

June 2006

SUPERBOOK Research Project at UCL

Anthony Watkinson

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

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Watkinson, Anthony (2006) "SUPERBOOK Research Project at UCL," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 18: Iss. 3, Article 12.

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

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.

SUPERBOOK Research Project at UCL

by **Anthony Watkinson** (Senior Lecturer, Centre for Publishing, School of Library, Archive and Information Studies, University College London, London, UK) <a.watkinson@ucl.ac.uk>

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

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.



“In this research UCL academic user communities (students, researchers and academic staff) will be exposed to a significant and relevant population of eBooks...”

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

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>).

Interview Patrick Alexander from page 36

munication will force publishers — as they are doing already — to create and implement new business models, to find ways of enhancing the value of content, and to become more aggressive in the marketplace. On the plus side, these new business models will mean a publisher’s content can be used more effectively and more widely. For example, ten years ago, a scholarly article in a print journal might have languished on a library’s shelf, overlooked by even the most diligent researcher. With online access, articles — or even more importantly for scholarly communication, chapters in books — can be accessed 24x7 from virtually anywhere in the world. The distinction between “book” and “journal” and “reference” will blur because the content in a book, journal, or reference work can be repurposed to suit endless sce-

narios. Traditional print-runs of academic titles will diminish to one-off, on-demand volumes. Research itself will take on new forms, with monographs, theses, and dissertations being at times entirely digital, including film clips, audio samples, and hyperlinks.

ATG: *What do you do for fun and what do you read in your spare time?*

PA: For fun? I listen to more music than **Nipper**, crave **Tarheel** basketball when it’s not in season, love to fish from my kayak, and play **Scrabble** with friends at **Cold Spring**, New York’s finest, the **Foundry Café**, every chance I get. As far as reading I try to keep one fiction and one nonfiction going. Right now, though, I’m grinding away only at **Stephen Pinker’s Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature**. Averaging two paragraphs per night before falling asleep, I hope to finish that by Christmas 2012. My last nonfiction was **Dan Brown’s Digital Fortress**; nothing else’s in the wings. 