Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

E-Book Discovery and Use Behaviour is Complex

A review of:

Rowland, Ian, David Nicholas, Hamid R. Jamali, and Paul Huntington. "What do Faculty and Students Really Think about E-books?" Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives; 59.6 (2007): 489-511.

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Abstract

Objective – To assess academic users' awareness, perceptions and levels of use of e-books. Also to discover the purposes for which e-books were used and identify the most effective library marketing strategies for e-books.

Design – Survey.

Setting – University College London (UCL).

Subjects – 1,818 UCL staff and students.

Methods – In November 2006, staff and students of UCL were asked to participate in an online survey, administered using SurveyMonkey software. The survey ran November 1-18, 2006. Survey results were analysed using Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Main Results – The response rate to the survey was at least 6.7%. A total of 1,818 completed surveys were received from approximately 27,000 potential respondents, although it is not known whether all e-mails announcing the survey were successfully delivered. No statistically significant differences were found between the demographic profile of the survey sample and the profile of the total UCL population. Data regarding e-book usage were collected from the sub-group of respondents who were existing e-book users, and data regarding use of print collections and book

discovery were collected from all respondents.

Forty-four per cent of respondents had used e-books, with age a good predictor of usage. However additional data analysis revealed complex demographic interactions underlying e-book usage, making broad generalisations too simplistic. Of existing e-book users, 61% sourced e-books independently of the UCL library. Deeper analysis showed that men were more "library independent" than women and doctoral students were more so than other students and staff. Forty-eight per cent of existing e-book users preferred reading from a screen rather than paper, with men more likely to read from a screen than women, and undergraduates more likely to do so than other groups. Responses to questions about the purpose of reading showed that existing e-book users consulted e-books primarily for work and study, and tended to obtain these from libraries. They were less likely to use e-books for leisure, but if they did so, were likely to obtain them from non-library sources.

E-books were compared to traditional print across a range of factors and scored very favourably for ease of copying, currency, space requirements, 24/7 accessibility, convenience and ease of navigation. However e-books scored poorly compared to print for ease of reading, ease of marking a place and ease of annotation.

Regarding use of library print titles, data from all respondents indicated that women (42%) were more likely to be regular users of print than men (35%). Print book discovery behaviour is complex, and age, gender and subject area all influenced book discovery preferences. Analysis of data regarding satisfaction with UCL's current provision of print library books showed that 41% rated this service as "excellent" or "good," but further analysis by gender, age and subject

area revealed pockets of low satisfaction which warrant further attention.

Students were much more aware of e-book availability through the UCL library than academic and research staff, with differences in awareness also displayed between different faculties. The library's Web site and catalogue were the main channels for e-book awareness, with respondents themselves suggesting the library Web site and e-mail user guides as the most effective e-book awareness mechanisms.

Conclusion – This study reveals a significant level of interest in and use of e-books in one academic community, but with differences determined by age, gender, academic sub-group and subject area. It builds on the findings of previous studies of e-book usage and indicates key areas for further study. These include whether real-life information behaviour correlates with the self-reporting of respondents, and the intersection of gender and self-reported information behaviour. This information, plus the patterns of book discovery behaviour emerging from this study, will be of interest to publishers, booksellers and libraries.

Commentary

The survey reported in this article is part of the larger SuperBook Project at the Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research (CIBER) at UCL. This project aims to apply a range of research methodologies to e-book user behaviour and integration of e-books with e-learning. Wiley and Emerald, two major e-book providers, are funding the project so it would have been appropriate for the authors to provide a statement outlining how conflict of interest will be avoided. Approximately 3,000 e-texts have been made available to the UCL community and,

again, it would have been useful for the authors to explain how these texts were selected and by whom – the publishers or academics or both. It is possible that e-text and/or publisher selection could influence how the UCL community discovers and uses e-books. User behaviour will be examined using deep log analysis and interviews or focus groups. Before this happens, however, the survey reported in this paper was carried out to provide baseline contextual data regarding the UCL academic community's awareness and usage of e-books.

An excellent literature review places this article in context with other studies of e-book usage. This article builds on the results of Levine-Clark, whose study of e-book usage at the University of Denver has been the subject of an earlier evidence summary in this journal (see Hannigan). Generally, results are reported logically and clearly, although there may be too much detail for some readers. There appears to be one error in the reporting of the results. Regarding reading format preferences, the authors note that the youngest group of respondents prefer reading from the screen "but the overall pattern appears not to be very age-dependent, except for a marked fall off (on the basis of a small population) after the age of 65" (Rowland 497). However the accompanying graph (Figure 7) shows the opposite trend. This may simply be an accidental reversal of information in Figure 7.

There is a wealth of detail in this report and some interesting trends are identified regarding the interaction of age, gender, academic sub-group and subject area with e-book use, library use and satisfaction with current library services. Potentially the most valuable information derived from the data is the identification of predictors of e-book use, and "hotspots" of dissatisfaction with current library provision of printed books.

However, while this information will be of great use to the UCL library management, readers cannot apply it to their local populations with confidence. As the authors themselves note, some of the results may be locally determined by e-book availability rather than by characteristics of the study population itself that could be extrapolated to other academic communities.

The analysis of book discovery behaviour and preferences will, however, be of interest to many readers. Complex analysis of responses to the question of how dependent readers were on a range of formal and informal strategies for book discovery revealed a hierarchical classification of three clusters of strategies. The first cluster consists of formal systems of literature control outside the academic library such as other libraries, publishers' catalogues and book reviews; the second cluster comprises informal, personal activities including searching Web sites such as Amazon and Google and visiting bookshops; the third cluster of activities (reading lists, UCL library, UCL catalogue, recommendations) is focused on the academic institution. These clusters are further modified by significant demographic differences. As the authors note: "service planning and delivery might well benefit from a better understanding of how people find books and … librarians might do well to segment their offerings in a much more sophisticated way" (Rowland 504).

The survey was conducted online, but a list of the survey questions and response options would have been a useful appendix to this article. Some of the response options appear imprecise, particularly for a self-reported user survey such as this. For example, regarding current use of library print collections, response options such as "use regularly," "use as required" and "rarely use" are open to interpretation – is regular use once a day or once a week? It

will be interesting to see the comparison between the self-reported results elicited by this survey and the "real-life" behaviour revealed by deep log analysis, the next stage of the SuperBook Project.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Chris, Ray Lonsdale, and David Nicholas. *CIBER SuperBook Project*. 24 Oct. 2007. University College London. 27 March. 2008 <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/research/ciber/superbook/>.

Hannigan, Gale G. "Users' Awareness of Electronic Books is Limited." *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 2.2 (2007): 104-106. 27 March 2008 <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP/article/view/235>

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