E-Readers & E-Books in Public Libraries: Measuring Library Patron Expectations

James Hutter, Westbury Memorial Public Library, USA

ABSTRACT

In the rapidly changing world of e-Readers and e-Books, it is extremely difficult for public libraries to have a strong understanding of current patron experiences with these technologies. This report starts with a quick overview of the history of e-Readers, e-Books, and library technology adoption, as well as current trends and issues. A significant number of library users were anxious to participate in the survey and detail their experiences. Library Administrators should be astonished to find out that many users have borrowed e-Books and e-Readers from public libraries. Few users experienced any difficulty in using these new technologies on their own, contrary to popular belief. Most importantly, almost all public library users find these technologies to be valuable both now and in the future. The information discovered in this research project should be difficult for any library administrator to ignore.

Keywords: Electronic Books (e-Books), Electronic Readers (e-Readers), Library Technology Adoption, Patron Expectations, Public Libraries

INTRODUCTION

e-Readers have been available for many years, with the first popular consumer model debuting several years ago. Their versatility, light weight, huge storage capability and easy readability have won over consumers. Publishing houses and online retailers such as Amazon.com are shifting their corporate focus in order to dominate this growing market. It is becoming clear that e-Book sales may soon eclipse sales of traditional books, thus affirming that our literary world has shifted to a digital one. One estimate is that e-Book purchases will account for 50% of purchases worldwide by 2020 (Duncan, 2010).

While e-Reader manufacturers and book publishers have enjoyed high sales, public libraries have struggled to get a true handle on where this current technology trend is headed. Understanding how they will fit into a digital world, where physical materials are becoming less sought after, has proven difficult for public libraries. As an attempt to meet this need of their patrons, some libraries have embraced services where users can borrow e-Books from a website and load them onto their own devices. Other libraries have purchased e-Readers, preloaded them with popular titles and chosen to loan those devices out to patrons. A few libraries have resisted e-Books as a format and have...
taken an ideological stand against purchasing electronic titles. Clearly, confusion amongst library Administrators and librarians exists. A lack of solid information has made it difficult to determine how best to approach the growing use of e-Books.

For a public library to understand what is going on in the world of digital materials, they need to properly gauge exactly what it is that their patrons want and how they want it. Libraries need to understand if their patrons are recognizing their institutions as sources of e-Books. Libraries need to determine if their users own these e-Reader devices in significant numbers. Professionals in the field need to understand the positives and negatives of these technologies to be able to recommend and support their users. If users do not own these devices, libraries need to determine why. In the case of users not being able to afford e-Readers, libraries should contemplate if they should purchase and loan out e-Readers. Finally, library Administrators need to know if they are providing enough technical assistance to ensure that their users are able to fully utilize their e-Book lending services.

At this current point in time, many in the public library profession do not have a clear picture of the needs, expectations and experiences of their users in regards to e-Books and e-Readers. This research project is a scientific attempt to determine the current needs and desires of library patrons. Additionally, this research project will present Administrators with a simple and reproducible method of gauging library user needs, should they wish to conduct their own analysis in the future.

Survey of Related Literature

Though it may seem like a new technology, the first form of the e-Book appeared in 1971. At the time, Michael Hart, at the University of Illinois, was granted usage of a mainframe computer. He used this computer to type in the Declaration of Independence, converting it to a plain text file. Thus, the first electronic book was born. The project of converting books to text was eventually transformed into the much larger Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org). The first targets of this project were books that were out of copyright or in public domain. While the project was able to successfully convert titles to a basic e-Book format, the simplicity of the text file and the lack of current or contemporary files prevented the format from gaining popularity (Schroeder & Wright, 2011). The project continued, but it was not until later technological advances occurred that the form of e-Books emerged that we know of today.

In truth, many technological changes had to take place before e-Books became more accessible to general users. It basically took a “perfect storm” of advances to get to the current e-Book and e-Reader marketplace that we see today. The advent of desktop publishing, greater emphasis on paperless publishing, as well as the creation and adoption of the Internet as a means to transfer information all greatly contributed to the rise of the e-Book (Rao, 2005). It was only when all of these technologies merged around the start of the 21st century that most end users began to grasp the likely importance of e-Books and e-Readers as helpful devices.

Some companies attempted to get an early lead on their competitors in the e-Book and e-Reader market. In particular, there were many e-Reader “flops” that were created in the early history of the technology. The problems that these devices encountered were that they did not have a low enough price to be sold to consumers, they did not possess an easy enough level of usability, their size was far too large, their weight was uncomfortably high or any myriad of other negative factors. Some of these initial devices, which simply no longer exist today in any sort of capacity, include the RCA REB1100, the Franklin eBookman and the HP Jornada (Rao, 2005).
The Digitization of Contents in Digital Libraries: Moral Right and Limits
www.igi-global.com/chapter/digitization-contents-digital-libraries/47476?camid=4v1a