.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: purchasing multiple copies weekly

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Then having Biblioboard, as well, is, I think, a fantastic suite of services for our members and their customers. What I always say to people when I describe Biblioboard is that it's very rich. It has a lot of depth and diversity of resources. So maybe talk a little bit about how because it is a partnership and how working together, learning together, you figured out how to bring that richness to life and make it even richer.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Well, just really quickly it's so interesting that you start with the content because when I'm talking about it, most often at yoga for some reason when we’re sitting around afterward talking about books, I talk about the user experience and just say “hey, take your phone out” and in fact, I just did this Sunday, “Let me show you a place where you can get a lot of great content.” I either just ask people in class- (after class, not in class!)

MITCHELL Namaste! (Laughs)

VERONDA: Namaste! (Laughs) I ask people *after* class to download the app and one person said, “Well, I don't have a lot of space,” and I said you can go to the website. So we did that together but it's funny, I start with experience and how it's geo-located and right now you can open up a book and start reading it. That is the thing I lead with: I've done this at parties, I've done this at yoga, on the bus; you can just, anywhere, anytime read it.

 MITCHELL DAVIS: Yeah, I think something we realized pretty quickly was that though the big five and the one book-one user have a definite spot and a real value to the people that use that in libraries, I think in trying to sort of push beyond that and engage new younger patrons with a digital library and thinking about how do you really democratize this experience that technology was one part of it. You needed to build software that was simple and easy to use but you had to go deeper. You had to actually go back and talk to publishers and convince them to license content in different ways and in different models. I think when you look at Biblioboard and you look at the content that’s there, what you can also do is look at publishers who are betting on a new way for libraries to work. I mean these are publishers that should be applauded for embracing fixed cost unlimited use models. A model that doesn’t create pain for the library when it succeeds. It doesn't create lines, or spiraling pay-per-use charges. I think the publishers in our model, Independent Publishers Group, we've collaborated with them, I'm sure we'll talk a little bit about Pop-Up-Pics on this, really should be looked at as equal innovators with us. We built great software but we couldn't let you read a book just because you're geo located in the state of Illinois without a publisher agreeing to let us do that. So they really deserve a lot of credit in the innovation we're doing as well.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Let's talk more about the different components of Biblioboard resources now then.

MITCHELL DAVIS: Yeah, I mean I think something, and Veronda can probably add some color to this too, but I think one of the things we learned here in Illinois is that you guys were really a blank slate. In fact, I think one of our things in our agreement is that if we have a new idea we get to bring it to you guys first. You have first right of refusal which is a really amazing thing to put in a contract.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: What I love about it is RAILS is a development partner, not just a customer and it feels that way.

MITCHELL DAVIS: Yeah, completely and I think the lesson we've learned over the last year, and I think last November we had a big meeting in Charleston where we said, to your point Dee, it’s so broad and it's so deep that sometimes that can be its Achilles heel as well because people just kind of show up and they're not sure what to do or how to engage and so what we decided was there are really three different missions in audiences that we're trying to reach with billboard in Illinois today. The first one is the Indie Book self-published audience and so the partnership with Soon-to-be famous, I mean the Illinois Author Project out of which soon to be famous was born, that idea we've actually now seeded in seven other states. They all launched statewide author contests inspired by what you guys are doing here in Illinois on April 2nd. So clearly an idea that that was good and worked and is beginning to expand. So there's that audience. I think the important thing about that audience is that it's not only pushing content to patrons, it's also taking content from patrons, which is really a switch in the role of the libraries as like a facilitator and archiving a distributor of local creator content which we think is super, super important.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: What’s important about that audience is that it supports the library's role in connecting people locally; readers with writers and supporting both audiences. So I have a big thing wanting the library to be able to facilitate people living local and reading local just as they eat local & shop local. The soon-to-be-famous, our Illinois Arthur project helps us do that along with the support of the resources on Biblioboard.

MITCHELL DAVIS: Definitely and I think it puts the librarians in such a position to add so much value to what's happening in self-publishing because I think just as the publishers have realized that an author that has written a book, if they can take that book directly to Amazon and sort of skip all the existing ecosystems, they're doing that. I think what you guys have done with Illinois Arthur project and the selfie program with library journal in those sorts of things insert the library into an incredibly valuable role there as the person who's identifying. We were talking about earlier Leslie Penelope. She was a local author, she ended up winning the Black Caucus the ALA self-publishing book award and she just got signed to a four book contract with St. Martin's Press. So this is a local librarian who recognized an author and they just kind of kept rising up the ranks. So putting libraries in that position of adding value I think it's so, so important.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Because libraries know what people need and read so the ability to translate our skills into supporting self-published authors is really a nice thing.

MITCHELL DAVIS: And a scouting talent which is really what Soon–to-Be-Famous is doing in a powerful way. So that’s sort of one audience. The other audience is school support. One of the powerful things about geolocation and unlimited use e-books is that any school building, any teacher, any students sitting inside the same geography gets to use everything on that platform for no-cost. So, what RAILS has done in licensing this for the entire state and then licensing this set of really rich materials is they can now support any school library in the state with e-books with no added cost to the school, the students, and the teachers. It all works on mobile devices and so, as you know Veronda, we’re in the process now of planning through a school Reading Room. We're going to be doing some summer camps with teachers and librarians and launching that in the Fall as a school sport.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Right, and schools for RAILS is our largest membership group so we really are very eager to serve them more.

MITCHELL DAVIS: Yeah, and it’s really nice library material. So that school support is a separate discipline and then the third one is the community reading, which is the Pop-up Picks, which has really been a complete research and development project with RAILS. I mean this was nothing but an idea three years ago and from the branding, to the content, to the way the technology works, to the partnerships, we’ve really worked hand-in-hand on all of that and it's starting to really make some resonance in the industry. Publishers Weekly just came on board as a partner with that in the last few months. So it's really been validated by the industry and I think is really in its early days of having an impact so it's exciting.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: What’s also been great about that is we talk about librarians connecting people to what they need and read; with our partnership also with the Independent Publishers Group, in introducing people to Indie content it’s an opportunity to create a unique value for libraries in the whole reading economy. We could get these books on the major platforms but how can we do something unique for libraries? So if they've read Gone Girl, which is incredibly popular, what do you read next? And how could we introduce you to something you may not have seen elsewhere? In talking with other friends who are in collection development, they are always saying the challenge is that with Twitter and everything else the public knows about books before. So, how can we get people to something unique as libraries?

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: So, what's coming up next for Billy aboard and rails?
VERONDA PITCHFORD: Well, I think I would say before we say was coming up next, everything that we do next comes out of as partners what we have the opportunity to learn from our awesome members and from each other. I don't mean just personally, each other, but more importantly, what's in it for publishers? What goals do publishers have, what goals do distributors have, and of course, what goals do libraries have? So, in doing that, that's how what's next is always informed. Of course we have strategic vision, a shared vision as a development partner we want to get to but more important I just wanted to say really quickly it's always informed out of feedback and learning along the way. But this idea because it's like super platform-it is super platform-it should have a cape with an electronic “S!”

MITCHELL DAVIS: I like that. Or a “B” or something (laughs)

VERONDA PITCHFORD: (Laughs) A multi-use “S!” It's so powerful, what we found is, and it kind of came out of conversations when I was in Charleston during the Charleston conference working with ya’ll, I'm like people need a living room or a welcome space to come into the platform that reflects their library type. Just as someone would come into your home, you would set them down and they would feel welcome in this space, how can we create that kind of virtual living room by type of library? In that virtual living room, for example, academics would see open educational resources, primary source materials, maybe class recordings from professors that are on the platform, and academic content maybe from Chicago Review Press on there. Schools would see Common Core Curriculum materials, of course for those of us in Illinois, primary source stuff about our friend Abe Lincoln on there, and maybe some resources on how schools that are in a one-to-one setting could use resources on Biblioboard to work with kids to do homework; homework help. Our friends in a public library would see how, in the living room, what public library resources you could read right now. What could you take on a trip with you, etc. Or our friends who may be in a public library, someone would like to use the platform, which we learn I learned along the way, it's a great opportunity to introduce people to a new genre. So if someone hadn't read comic books before and you're like, “where do I start?” This was, for me at least, an opportunity to try something else. It's a very easy way to do that in a non-committal way. I know in some platforms, and just libraries given the resources we have, you can only check out a certain number of things at a time.

MITCHELL DAVIS: With this she can just kind of go crazy.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Right, just take a little peak.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: What do you see is out there for special libraries?

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Special libraries are mostly using, in my experience, the platform, well actually there is a very cool special library who's joining us at an event this week Fermilab and I've only emailed with her. They do stem work with students in the community. So they're using the platform to support work with community you know, kind of as a way to introduce kids to that career.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Yes, absolutely.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: But I know a lot of specials use it as leisure reading. There's another collection on the platform called Recovering the Classics that is good for all types of libraries because it's very cleaned up content, public domain in British literature, American classics, along with that, digital covers that can be used for promotional materials. And those are available on the RAILS website.

MITCHELL DAVIS: Yeah, I think the Recovering the Classics is interesting too because it really shows the versatility of the platform in that we have content that we’ve licensed from Publishers that's our own but in the case were Recovering the Classics, you guys bought that directly from the publisher and just loaded it onto the platform. I think we're trying to be as I can is agnostic as to how the library wants to use the technology, so it's very flexible.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: I talked about us being a development partner but what I've observed as part of my role here at RAILS as group purchase, I work with a lot of vendors my colleague Amanda and I do on behalf of members, and what I found in this case is that Biblioboard is a tech company that has come to libraries. In most of my, in 99% of my experiences it's the reverse in that there's just a different culture I’m finding (the sprints, the daily sprints!)

MITCHELL DAVIS: It’s true. We are definitely a software company that is incredibly motivated and has a really good vision and we approach it as a software company. So I mean that learning and that changing tack and that encompassing learning,

VERONDA PITCHFORD: being very agile

 MITCHELL DAVIS: Yeah we can do those things so quickly and easily because of the way we've architected and because of the way we think and because of the way the people work within our building, which I think is important.

VEROND PITCHFORD: And being malleable to what we need. In having a conversation and wanting to be, “We'd like to have a collection of all the common core resources.” I mean on the phone I said that and it was, “Okay, here let me select someone and we'll get that common core collection up on the website.” So, it's the flexibility and the ability to really look at it from a “you” experience has been really valuable and a lesson learned for us.

MITCHELL DAVIS: Yeah, when I look at what's next I saw something in the RAILS vision about the future of libraries as multi-type and I think that really gets at the heart of what we've tried to do, which is create a user experience that just is a modern media user experience that can move from a from a second grader, to a college student, to a retired reader; same technology, same platform, and just dealing with that at a layer that works. When I think about what's next, we have to become better within Illinois at taking the platform and pointing it at these different audiences through the Reading Rooms, through the content and having it resonate with each of those audiences in its own way. Same technology, same platform behind it but working in much different ways depending on who you're trying to reach.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Just like software does in, I almost said the real world, but I guess we’re in the real world too, but how people interact with software and with their cell phone.

MITCHELL DAVIS: Always getting better, invisibly too.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Yes, exactly

DIERDRE BRENNAN: So we've really got our users excited, I can see them.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: I can feel it!

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: They’ve all pulled over to the side of the road. They’re driving and they're trying desperately to hold on and get the information about where they can go find all this great stuff if they haven't already found it. So that would be…

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Either they could download the app on iOS or Android, the Biblioboard app, or they can use the URL library.biblioboard.com. Always on the RAILS website there is a whole page of information on how to use Biblioboard and marketing materials. Every week our RAILS friends post something in e-news about different aspects of the platform and how to use it. You can always find out what's new about it in the RAILS e-news. And you can call or email.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: I knew you were going to say that! Absolutely, of course.

VERONDAPITCHFORD: I hope you knew that in a good way.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: I did! Always glad to help answer questions.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Of course, we love it. Hello-I'm a reference librarian! Who would I be if I didn't answer questions?

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: So, lots going on with Biblioboard and RAILS this week alone.

 MITCHELL DAVIS: And the Soon-to-Be famous announcement is also this week.

VERONDAPITCHFORD: The winner will be announced this week. It’s exciting.

MITCHELL DAVIS: I get to hand a check to someone which is always exciting-a big check!

VERONDA PITCHFORD: I love surprises; I am excited for them!

MITCHELL DAVIS: It's an incredible event. I mean I've read a couple of the books and have just had such a good time getting to know the winners of the Soon-to-Be-Famous contest. We've had several events in Chicago. It was just always so inspiring to the authors to be around other authors and librarians who resonate with their books; it’s just a good sense of community.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: And obviously the program has grown legs and run across the country. Prior to it being adapted in other states people were always asking us about it at any book meetings. So there's great interest out there in ways in which to support the self-published community and this is a big part of that and along with the platform.

MITCHELL DAVIS: Yep, we launched on April 2nd a contest modeled after the contest you guys do here in Illinois in California, Kentucky, Ohio, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Virginia.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That is great news for authors and readers.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: and resource-sharing

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Yep. Well, thank you very much for this great conversation Mitchell, Veronica, and look forward to hearing more about great new ideas that we develop and work on together.

VERONDA PITCHFORD: Thank you

MITCHELL DAVIS: Thank you for having me, it’s been great.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Thank you very much for listening to Sparks today! Sparks is produced by the Reaching Across Illinois Library System. If you would like to learn more about the show or share your feedback on the topics discussed, please visit railslibraries.info/sparks.