

E-books – reinventing the wheel?

Based on a paper presented at the UKSG seminar 'E-book: the new serial?',
The British Library Conference Centre, London, Wednesday 9 November 2005

To quote Carole Moore, the Chief Librarian at the University of Toronto Libraries (UTL): "One solution we have decided on is to invest in a pilot project in electronic books."¹ At UTL, we believe that our users do not care whether the information they are looking for is in a journal article, a section of a reference work, or a chapter of a book; they want the information online 24/7/365. To that end, we intend to undertake a pilot project with a critical mass of e-books, from as many publishers as we can afford, with the purpose of ascertaining how users discover the e-books, how they use the e-books and what they do after they get the information they were looking for. This article will discuss the current thinking of one large research-intensive university library as it pertains to current academic e-books.



WARREN HOLDER

Electronic Resources Co-ordinator
University of Toronto

"One solution we have decided on is to invest in a pilot project in electronic books"¹ – a quote from my Chief Librarian, Carole Moore, displayed on the University of Toronto homepage. I was thrilled when I read the quote because e-books have become my new passion. The University of Toronto Library (UTL) has aggressively licensed access to electronic resources. At present the University of Toronto (U of T) faculty, staff and students have access to well over 40,000 licensed e-journals and over 500 abstracting and indexing databases. U of T users also have access to in excess of half a million e-books, but most of these titles fall within collections such as Early English Books Online and Eighteenth Century Collections Online. There is absolutely nothing wrong with these e-book collections but the focus of this article is what one might clumsily call 'current academic monographs' available in electronic form. (Not the ideal description, perhaps, but it serves to differentiate from the older e-book collections.)

I firmly believe that the evolution of these current e-books is about where e-journals were back in 1996 and 1997, when we did not completely believe in their long-term viability. It comes as a surprise that we need to go through the same debate again, but that indeed seems to be the case. One of the problems is the variety of business models that are out there. For that we need to lay the blame at the feet of the publishers who seem

unsure as to how to market their e-books. One publisher's representative openly admitted that his company was "kissing frogs", by which he meant that they were licensing their e-books to just about any vendor that would give them money, and then watching to see which, if any, of the vendors got the business model right. Adding to this there are discussions about licensing terms, especially the issue of the number of simultaneous users, namely the digital rights management issue. Unlike the world of e-journals, the publishers are most comfortable with the 'one user, one copy' model replicating the print world, arguing that if you need more access you should buy more copies.

But the bigger surprise is that some of our colleagues are even questioning whether or not our users want e-books. It is astonishing that, given the undeniable success of e-journals, we have to go through it all again with e-books. I submit that users, be they faculty, staff or students, do not care whether the information they need is found in a journal article, an entry in a reference work or a chapter in a book. What they do know is that they want access to this information 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year. Undermining the strength of our argument is our lack of hard information about our users' attitude to e-books. That is why I am excited at the opportunity to be involved in a pilot study.

There are some very rudimentary questions that need some answers. How do users even find out about e-books? Once they find an e-book what do they do with it? After they have finished with the e-version what do they do next?

Let us take a look at each of these in a bit more detail. How do users find the e-books? The assumption is that e-books will come with MARC records that can be loaded into library catalogues. Is that sufficient? Is that indeed how students will find them, or is it more likely that they will find them when their professor provides a link to readings for the next class? Once they find the e-books, how do they use them and what do they do once they have gained access? Several studies and the vendors/publishers seem to concur that the average length of time that a user is logged on to an individual e-book is somewhere in the 5- to 15-minute range. What can be deduced from that research? Does it mean, as some 'nay-sayers' would have us believe, that the users actually did not find what they were looking for and just gave up, or does it simply demonstrate that the user quickly found the information they were seeking and then either printed out the relevant section, or cut and pasted it into the document on which they were working? Where does the user go when they have finished with the e-book? Do they follow a link to another reference in the same book? Do they click on a reference found in a footnote or bibliography that takes them to a journal article?

It is hoped that many studies will be taking place in the near future. These studies should be big, and small, and involve users from many library types. The University of Toronto Library, a large, research-intensive academic library, intends to undertake such a pilot study. UTL intends to provide access to a critical mass of e-books using a single interface. There is nothing wrong with providing access to any number of e-books, and the number is probably limited by the library's acquisition budget, but the purpose of UTL's study is to provide access to a collection of current academic e-books that exceeds 25,000 titles. The first step was taken at the very end of 2005 when the library reached an agreement with Taylor & Francis for access to over 11,000 e-books that they have available.

In addition to ensuring good data, by providing access to a significant number of e-books, UTL is also concerned by the potential problems posed by the multiple e-book platforms that are available. It

will not be long before every publisher will have e-books on either their own platform or on a hosted platform. And then there are the aggregators, from the general ones like NetLibrary and ebrary, to the more specialized ones like Books24x7 and Knovel. Obviously there is nothing wrong with any of these approaches, but for the University of Toronto Library pilot study the aim is to see what the effect will be if the access to the critical mass, rather than being in any number of disparate interfaces, is on one. The intention is to provide seamless access to as many e-books as we can possibly afford, regardless of the publisher's platform. This comes from the belief that the average user does not know – or care – who the publisher is. Accessing all the e-books through one interface replicates the approach a user would take when using the library catalogue. They hopefully have enough information to find the book they are looking for and then link to it. To that end UTL is in discussions with Coutts for their MyiLibrary e-book platform. Why Coutts and why MyiLibrary? Coutts appears to have the confidence of the publishers when it comes to the all important – for the publishers – Digital Rights Management (DRM) issue. Another factor, and a local one, is that the collection development librarians know and appear to be comfortable with Coutts, one of our approved 'approval plan' vendors. Coutts has acted as a book jobber for the University of Toronto Library system for several decades. For those who might not be familiar with approval plans, which are more North American in application, they are based on a profile of selection criteria written by the book selectors. Based on this profile the vendor supplies current academic monographs to the library. Like many large research libraries in North America, UTL has many approval plans and several of these are with Coutts.

If the pilot study stopped here, then the results would be of interest. But UTL believes it can take the pilot study to another level. First, a little history. For many reasons, UTL has been involved with local loading electronic resources since around 1997. This is not the place to discuss the whys and wherefores of local loading at the University of Toronto Library. At present U of T users have access to over 7,000 e-journals from Elsevier, Springer, Wiley, Blackwell, Taylor & Francis, Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press and others, all of which are accessible by searching on one interface with one click to the full text. That

was the beginning, but using the same premise as stated when discussing access to e-books – that the user does not care where the information comes from, they just want access – and believing that many users start with an abstract and indexing resource, UTL added the A & I metadata to the interface. At present, the interface named Scholars Portal integrates the A & I metadata from CSA, IEL (IEE/IEEE) and will soon have the Web of Science available.

One of UTL's firmly held beliefs is that the users' information seeking is enhanced by providing one-stop access to a large range of information. So what is missing? The obvious answer is e-books. The intention is to move as quickly as possible to integrate the Coutts MyiLibrary platform with the integrated Scholars Portal platform so that the users will have their very own, dare we say it, Google-like experience.

Have we built a better mousetrap? We certainly think and hope so, but that is not sufficient. Having embarked on the e-book pilot project, UTL will then work in partnership with at least one publisher to get user feedback. The aim is to invite users at every level – undergraduate, graduate, staff, researchers, junior faculty and senior faculty – to ascertain if the e-books and the integration of the e-books into Scholars Portal, with the e-journals and the abstracting and indexing databases, has any real impact on their information seeking; and does it make a demonstrable difference in the time and effort necessary to find the information they are seeking? Does it bring a serendipitous aspect into their search for answers?

The best answers to these questions will come by sitting down with these various categories of users and watching how they go about using the Internet to find what they are looking for. It involves watching the steps they take once they have found Scholars Portal and, in this case, specifically the e-books that have been added to the aggregation. It will involve the analysis of logs that will help answer the questions raised earlier:

how do users find e-books, what do they do once they have found them and where do they go after that? Thankfully, COUNTER has begun to tackle the whole issue of e-book usage statistics and so that aspect can be included in the study.

Obviously, this is not the only e-book study and there are certain to be other libraries, both large and small, that will undertake user studies to ascertain, as much as we possibly can, the wants and needs of our users. As librarians, our goal should be to try to satisfy the information needs of our users. In this fast changing world it is not acceptable to just sit back and say that the library is at the centre of the university and expect that the researchers, faculty and students will come to us and, as a result, the university administrations will provide the necessary budgets. It is incumbent upon us to do more in the way of user studies in an attempt to learn as much as we possibly can concerning their information seeking habits, so that we can ensure that we are indeed at the centre of our community and integral to the teaching and research that is taking place.

Reference

1. Rynor, M., Library system: meeting the demands of today's users. Originally at U of T homepage, now available at:
<http://www.steppingup.utoronto.ca/bin/001652.asp>

Article © Warren Holder

■ Warren Holder
Electronic Resources Co-ordinator
University of Toronto Libraries
130 St. George Street
Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5S 1A5
E-mail: warren.holder@utoronto.ca
Tel: 416 978 2286
Fax: 416 978 1668

To view the original copy of this article, published in *Serials*, the journal of the UKSG, click here:

<http://serials.uksg.org/openurl.asp?genre=article&issn=0953-0460&volume=19&issue=1&spage=15>

For a link to the table of contents for the issue of *Serials* in which this article first appeared, click here:

<http://serials.uksg.org/openurl.asp?genre=issue&issn=0953-0460&volume=19&issue=1>