When Librarians Hit the Books: Uses of and Attitudes Toward E-Books

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Librarians offer a unique perspective on e-books: on one hand they collect these resources and train users as part of their jobs, while on the other hand, they may be users of e-books themselves. With recent increases in research expectations for Canadian academic librarians, this study aimed to discover: when librarians do research, do they use e-books and how often are they using them? This study examines the results of a survey of 392 academic librarians from across Canada. The survey generated data on librarians' use of, and attitudes towards, e-books. While a number of studies examine the use and opinions of e-books among other user groups, this study examines how librarians search for or use e-books differently than other user groups. Results will help librarians to improve their liaison work and make more informed collection development decisions at their own institutions.

Introduction

McGill University is a large research university with approximately 33,000 students, including undergraduates, graduates, doctoral and post doc students, and medical residents (McGill University, 2016). The McGill Library is comprised of eight branches on its downtown campus and one branch at its suburban campus. Like many academic libraries in North America, it has been facing significant space constraints in the past decade. For various reasons, including several branch mergers and a growing student population that requires more material than ever before, the stacks are overcrowded. In some subject areas, particularly in science and engineering, theft of the print textbook collections is also a major concern. These were some of the factors that resulted in the Library's transition to "e-preferred" for English-language monographs in 2011: books selected individually and arriving via approval plans were ordered in the e-book format rather than in print whenever possible. Purchasing e-books aimed to reduce the burden in the stacks by reducing the number of volumes added each year. Additionally, purchasing e-books offers one solution to the theft of physical books.

In 2017, the number of electronic documents surpassed the Library's print volumes, providing access to over 2.5 million e-books. Over time, many liaison librarians up-skilled on how to use the ever-changing e-book platforms, and many now include e-book demonstrations in their information literacy workshops. Faculties are encouraged to use e-books for course material, although print copies are also still purchased by the Library to support teaching and learning.

McGill University professors and librarians are academic staff and are required to do research to attain tenure. When they request books for their research, by default the Library purchases e-books for them. Print is purchased only when e-books are unavailable or when researchers specify a preference for print.

Librarians have a unique perspective on e-books. As P. Jacobs and Bergart (2014) suggest in their examination of the "e-book ecosystem," librarians are involved in many stages of the "life cycle" of an e-book including: selection and acquisition, budgeting, electronic resources management, discovery, user experience, preservation, interlibrary loan, teaching and learning, promotion and communications, monitoring and assessment. As researchers, they are users of these resources as well. With that in mind, this study sets out to answer the questions:

- When librarians do research, do they use e-books and how often are they using them?
- Do librarians search for or use e-books differently than other user groups?
- How do librarians feel about using e-books?

Using a survey on e-book use and attitudes developed by Corlett-Rivera and Hackman (2014) as a guide, the authors created an online survey tailored to Canadian academic librarians working in English-speaking institutions. Corlett-Rivera and Hackman's well-design survey asked questions about how patrons were using e-books while conducting research and when reading recreationally, providing an excellent snapshot of a user group. While their study surveyed students and faculty in humanities, social sciences, and education at the University of Maryland, this study focused on academic librarians. As academic librarians are entrenched in the e-book world, asking

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librarians the same questions seemed pertinent and timely. This paper discusses the results of that survey, answers the research questions above, and provides implications for liaison work and collection development decisions.

Literature review

Recent years have seen a considerable increase in the purchase of e-books by academic libraries, and with this has come an emergence of literature on the topic. As this survey examines user experiences, attitude and preferences, it is important to understand the literature that already exists on this topic. So much has been written on e-books in the last few years, that Corlett-Rivera and Hackman (2014) suggest "it can be difficult to achieve an understanding of the current state of e-books in the academic library" (p. 257). This was not always the case, as reflected in papers published just several years prior. Shelburne (2009) suggest a gap in the literature on users' awareness of and attitudes towards using e-books. Two years later, Shrimplin, Revelle, Hurst, and Messner (2011) describe the literature on patron perceptions of e-books as "modest," due to a lack of regular usage of e-books by library patrons. However, just around the same time, the e-book was about to make a significant emergence. Becker (2015) refers to 2010 as "Year Zero" for e-books, as the first iPad arrived in 2010, which brought e-books into the mainstream, and Amazon reported e-books sales exceeded print sales. It is not surprising that since 2010, a host of studies have emerged examining how various user groups from a variety of settings use e-books.

Like the authors' institution, many other academic libraries have become 'e-preferred'. This preference for collecting e-books over print books has been fueled by a number of perceived advantages from both the library and the user perspective, including the search capability of e-books, lower overhead cost for the library, environmental benefits, and a growing desire to make more shelf-free space to accommodate student study areas (Chen-Gaffey & Getsay, 2016; Ward, Freeman, & Nixon, 2015). Although e-books are now a major part of academic library collections, the growth of these collections has faced resistance. According to Ward et al. (2015) an "e-book revolution" has been halted, in part, because of patrons' preference for print (p. 1).

Patron attitudes, perceptions, and engagement with e-books in academic settings have been explored in two separate, large-scale studies. From 2007 to 2010, JISC conducted the UK National *E*-Books Observatory Project. Their survey garnered 52,000 responses from students and academics across the UK. Through survey responses, observing log data, and follow-up focus groups, the study looked at users' awareness, perceptions and attitudes towards e-books in general, and towards course textbooks more specifically. With 64.6% of university students and professors reporting that they used e-books, JISC concluded that e-books had entered the mainstream. The report also suggested the convenience of e-books is at times compromised by technical barriers (JISC Collections, 2009). From 2007 to 2008, ebrary conducted an extensive study comprised of three surveys: the 2007 Global Librarian e-book survey, the 2007 Global Faculty e-book Survey, and the 2008 Global student e-book survey. Rather than asking librarians to answer from their own perspective, the survey asked respondents to answer from the students' perspective. The survey revealed a gap in awareness on the part of librarians for their users' needs or concerns (ebrary, 2008a, 2008b). In her review of the ebrary surveys, Ashcroft (2011), points out that this gap in understanding makes it impossible for librarians to make informed choices about book purchasing. Similarly, two studies on e-book use in academic libraries conducted by LibraryJournal asked academic librarians to respond on their students' preferences and habits regarding e-book use ("Ebook uage in U.S. Academic Libraries", 2012; "Ebook usage in U.S. academic libraries", 2016). On behalf of their patrons, librarians indicated that patrons were unlikely to be aware of e-book availability and to prefer print. However, just as Ashcroft identifies a gap in librarians' awareness of their patron's

preferences and concerns in the ebrary survey, it is possible that there is a similar disconnect in the LibraryJournal responses.

Librarians have also conducted a number of surveys that examine user experience with and attitudes towards e-books. As libraries continue to purchase e-books, librarians are eager to know how faculty and students use e-books, and also how they *feel* about using these resources. Michael Levine-Clark conducted three surveys between 2005 and 2015 to track patterns of e-book usage and attitudes towards using e-books at the University of Denver. While his 2005 survey of over 2000 participants found that 60% of respondents preferred print (Levine-Clark, 2006), the subsequent surveys show a move towards a preference for electronic. However, he pointed out that this preference depends on *who* the patrons are and *how* the material is being used. In 2015 he concluded that libraries cannot expect to adequately serve patrons by relying on a single format for books (Levine-Clark, 2015).

Recognizing that different patron groups may have unique perspectives, some researchers have focused their studies on particular populations. Studies by Gregory (2008), Mizrachi (2015), Olney-Zide and Eiford (2015), and Hobbs and Klare (2016) focus specifically on undergraduate use of e-books. All of the studies suggest problems with, or limitations to, e-book use. After conducting a survey questionnaire of undergraduates at the College of Mount St. Joseph, Gregory (2008) found that students have mixed feelings about e-books—they will use the e-format, but still have a preference for print. After analyzing the results of an Academic Reading Questionnaire, completed by approximately 400 students at the University of California, Mizrachi (2015) had similar findings: when using books for learning purposes, students showed a preference for print over e-books, but their usage behavior was mitigated by other factors, such as cost and accessibility. As in the other studies, Olney-Zide and Eiford (2015) reported that generally there were mixed feelings among students. However, 95.9% of their survey respondents stated that how quickly they could access a book determined which format they select. Hobbs and Klare (2016) conducted usability studies and interviews with undergraduate students at Wesleyan University. They found that while students were using e-books more than in the past, they were not adept users of this format.

A number of studies focusing on patrons within specific disciplines have explored subject-area trends in e-book usage. Camacho and Spackman (2010) conducted a survey of Business faculty members at Brigham Young University, and suggested that while faculty are using e-books, and are increasingly interested in the format due to availability and search capability, there are still many issues that need to be resolved. At the time, 61% of the faculty they surveyed still preferred print, due in part to ease of reading and portability. Foote and Rupp-Serrano (2010) surveyed and conducted focus groups with faculty and graduate students in Geosciences at the University of Oklahoma. Their results revealed that while e-books are being used, both faculty members and graduate students have reservations, particularly around ease-of-use and the quality of graphics and images in e-books. They also suggested that librarians need to provide more instruction on e-book use.

Corlett-Rivera & Hackman's, 2014 survey of faculty and students in the humanities and social sciences at the University of Maryland revealed a huge range of responses regarding attitudes towards e-books. They concluded that students and faculty at the University of Maryland has "by no means reached a consensus" when it comes to e-books, with feelings that ranged from enthusiasm, to hesitation, to "outright hostility" (p. 276). A follow-up study looking at STEM vs non-STEM disciplines at the same institution suggested that their results are not definitive enough to provide a guide for purchasing. While users were comfortable with e-book versions of conference proceedings, reference materials, and style guides, users remain deeply divided about scholarly monographs, edited collections and literature(Carroll, Corlett-Rivera, Hackman, & Zou, 2016).

Plum and Franklin (2015) echo the lack of consensus revealed in the University of Maryland studies in their own research, which analyzed