

# Comparing Safari Tech Books Online and Books24x7 ebook collections: a case study from the University of British Columbia Library

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## Abstract

Most academic libraries are seeking to provide electronic access to the very dynamic and changing field of technology related material. *Safari Tech Books Online* and *Books24x7* are the major ebook collections in this area. We compared the *Safari Tech Books Online* and *Books24x7* ebook packages as to their usefulness for the University of British Columbia Library, second largest academic library in Canada. In our sample, we found that *Books24x7* had more titles to offer (25% more); the overlap between the collections was relatively small (13-16%) and publishers varied considerably; and although there were no major differences in the “usefulness” measures of the titles in the two packages (Amazon.com ratings, WorldCat holdings and Reviews.com reviews were quite similar for both packages), O’Reilly titles, available only through *Safari Tech Books Online*, were held by a slightly higher number of libraries worldwide. We conclude that in order to have comprehensive coverage of this constantly changing area of knowledge, a large research academic library needs to subscribe to both collections. If subscribing to both collections is not an option, we recommend selecting a package based on the pricing that the library can negotiate with ProQuest, the vendor of both products, since the collections are complimentary in their nature.

## Introduction:

With current financial markets in disorder and possible budget cuts to our libraries continent-wide, librarians may be forced to make tough decisions regarding their collections in the near future. In the area of Computer Science and other Science and Engineering disciplines, many academic libraries may feel a strong demand for fully searchable, full-text, online computer manuals and other technical reference books. At present, two major vendors offer comparable full-text, technical reference content: *Safari Tech Books Online* and *Books24x7*. While a number of articles discuss these ebook packages individually, there seems to be no research comparing the two (Dalzell, 2007; Fernandes, 2007; Golderman & Connolly, 2004; Hawkins, 2007; Kong, 2006; LaGuardia, 2004;

Marien, 2007; Stephens, Melgoza, & Gang Wan, 2008; Turner, 2003; Wallace, 2006; Whang, 2006). In an era of budget cuts and hiring freezes, we decided to evaluate these two packages of electronic technical reference books to see how they compare with each other and what their advantages and/or disadvantages might be.

*Safari Tech Books Online*, a joint venture between O'Reilly Media, Inc. and the Pearson Technology Group, is a collection of fully searchable, full-text computer manuals. The full *Safari* catalog contains 6,474 publications (as for Dec. 19, 2008) from publishers including O'Reilly and Pearson imprints, Addison-Wesley Professional, Adobe Press, Cisco Press, New Riders, Peachpit Press, Prentice Hall PTR, Sun Microsystems Press, Que, and Sams. O'Reilly is the publisher of the popular "In a Nutshell," "Essentials," and "Definitive Guides" book series, identifiable by the animals on their covers. ProQuest is the distributor of *Safari Tech Books Online* to academic, public, and K-12 libraries.

A product of SkillSoft, *Books24x7* makes available Web-based technical and business reference content; it contains 7,501 of digitized reference books (as for Dec. 19, 2008). Like *Safari Tech Books Online*, the content is cover to cover, including full text, tables, sidebars, figures, drawings and formulas. Included titles come from McGraw-Hill, John Wiley & Sons, Cambridge University Press, Sybex, Microsoft Press, Oxford University Press, MIT Press, IBM Redbooks, and Wrox Press. ProQuest is also the distributor of *Books24x7* to libraries.

In comparing these two ebook packages, our goals were to determine for each collection:

- The number of titles covering our sample topics;
- The currency of those titles (based on publication years);
- The major publishers of those titles; and
- The "usefulness" of those titles, as measured by:
  - The average number of libraries holding those titles (as listed in WorldCat),
  - The number of positive reviews of those titles on Reviews.com (a computer science book reviews site from the Association for Computing Machinery), and
  - The average rating for those titles on Amazon.com.

## **Methods:**

Unable to exhaustively compare *Safari* and *Books24x7* title by title, we selected six (6) topics that would best represent the interests of our user groups. We made our selection based on the reference questions received by the Computer Science liaison librarian (one of the authors) during the past year.

The topics selected were: Python and C# (programming languages), Dreamweaver and Maya (web and graphical design), cryptography and podcasting.

For each topic, we searched both *Books24x7* and *Safari* for books about that topic, limiting the search to book titles only (i.e., book titles containing the word “python”) and collected the following data:

- Number of titles,
- Distribution of publication years, and
- Publisher distribution.

We also wanted to evaluate the “usefulness” of those titles to general readers. For each title, we measured usefulness by looking at the number of libraries worldwide that owned that title (as reported in WorldCat), its average star ranking on Amazon.com, and whether it had been positively reviewed on Reviews.com, ACM’s review site for computer science books. Our assumption was that if a title is held by more libraries, has a better ranking on Amazon.com, and is reviewed positively on Reviews.com, it will be more useful to our readers. Unable to spend the large amount of time required to compare the usefulness of all retrieved titles in our sample, we evaluated the titles for only two topics – Python and Maya.

## **Results and Discussion:**

After compiling our results, we analyzed the 395 titles retrieved in our sample.

Number of titles: Our sample contained 220 books from *Books24x7* and 175 books from *Safari* (see Appendix 1). *Books24x7* had 25% more titles covering our chosen areas.

Years of publication: In our sample, *Books24x7* offered more titles published in every year except 2003 and 2007; *Safari* had more books published in those two years for our selected topics (see Appendix 1).

Publishers: Although we had learned from the existing literature that the publishers for the two packages would vary, the results still surprised us. As anticipated, the major publisher in *Safari* was O’Reilly with 38 books (22% of the *Safari* titles in our sample). Other significant publishers were Sams with 26 books (15%), Addison Wesley and Microsoft with 17 books each (10%), and Peachpit and Prentice Hall with 16 books each (9%). In *Books24x7*, the major publishers were Apress with 52 books (24% of the *Books24x7* titles in our sample), Wrox Press with 28 books (13%), Microsoft with 25 books (11%) and John Wiley & Sons with 21 books (9%). Moreover, publishers that were well represented in one package tended to be poorly represented in the other: There were 52 Apress titles in *Books24x7* but only 7 in *Safari*; there were 21 John Wiley & Sons books in *Books24x7* but only 4 in *Safari*; there were 38 O’Reilly books in *Safari* but none in *Books24x7*; there were 26 Sams books in *Safari* and only 2 in *Books24x7*. Finally, we found that *Books24x7* represented a much larger variety of publishers (e.g. Cambridge University, Charles River Media, Friends of Ed, McGraw-Hill, Paraglyph, Sybex, Visibooks, etc.; see Appendix 2).

Overlap: Also of interest was the number of titles appearing in both *Books24x7* and *Safari*. By comparing books on each of the chosen topics, we found the following overlap:

- Python: 2 titles in common, representing 9% of the *Safari* Python collection and 12% of the *Books24x7* Python collection.
- C#: 22 titles in common, representing 26% of the *Safari* C# collection and 17% of the *Books24x7* C# collection.
- Dreamweaver: 3 titles in common, representing 7% of the *Safari* Dreamweaver collection and also 7% of the *Books24x7* Dreamweaver collection.
- Cryptography: 1 title in common, representing 25% of the *Safari* Cryptography collection and 6% of the *Books24x7* Cryptography collection.

The total overlap was 28 titles in common, representing only 16% of the *Safari* collection and 13% of the *Books24x7* collection. This was much less duplication than anticipated. Microsoft Press titles accounted for most of the overlap; if we eliminate Microsoft titles, the overlap would represent a mere 7% of the *Safari* collection and 5.5% of the *Books24x7* collection. This was one of our most important findings: since the content overlap between the two collections is insignificant, the ebook packages are complementary, rather than duplicating one another.

Usefulness - WorldCat holdings: As one indicator of usefulness, we examined the number of libraries worldwide that owned each title in our sample, as reported in WorldCat. On average, each *Safari* title was owned by 203 libraries worldwide and each *Books24x7* title by 194 libraries worldwide. This is a relatively minor difference (see Appendix 3).

Usefulness - Reviews.com ratings: As another indicator of usefulness, we investigated the number of titles in our sample that were positively reviewed on the ACM's computer science book reviews site. Six titles from each package were reviewed positively on Reviews.com.

Usefulness – Amazon.com ratings: As a third indicator of usefulness, we examined user reviews on Amazon.com – the major online bookseller – and compared the rankings of each title in our sample. On average, *Safari* titles achieved a rating of 3.8 (out of 5) versus 3.45 for *Books24x7* titles, not a sweeping difference.

Usefulness – O'Reilly titles: Our user groups report that many people prefer O'Reilly books to those from other publishers. Using the three measures listed above, we compared the usefulness of the

O'Reilly titles in our sample to the overall sample. We found that the O'Reilly titles in our sample were, on average, held by more libraries than the titles from *Books24x7* or even the *Safari* titles as a whole – an average of 280 libraries for O'Reilly titles, compared to 203 for *Safari* titles and 194 for *Books24x7* titles (see appendix 4). The average Amazon.com rating for O'Reilly titles is similar to that for the *Safari* titles overall – 3.8, which is just a bit higher than the *Books24x7* average rating of 3.45 (see Appendix 4).

Other Considerations: Both ebook collections provide MARC records for their content. The technical staff here at the UBC Library regards the *Books24x7* MARC records very highly, reporting that *Books24x7* is one of the most user-friendly and automated online book packages. Our library system has no experience with *Safari* MARC records.

Both ebook packages offer HTML viewing, displaying one page at a time with a table of contents link on each page. HTML pages can be printed and the URLs can be emailed or bookmarked. It is unfortunate that neither collection offers PDF versions of the books' text, the option that most of our users seem to prefer for viewing and printing.

Another important usability consideration is how users access the database. *Safari* authenticates users based on their IP addresses, which allows seamless access for patrons both on our campus and connected to the network through Virtual Private Network (VPN). *Books24x7* requires users to create individual accounts and log in to view an ebook. Although UBC patrons can set up free accounts relatively quickly and easily, this extra step dissuades some users from taking advantage of this resource. It also impedes easy access should users discover *Books24x7* content through any means other than the database itself.

## **Conclusions:**

Most academic libraries are seeking to provide electronic access to the very dynamic and changing field of technology related material. *Safari* and *Books24x7* are the major e-content providers in this area, together with *NetLibrary*. Stephens et al (2008) found that the most recent editions of electronic ebooks are available in *Safari* (we found no comparable research for the *Books24x7* collection), which helps to keep this rapidly changing field up-to-date. Our study found that the overlap between the collections is relatively small (13-16%) and publishers vary considerably; there are no major differences in the usefulness of those two packages: Amazon.com ratings, WorldCat holdings and Reviews.com book reviews were quite similar for both. Therefore, we conclude that in order to have comprehensive coverage of this constantly changing area of knowledge, a large research academic library needs to subscribe to both collections. If subscribing to both collections is not feasible due to budget constraints, as is the case at the University of British Columbia Library, we recommend selecting a package based on the pricing that the library can negotiate with ProQuest, the vendor of both products, since the collections are complimentary in their nature.

## Acknowledgments:

The authors would like to acknowledge Dean Giustini for reading and commenting on the preliminary version of the article.

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#### Appendix 1 – Years of publication

<b>Year of publication</b>	<b>Safari</b>	<b>Books 24X7</b>
2008	16	17
2007	32	14
2006	22	40
2005	16	21
2004	12	28
2003	34	29
2002	22	43
2001	12	17
2000	6	9
1999	1	2
1998	2	0
total	175	220

## Appendix 2 – Publishers

<b>Publishers</b>	<b>Safari</b>	<b>Books 24X7</b>
A K Peters	0	1
Addison Wesley	17	0
Adobe	3	0
A-LIST	0	1
Apress	7	52
Artech	0	2
ASTD	0	1
Cambridge University	0	4
Charles River Media	0	2
Course Technology	0	2
Digital Press	0	1
Electronic & Database	0	1
Exam Cram	6	0
firstPress	0	1
Friends of Ed	0	4
IGI	0	1
iUniverse	0	2
John Wiley & Sons	4	21
Jones & Bartlett	0	3
Macromedia	8	0
Manning	1	0
McGraw-Hill	0	7
Microsoft	17	25
MIT	0	1
Morgan Kaufman	0	1
New Riders	14	0
O'Reilly	38	0
Oxford Press	0	1
Packt	0	3
Paraglyph	0	3
Peachpit Press	15	2
Pragmatic Programmers	0	2
Premier Press	2	9
Prentice Hall	15	0
Que	5	0
Redmond Technology	0	2
Sams	26	2
Sitepoint	2	3
Springer	0	1
Sybex	0	15
Syngress	1	3
Visibooks	0	4
Wordware	0	1
Wrox Press	0	28



### Appendix 3 – Usefulness of books

<b>Usefulness (done for Python and Maya titles only)</b>	<b>Safari</b>	<b>Books 24X7</b>
Number of libraries in WorldCat (average)	203	194
Number of positive reviews in reviews.com	6	6
Average review score on Amazon.com	3.8	3.45

### Appendix 4 – Usefulness of O'Reilly books

<b>Usefulness (done for Python and Maya titles only)</b>	<b>Safari</b>	<b>Books 24X7</b>	<b>O'Reilly titles</b>
Number of libraries in Worldcat (average)	203	194	280
Number of positive reviews in reviews.com	6	6	
Average review score on Amazon.com	3.8	3.45	3.8