Oral Communication

E-books: what interest(s) in 2012 for life sciences library users?

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Revised abstract

Introduction

Over the last 10 years or so, print journals have been progressively replaced by electronic journals in academic libraries. This change has been readily embraced by users. As a comparison, we would like to address now the question of e-book availability and usage. Indeed, e-book supply is becoming increasingly important. Surprisingly, recent statistics regarding the usage of e-books purchased by University of Liège (Belgium) show relatively poor consultation rates. We decided to analyze this situation.

Objective

The main objectives of the following study were:

- to identify the obstacles to using ebooks, as perceived by users;
- to identify how the library can facilitate e-book usage.

Survey methods

An online user survey was conducted in March 2012. About 8000 members of the faculties of Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, Psychology and Science Education received by mail an invitation to participate. A reminder was sent after 2 weeks.

Participation was anonymous and voluntary.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part was the same for all participants and included 13 questions to gain general information about the respondent (gender, age, degree and faculty...), and to find out about the repondent's information-seeking behavior and comfort level regarding computer use.

The second part of the questionnaire contained different questions depending on whether or not the user stated that they consulted books or e-books. Answering the whole survey took 10 minutes maximum. The questionnaire was designed so that some questions did not necessarily require a response.

Results

1140 questionnaires were returned (14% participation rate). Respondents belonged to the following user categories: bachelor's or master's students (75%), PhD students (6%) and university staff members (19%).

Generalist search engines such as Google were their favorite search tool and entry point to scientific information (87%). 68% of the respondents also referred to bibliographic databases. 57% referred to their personal library and 41% stated that they used books from the academic library.

Two sub-populations were considered in the following analysis: those who stated that they did not use scientific e-books and those who said that they did.

Characteristics of the non-user population (14%)

Three main reasons were advanced for not consulting e-books: discomfort of reading on screen (82%); preference for paper (59%); ignorance of e-book availability (40%).

The two major reported barriers to using e-books were poor advertising by the library of e-books available in the institution (51%), and the difficulties encountered in using the library catalog (47%). Not having a computer or internet connexion at their disposal was not mentioned as a barrier by this group.

Measures suggested to facilitate the use of e-books were to provide a better description of e-book content (44%) and to inform users about the potentialities of this type of electronic resource (56%). The possession of a tablet or an e-reader enabling more comfortable reading would also be of interest to 42% of the respondents.

Nevertheless respondents in this group were aware of advantages such as the "anywhere anytime" access (60%) or the power of full-text search (58%).

Characteristics of e-book users (86%)

Overall average usage by those who did use e-books was in the order of one or two consultations a month. Where a choice were available between print or electronic versions, the preference was for the electronic one (77%). However, the choice to use a book depended on its content and not the format in which it was presented (73%).

Satisfaction in using scientific e-books was nevertheless mitigated (5.8 on a scale ranging from 1 to 10). Restricted consultation was the major reported criticism (64%). Other frequently cited drawbacks were: eyestrain generated by reading on a screen (61%) and the difficulty of finding an e-book corresponding to one's needs (46%). Respondents also reported rather frequent difficulties in using the catalog to find e-books of interest.

The survey ended with questions to all respondents adressing user perceptions of the future. 60% of participants believed that e-books would never completely replace print versions, and that both types would continue to coexist. Nevertheless, the remaining 40% were convinced that the electronic version would definitively replace the print version in the short- to medium-term (5 to 15 years).

Only 9% considered the shift from paper to electronic as totally positive; 27% were clearly against. The remaining respondents reported mixed feelings on the matter.

Discussion

The survey launched in March 2012 at the University of Liège with the users of the Life Sciences Library indicates that the users are well informed of the existence of scientific e-books. The majority of the respondents (75%) were bachelor's and master's students in the fields of medicine, veterinary medicine, psychology and education sciences. The other participants (25%) were PhD students, researchers and other faculty members.

A general and reassuring observation is that there does not seem to be any insuperable obstacle for any of the surveyed groups to access e-books. Almost 100% of the respondents had a computer at disposal, not only on the campus but also at home. Tablets, smart phones and other e-readers are still infrequent in this population, but decreasing costs will quickly make these devices affordable for the majority of consumers.

As with the populations studied by Dewan (1), the participants in the present survey appreciated being able to consult documents online without any spatial or temporal constraints and being able to escape the stress related to loan procedures (bringing books back in time or incurring fines).

In spite of these positive considerations, user satisfaction regarding e-books remained mitigated (5.8/10).
The moderate success of e-books may be explained by technical and personal reasons that were to be expected and have already been described by others. Although our survey did not reveal any new data, it did have the advantage of characterizing precisely the population of our library users. Moreover, the measures and observations collected corroborate the findings of a recent analysis carried out at the University of Pittsburgh (2).

At this stage of our analysis, we are convinced that librarians are in a position to remove most of the barriers and drawbacks reported by users. Several actions can easily be undertaken to facilitate e-book usage. They rely on user education and training on matters such as catalog searching or understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the different strategies that are commonly adopted to access scientific information. In particular, users need to be made aware that the majority of e-books are not free, but only available if purchased by academic institutions. Once users know this, they can then be encouraged to learn how to use the library catalog efficiently to locate books of interest instead of turning to Google Scholar or any kind of generalist search engines. Our library has a long term experience of user education and we are confident that we could easily act at this level.

Unfortunately, all the ways we have considered to enhance e-book usage are not so easy to implement. The librarians encounter other obstacles that are related to both acquisition policies at the university level and the commercial practices of e-book editors and suppliers. A major pitfall is the acquisition by local managers of large packages of e-books offered by e-book editors at dumped prices. Two problems arise from these practices: the impossibility for the librarians to process thousands of e-books in reasonable time and the risk of purchasing resources unsuited to users' needs.

We all know that the efficacy and the precision of catalog searching depend on the quality of the indexation of the recorded documents. It is technically easy to import a large batch of bibliographic references into a catalog. But the indexing that needs to be performed next by librarians is a time-consuming process, also requiring knowledge, skills and careful analysis of the scientific content of e-books. An alternative approach would be to entrust the indexation task to the e-book editors themselves. But, on this point, experience has shown that the results are of very poor quality.

Price is the primary argument used at present in our institution to guide e-book acquisition. The content of the packages is decided by the e-book editors or suppliers alone and cannot be customized by the librarians according to user needs. On the one hand, we have the feeling that the textbooks that are necessary for bachelor's and master's students are underrepresented in the packages, or lost in the middle of highly specialized books. On the other hand, many of these specialized books are not directly useful for our researchers, though their interest and their scientific quality are not in doubt. Essentially, they cover research fields that are not developed in our university.

For all these reasons, we would recommend applying to e-books the same selection criteria as those that have been used to date for print monographs. Limited and targeted choices should prevail over quantity. Dumped prices should not interfere in the decision making. Instead, acquisitions should be tailored to the exact needs of all the categories of end users. If the number of books is limited, the librarians will be able to process them carefully at the catalog level and the end-users will experience good working conditions in which to exploit this wealth of information.

A side effect of the disappearance of printed books will be the release of space inside libraries. Another challenge facing librarians will then be to preserve the physical identity of the library while promoting learning activities and scientific thinking.

We believe that if we can put all these measures in place, e-books will soon be a tool of choice in the Life Sciences libraries. As always, user education and dialogue among all the stakeholders will be the keys to success.

Reference

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