SUPERBOOK Research Project at UCL

Anthony Watkinson

University College London, a.watkinson@ucl.ac.uk

Recommended Citation

DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4960

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
We are about to witness a major paradigm shift in the use of books: electronic or eBooks are emerging as a major resource in the academic world. In recognition of this development, CIBER (Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research) at the UCL Centre for Publishing, together with UCL Library Services and partners from the Department of Information Studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, the Department of Media and Communication, University of Leicester, EmeraldInsight, OUP, Taylor & Francis and Wiley will be embarking on a one-year major investigation into the use of eBooks in the higher education sector.

Until now, research into how, when and why digital resources are used within Universities has focused primarily on the use and impact of journals available within digitally enabled libraries.

Considerable steps have been made in understanding journal user behaviour and the actions of the virtual scholar, through groundbreaking studies conducted by CIBER of EmeraldInsight, Blackwell Synergy, OhioLINK, Elsevier’s ScienceDirect and the IOP Electronic Journals database.

All of these evaluations have been based on an analysis of the digital “fingerprints” left by the users of electronic journals — a technique the CIBER team will now take to eBooks.

In practice, scholars use a much wider range of digitally delivered content and materials to achieve their research, teaching and learning goals. Determining how these digital resources are used is vital for commercial and academic reasons. We need to know how scholars and students use this online resource and whether the emergence of the eBook marks the beginning of the end for the paper textbook.

It is also important for publishers to establish what kinds of business models will work best for eBooks. Internet users are accustomed to receiving all kinds of content and services for free. Publishers cannot survive in that kind of market. Users must expect to pay for access to eBooks, but how much and in what ways?

There has been much talk about the potential of eBooks, especially in a higher education context and the need for user studies of eBooks by staff and students has been articulated strongly and recommended in a number of the JISC-funded research reports. But a lot of the information available is based upon studies of insufficient depth and robust evidence is in short supply.

The CIBER team, having spent the last five years robustly mapping and evaluating the roll-out of e-journals, are in an ideal position to take honed skills and techniques to the roll-out of eBooks.

A case study/action research approach will be undertaken in this project. This means using a variety of different research methods and collection of data from many different sources. The research will gather intelligence from all the key stakeholders — publishers, librarians, academics, researchers and students.

The research will also be undertaken in a real-life environment, that of a major research-led UK university. This lends power and a reality to the data and we believe this pioneer project will prove to be the biggest and most important of its kind. University College London provides an excellent learning laboratory for eBook publishers.

The broad objective of the study is to create a live research laboratory at the UCL which puts eBooks through their paces, under the microscope, and in a real-life setting. From this “laboratory,” academics, publishers, users and librarians can learn and exchange information and they can also contribute ideas to be tested. This way, hopefully, the fallouts (and blinkered thinking) that have occurred over e-journals will not happen here.

In this research UCL academic user communities (students, researchers and academic staff) will be exposed to a significant and relevant population of eBooks. (more than 3000). The research team will observe and measure what happens.

Certain subject groups will be targeted and pre-planned interventions will be introduced to the learning environment to evaluate the uptake of eBooks and the impact of the way they are provided on usage and satisfaction. Interventions will enable the researchers to measure the effects of different forms of eBook promotion within the learning environment and to assess the efficacy of different business models — in effect determining whether users are prepared to pay for eBooks and how much.

Three eBook publishers have agreed to take part in the experiment:

- Oxford Scholarship Online
- Wiley Interscience
- Taylor & Francis

For more information contact: Professor David Nicholas, UCL Centre for Publishing (www.publishing.ucl.ac.uk; <David.Nicholas@ucl.ac.uk>).

“...will be exposed to a significant and relevant population of eBooks...”