

E-books – how can we show they're worth it?

Ksenija Mincic-Obradovic

The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand, k.obradovic@auckland.ac.nz

INTRODUCTION

E-books have been recognized as having great potential to be an effective and efficient educational tool. The combination of text with animations, graphics, simulations and sounds can be very useful in explaining abstract theories and concepts. Features such as hyperlinks, customizability of text size and the ability to convert text to audio also have benefits in education.

Two characteristics of e-books – availability and flexibility – make them appealing in the academic environment. Access anytime, anywhere, and full text searching are functionalities highly valued by students and staff.

Limited physical space is a problem for many university libraries, and in this context electronic books are an excellent solution.

E-book collections in academic libraries are growing. Libraries are investing huge proportions of their budgets in e-books, but how do we know that e-books are worth it? Can we prove that libraries are getting value for their money? This presentation will look into statistics of usage and demonstrate what they can deliver. It will discuss different measures available to evaluate e-book usage.

WHAT ARE STATISTICS OF USAGE TELLING US?

The paper will analyse of the examples of statistics collected by the University of Auckland Library but also by other academic libraries. It will demonstrate:

1. How e-books are used

- E-books from library collections are mostly used for research and study, and much less often for leisure reading.
- Students do not spend much time reading e-books; instead they dip in and out searching for the information they need.
- Users read smaller chunks of text on screen.
- Users make printouts.

2. When e-books are used

Statistical data show that usage of e-books closely correlates with the academic year and that e-books are more heavily used when assignments are due. Books prescribed as recommended reading for courses get the highest usage. They get accessed hundreds of times.

3. How usage can be improved

Statistical data highlight the importance of having relevant titles, including textbooks, in e-book collections. They also prove that adding MARC records to the library catalogue increases the usage of the e-book collections. The paper will argue that improvements in these two areas are highly needed.

CHALLENGES OF COLLECTING THE STATISTICS OF USAGE

Collecting and analysing e-books statistics is not a straightforward task. Libraries themselves can only count traffic from their websites to e-book databases. They cannot monitor users' behaviour within the databases. Therefore they rely heavily on statistics provided by e-book vendors and publishers. However, different vendors count usage differently. Data vary in quality too, and can include numbers of downloads, pages viewed, copied, and printed; numbers of successful searches; and numbers of searches turned away.

This presentation will talk about initiatives such as COUNTER and SUSHI, and their importance.

CONCLUSIONS

Thorough information about the use of e-book collections helps academic libraries to better meet user needs but also to make the right changes to library collection policies. Library budgets are tight, even more so in the last few years, and librarians are concerned about the usage of e-book collections, particularly ones for which they pay on-going subscriptions. Statistics on e-book usage help when decisions have to be made about which collections should be retained and which subscriptions should be cancelled, but also which collections are worth spending money on for cataloguing, or promotion and training.

Statistical data is often difficult to obtain and compare. They offer only limited help in understanding e-book user behaviour. Nevertheless, they are a good indicator of use and a good way of obtaining information about usage trends.

The presentation will conclude with improvements libraries would like to see in approaches to measuring and evaluating library investment in e-books.

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