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ONLINE DATABASES

Usage and Functionality

By Carol Tenopir

THE ONLINE INFORMATION Meeting each December in London is one of the last remaining conferences dedicated to e-resources in libraries. As such, it was somewhat surprising that few sessions this year focused on features or functionality of the latest products for libraries. Instead, the library track dealt almost entirely with measuring and demonstrating the value of the library to increase (or maintain) funding. Other tracks discussed social media, the semantic web, and incorporating content into intranets. Only in the exhibit hall was there even muted talk about features and functions of specific commercial offerings.

Discovery and ebooks

Products that strive to drive increased usage of library materials were among those generating some buzz. Notable in this category were discovery services, such as Serials Solution's Summon and EBSCO's Complete Discovery Solution covered in my previous columns (for example, see bit.ly/4PDM9G).

In the few sessions that featured other commercial resources for libraries, ebooks took center stage. For the last several years, speakers have predicted that ebooks would be the next big thing, which is most likely true, as the penetration of e-journals is almost complete.

Leslie Lees, VP of strategic market development at ebrary, pointed out that ebooks are a permanent feature in libraries, but their "adoption is sporadic" and there is "little agreement on how they should be purchased." Certainly ebook services such as ebrary compete with books on portable ebook readers. As of now, there are multiple formats, standards, and purchasing models.

Not surprisingly, Lees believes that ebooks deliver better value than traditional books, which is partly owing to how ebooks change library strategies. In a print world, collection development is "based on providing access to books in

case they [become] hard to get." This is irrelevant in an e-world because books don't go out of print. Lees told the audience of librarians that they don't "have to identify, select, acquire, or describe anymore." Instead, libraries "need to integrate" ebooks into their search and discovery services.

Ebook behaviors

David Nicholas, director of the Department of Information Studies, University College, London, provided an update on the "national ebook observatory" project, which provided 26 scholarly ebooks free to 127 UK universities for 14 months to

Measuring success

But increasing use is meaningless without good measurement. Mary Sauer-Games, VP, education publishing, ProQuest, discussed ways to survey the value of "next-generation databases." Measuring full-text downloads may be an old model, as behavior is changing. Users today are browsing through content, entering fewer search terms, tagging and commenting on content, sharing material, creating their own mashups and new content—changes in activity that led Sauer-Games to question whether what we are gauging today is truly reflective of value.

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study how they would be used.

There is no doubt that ebooks are popular with students and were widely accessed—over seven million views were recorded in the study. A typical session saw eight to nine pages viewed in 17 minutes per session. Business titles were extremely popular.

What may be a bit disturbing is that 85 percent of users spent less than one minute per page view, dwelling on the cover the longest; cutting and pasting surpassed downloading. These books were mostly required reading in various social science courses, and the viewing patterns may point to the future of reading behavior as we move to ereading. On the other hand, quick reading in chunks just big enough to convey the necessary info for an assignment or a paper may not be a new behavior at all; it is just easier for students to do now and easier for researchers to measure.

She suggested a number of new indicators to consider adopting into the future, including time spent browsing or interacting with a site, the number of times an article is tagged, the number of links to and from an article, the amount of traffic into a site via links, the amount of traffic out of an abstracting and indexing database to full texts, the number of bookmarks or alerts or RSS feeds, the number of incoming queries from mobile devices, and the number of "my research" accounts.

These are all attempts to develop new measures that can be simply and automatically collected. Of course, satisfaction and outcomes are the ultimate scale of the success of our collections and services. Did users find what they needed in the library databases? Did the material help them accomplish their tasks more effectively or efficiently? Did it improve their results?

These are the questions any measurements must help answer.

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National Ebook Observatory Project
jiscebooksproject.org/reports/finalreport

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