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How Users' Perceptions of E-Books Have Changed—Or Not: Comparing Parallel Survey Responses

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Abstract

This project focuses on comparing the results of two surveys conducted on e-book usability at college and university libraries across the state of Florida. The first survey was carried out by librarians from the University of Florida in 2009 and provided benchmark responses for similar questions asked in a follow-up survey completed in 2014. Results of the two surveys conducted five years apart are an enlightening snapshot of user feedback on e-book usability, while providing insight on key issues and trends in e-book use. In addition to measuring side-by-side results of the two Florida surveys, the paper frames this comparison in a broader context by drawing upon data taken from other surveys published on e-book use in academic libraries.

Introduction

The study of e-books and how they are accessed, perceived, and used has been a popular area of research for many years. The idea of conducting a survey in Florida academic libraries on e-book usability blossomed at a summit preconference and library conference held in Tallahassee, FL in 2009 (FSU/PLAN, 2009). It was evident at the e-books summit preconference and subsequent conference discussion forums that many librarians and publishers in attendance had preconceived ideas about how e-books were used by library users. Missing from these discussions were perspectives from the users themselves on the extent and nature of how they accessed and used e-books. To that end, a team of librarians from the University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries (UF), working with partner librarians from the state's largest library consortium, developed a survey on e-book use in 2009. (CSUL, 2012) The survey was designed to elicit information on who was using e-books, why they were using them, and how they were being used. The survey was distributed to college, university, and health science center library users in the state of Florida in the hopes to acquire feedback and data that might spur libraries to make improvements for e-book access and navigation.

The 2009 survey data was shared with librarians in the state's largest academic consortia, but only used internally and never officially published. In 2014, with e-book acquisitions on the rise in most academic libraries in Florida, a second team of librarians from UF decided to slightly update the survey to better reflect the expanded e-book environment and run the survey again to see what had changed in users' perceptions and behaviors over time. In addition to comparing the two Florida surveys, the team also matched response data from surveys with related questions and data published in several other large e-book user studies. Comparing data from a variety of e-book user surveys identified fascinating trends and legitimized the findings. Results from the following studies were referenced for direct comparisons to a select number of Florida survey questions: a University of Illinois multi-institutional project in 2008 (Shelbourne, 2009); findings from two publications based on a JISC's UK National E-books Observatory study conducted in 2008 (Nicholas, Rowlands, Clark, Huntington, Jamali, & Olle, 2008; Jamali, Nicholas, and Rowlands, 2009); Primary Research Group's survey of American college students (Primary Research Group, 2009); and ebrary's 2008 and 2011 surveys (McKeil, 2012).

Methodology

In 2009, a survey consisting of numerous but straightforward questions regarding e-book use was designed and loaded into Survey Monkey and routed to libraries interested in participating. The survey were centrally hosted and administered by a librarian team from the University of Florida. Almost all the survey responses were derived from users representing two library consortia in Florida: the Council of State University Libraries (CSUL), comprised of eleven of the largest public academic universities and includes their Law, Health, and Medical Libraries; and the Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida (ICUF), which encompasses many private universities and colleges in the state. Due to conflicting surveys and crowded websites, very few college and university libraries elected to publicize or link the Florida e-books survey on their library's home pages; instead librarians at these institutions most often routed through e-mail the announcement of the survey with a link to Survey Monkey to their faculty, students, and other library users individually.

In 2014, the UF team modified the survey, primarily to reduce the number of questions and to update the survey to reflect the current e-book environment. For the best possible comparison of results from the 2009 and 2014 surveys, the wording for most questions was kept identical. The 2014 survey was loaded into the software, Qualtrics, and an e-mail announcement with a link to the survey was distributed to appropriate listserves and consortia members in Florida. As in 2009, few college or university libraries chose to publicize or provide a link to the e-books survey on their websites, but many librarians did respond to the survey themselves and frequently routed the announcement to library users and faculty at their institutions. In addition, for a two-week period in the fall semester the survey was placed as a Web pop-up on approximately four-hundred public computers located in the University of Florida's libraries. The pop-up worked this way: when a library patron logged on to the computer, a browser window to the survey automatically opened; for patrons unwilling to participate, users could close the browser, hit the home button, or

type in a new URL and skip the survey. Results were analyzed in Microsoft Excel.

Results and Discussion

Respondent Demographics

Results from the 2009 and 2014 e-books surveys are revealing. In 2009, 895 users started the survey and 536 users completed it. In 2014, 1,245 users started the survey with 592 completions. E-book users from twenty-eight academic libraries took part in the survey in 2009; in 2014 users from thirty academic libraries in Florida participated in the survey. A slight decrease in user responses from the state universities (97.3% in 2009 to 83.5% in 2014), was countered by increases in user responses from the colleges (1.9% in 2009 to 8.3% in 2014). The vast majority of responses in both surveys were from the University of Florida, 80% in 2009 and 72% in 2014.

The status of the respondents was significantly different between the two surveys. The 2014 survey had significantly fewer professional degree (MD, DVM, JD, etc.) and faculty respondents compared to the 2009 respondent pool. In 2009 only 21% of those taking the survey were undergraduates, while the percentage of undergraduates taking the survey rose to 61% in 2014. The dramatic rise in undergraduates responding to the second survey as compared the first survey is mainly attributed to the pop-up web tools used at UF in 2014, as undergraduates are more likely to use the library's general computers.

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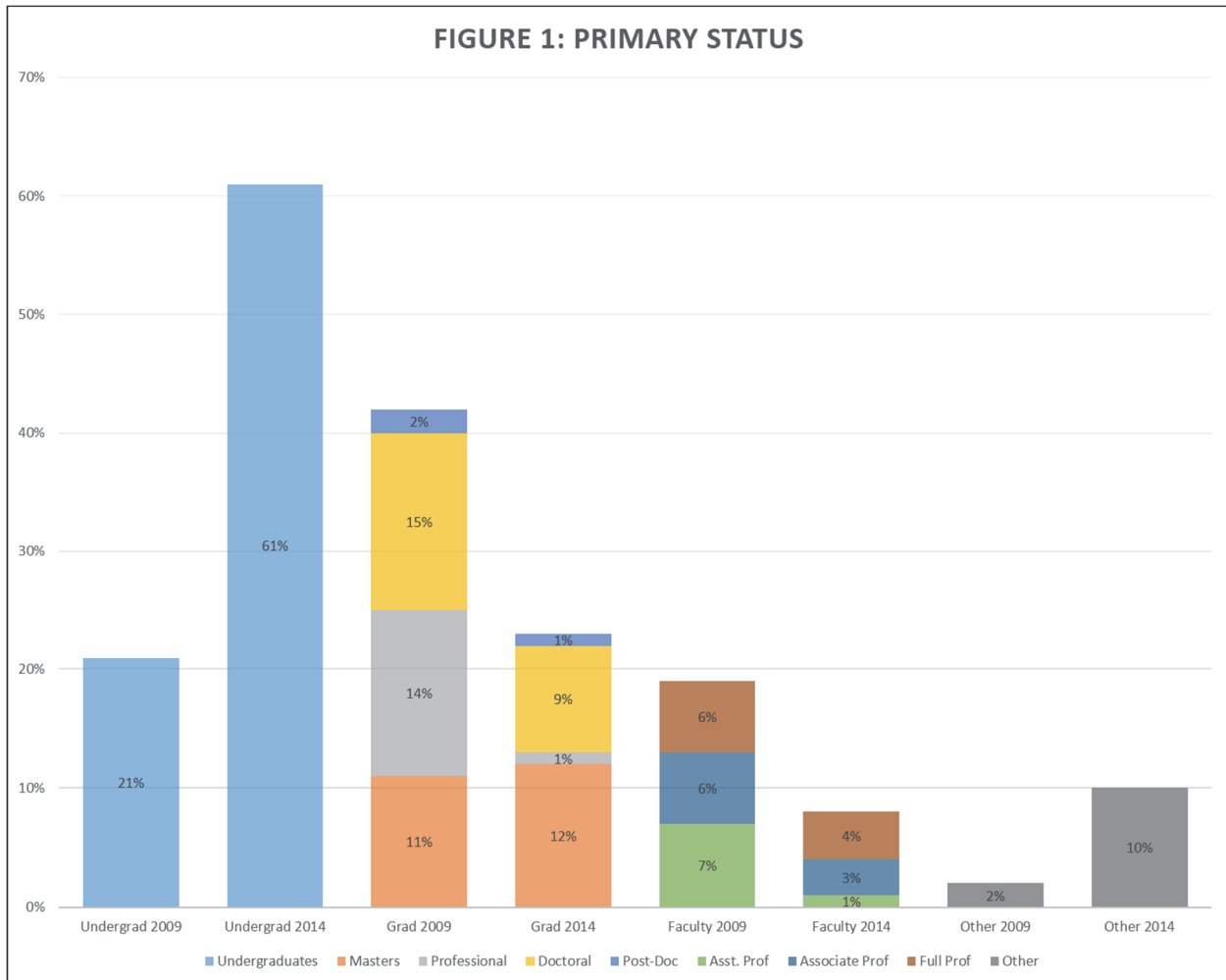


Figure 1. Primary status.

E-book Usage

In both the 2009 and 2014 Florida surveys an essential question was asked, “Have you ever used an e-book?” 77% of respondents in 2009 said they had used an e-book, while the 2014 survey showed almost the exact figure, 76%. Yet, when compared to data from national surveys these figures are far higher, as only 57% of the 2008 University of Illinois respondents and 60% of the 2008 JISC respondents stated that they had used e-books. The comparisons between the Florida and national surveys showed Florida users had a higher percentage respond in the affirmative, but it is unclear why this is the case.

Another question from the two Florida surveys asked users, “Did you know that you have access to e-books through your college or university

libraries?” The percentage of respondents stating in the affirmative was similar, 73% in 2009 and 70% in 2014. The almost flat line is somewhat puzzling, as it shows no real progress has been made at Florida academic libraries to market acquired e-books. Comparing these figures to the national surveys is interesting. The 2008 University of Illinois survey had only 55% of respondents reply they were aware they had access to e-books through their library. The 2009 Primary Research Group (PRG) Survey of American College Students asked a similar question, “What do you think of your college library’s e-book collection?” Responses showed only 58% indicated they knew their library had e-books. These figures may indicate that the promotion and marketing of e-books has been largely ignored or is not getting through. Although it must

be pointed out in the ebrary's 2011 global student survey, students were asked the straightforward question, "Does your library have e-books?" Results revealed that 65% of respondents said "yes."

A third basic question asked in all the surveys was, "Have you ever used e-books provided by your library?" Results from the two Florida surveys show that 66% of respondents in 2009 and 56% of respondents in 2014 said "yes." The JISC user survey from 2008 also asked this question with 47% respectively stating yes. What is particularly frustrating about survey responses showing a drop in the reported use of library e-books is the

abundance of usage statistics at UF to prove users are finding and accessing the e-books. Figure 2 shows the University of Florida Libraries' use of the Springer e-books (the 2008 front list) between 2009 and 2013 and reveals usage more than doubled in the Social Sciences and Humanities, almost tripled in the STEM disciplines, and more than tripled in the Health Sciences areas. This is but one example of e-book use on the rise at UF. What this disparity between survey responses and usage statistics tells us is that library users often fail to recognize the library as the source for many of the e-books they access. It stresses once more that libraries are poor at marketing and branding the resources they make available.

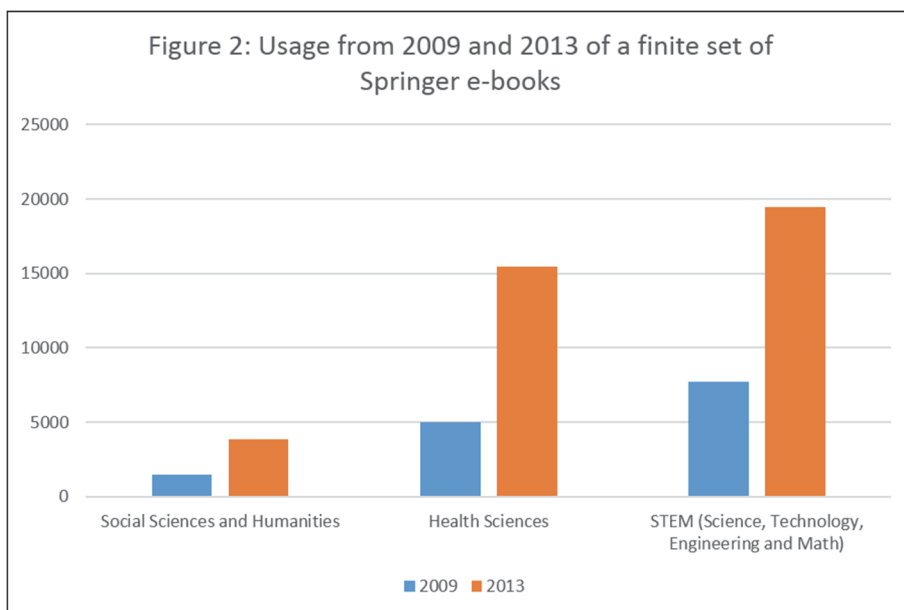


Figure 2. Springer e-book usage.

Print Books versus E-Books

The various surveys cited in this project all attempted to discern user preferences in the important issue of print books versus e-books. In the two Florida surveys the same question was asked, "When you have the choice of using an e-book or a print book, how often do you choose the e-book option?" The answer choices offered a five-point range from "always" to "never." In the 2009 UF survey, 48% of respondents said they chose the e-book "always" or "most of the time" but in the 2014 Florida survey the responses to the two ranges dropped to 25%. The 2008 ebrary survey indicated that 51% of the respondents

used e-books "almost" or "most of the time" while the 2011 Ebrary survey showed the two ranges at 48%. The two ebrary surveys showed user respondents are fairly similar between the three-year period, while a more dramatic drop in respondents preferring e-books over print books occurred in Florida. This shift in preference from using e-books may be a statistical anomaly when compared to the ebrary surveys, but at the very least it does indicate that print has become the preferred format for Florida. This shift in large part could also be explained by the increased number of undergraduates responding to the 2014 survey.

When library users were asked what they dislike about e-books, the responses from the 2009 and 2014 Florida Surveys present a revealing picture of what has changed and not changed during the five years between surveys. Issues related to a general preference for print, aversion to reading on a screen, and navigation problems (“I can’t flip the pages”) have only increased over the years. Complaints about Digital Rights Management (DRM) and a lack of available titles have decreased. Virtually unchanged are frustrations about annotating e-books. Some revealing comments from the 2014 Florida survey included:

- “I personally like the feel of paper books as it is easier for me to read and take

notes. However e-books are more convenient”

- “I have difficulty finding things in some platforms. I have difficulty remembering where in a book something is—or which book, when all look and feel alike.”
- “E-books are too tied to their platforms. Public libraries have e-books that can be downloaded onto a personal reader for offline reading, but this is uncommon in academia. This should change.”
- “I don’t like reading from a screen.”
- “No paper, no soul.”

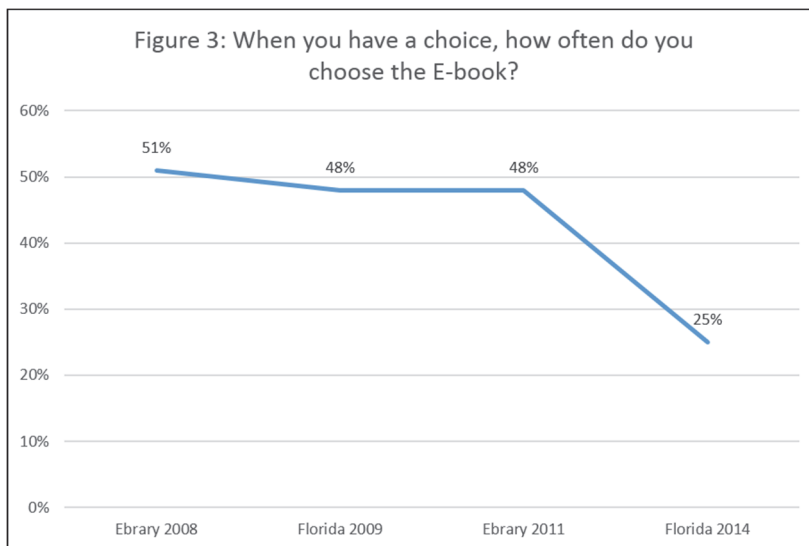


Figure 3. When you have a choice, how often do you choose the e-book?

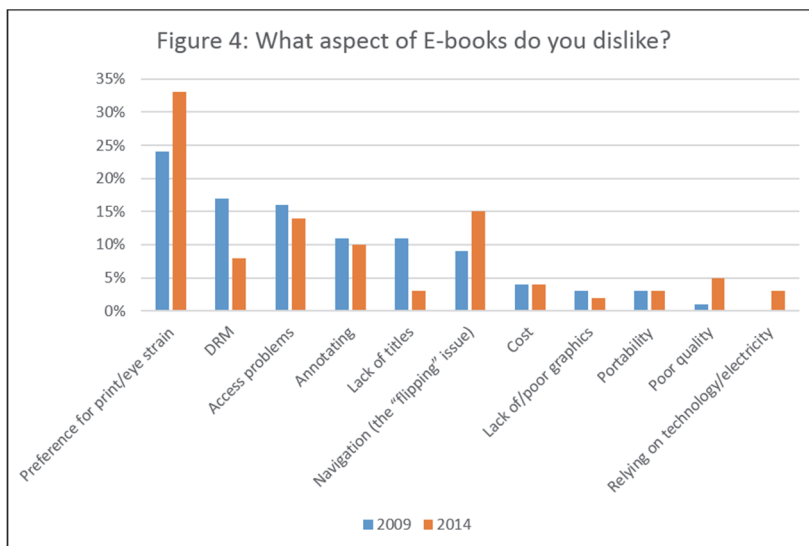


Figure 4. What aspect of e-books do you dislike?

User Behavior and Attitudes

A large percentage (74%) of respondents in the 2009 Florida survey stated they used e-books primarily for research as compared to the 2014 Florida survey where users indicated their primary reason for using e-books was “for study.” This switch in the primary reason the users access e-books seems consistent with the increase in the number of undergraduate students that completed the survey in 2014 as compared to 2009. Another change in user attitudes between the 2009 and 2014 Florida surveys is displayed in responses to the question, “Will you be using e-books more in the future?” In the 2009 Florida surveys a vast majority of the respondents indicated they would use e-books increasingly in the future (81%) but this outlook changed dramatically (64%) in results from the 2014 Florida study.

Almost all the surveys cited in this project indicated that instant access and navigability are the top perceived advantages to e-books for users. Fairly universal in all survey results are users’ preference for the print format when reading a book cover to cover. Users also want to see more e-books available in their research areas. A comparison that held little surprise were answers received to the question on where users start their searches for e-books. In the 2009 Florida survey the library website as a starter place was the most popular answer; but by the 2014 Florida survey, a large percentage of users indicated they started their e-book searches with Google. The fact that most users in 2014 responded their web searches start in Google or another search engine is hardly news, but it now seems rather remarkable that five years earlier the majority of survey respondents started a search at the library website. The ebrary surveys saw a similar trend when they asked respondents where their starting point was. In 2008 74% stated the library website but this dropped to 65% in 2011 while Google, and particularly Google Scholar, rose over that time period.

Textbooks

The rise in the use of and debate surrounding e-textbooks prompted the project team to add a

couple of questions to the 2014 Florida survey, particularly as this was not an issue explored in 2009. In the 2014 Florida survey a question asked faculty and instructors if they had assigned e-books as either course textbooks or readings, and the majority (61%) indicated they did not. When students were asked if they preferred their course texts and readings to be in print or electronic format, 40% selected the answer “both”; 30% selected print; and only 14% chose electronic. Another 16% chose the response “it depends” and provided comments. It is somewhat contrary to prevailing policy at UF to add e-textbooks and e-books whenever available to course reserves, particularly as e-books better support distance learning initiatives, creating a dilemma for the libraries.

Conclusion

After comparing user responses from the 2009 and 2014 Florida surveys, the project revealed insights and observations of note that are best summarized by a few take-aways:

- The increased number/percentage of undergraduates that took the survey in 2014 versus 2009 can be explained by the pop-up application placed on general use computers at UF.
- Many users are still unaware that e-books are available in their own libraries or that they are using e-books that are provided by their libraries, which may reveal a failure in marketing and branding.
- Many users are frustrated that they cannot access e-books the way they want (e.g., device and platform neutral) and e-books are often difficult to navigate and annotate; many users also profess frustration that so often academic titles are not available as e-books or, if available as e-books, not offered through their library.
- A large percentage of library users (many from the digital native generation) responded they prefer using print books. This preference for print books is so

strong that many users state they intend to use e-books less in the future.

Surveys like the two survey projects for Florida, along with the five other surveys conducted nationally as cited, provide important feedback on library users' behaviors, attitudes, and preferences on e-books. Survey results are far from scientific but are extremely helpful to librarians and staff hoping to determine better ways to improve methods of access and navigation to their users. Yet, survey instruments

have limitations so focus groups and live interactions with think-aloud protocols would be excellent next steps. Going forward e-book use needs to be consistently studied if academic libraries wish to improve upon the user experience.

The 2014 Florida survey and data can be found in the University of Florida's Institutional Repository at <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/IR00004919/00001>.

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