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E-Books in Academic Libraries

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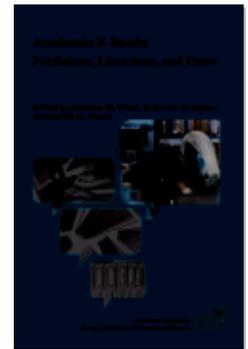
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Of Euripides and E-Books: The Digital Future and Our Hybrid Present

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ABSTRACT

Although the future of information may be digital, its present is clearly hybrid. Harvard's strategy looks to the digital future while remaining rooted in the hybrid present. For the Western Languages Division of Widener Library, the strategy involves the acquisition of both print and e-books, acquiring the same content in both formats where there is a demonstrable benefit. As an initial step in this process, in spring 2014, the head of the Western Languages Division initiated a six-month e-book pilot with Brill. Over 1,200 titles were made available and advertised to the community. This pilot afforded a unique opportunity to investigate the intersections between the use of print and e-books at this time of *both/and* rather than *either/or* collection development. This case study discusses some of the findings after six months of data and responses. Initial use of the e-books was high, but it flattened after the first month. The researchers also surveyed users on their preferences and report these results.

INTRODUCTION: E-BOOKS IN ACADEMIA

Although the future of information may be digital, its present is clearly hybrid. This is true not only in the obvious sense that the majority of the world's cultural, literary, and intellectual heritage remains undigitized, and that a tremendous amount of global information output is not yet available electronically. It is also true in the sense that much of contemporary scholarly practice, from the production of knowledge to its consumption,

remains embedded in print. There, is of course, a range of practices across the academic spectrum, with notable differences between and within disciplines, but the fact is that, despite clear gains in e-reading outside of the academy, the role of e-books in academic life has changed little over the past decade.

Although this paper is not the place for a comprehensive survey of the relevant literature, three general points about e-book use in academic libraries warrant mentioning. 1) Despite increasing reliance on e-resources in general, academic e-books have not been adopted as widely as was anticipated in the past or is assumed in the present. 2) Even where e-books are used, this often has to do less with preference for the format, which remains low, and more with availability and convenience. Given that many institutions cannot extensively duplicate holdings, users sometimes have no choice but to access the electronic version of a title—a fact that has sometimes been overlooked when accounting for the growth in e-book use (e.g., Shelburne, 2009). 3) Even if print and e-books were equally available and equally preferable, users would still discriminate between them based on how—and how much—they planned to use the work. Time and again, surveys of e-book use reveal a persistent preference for browsing or reading chapters as opposed to entire works.

These findings are thought to be particularly relevant for researchers in the humanities, whose scholarship has not migrated from print to digital as much as in other disciplines. This is due not to lack of awareness but rather a) to the ongoing importance of monographs, which remain an important career benchmark; b) to a disinclination, shared by members of nearly all disciplines, to use e-books for extensive reading; and c) to poorer representation in e-book packages of older works that remain relevant for humanities research.

The challenge for academic libraries, then, is determining not only how to navigate from the hybrid present to the digital future, but also how to balance the many and varying needs of user communities at present. This is particularly difficult when deciding how to enhance collections with a format that has not been widely adopted by the community those collections are intended to serve. If librarians are able to gauge what users across disciplines prefer, how do they define parameters for print and electronic collections, and establish ecosystems in which those formats coexist?

HYBRID COLLECTION MANAGEMENT

Harvard's current collections and content development strategy look to the digital future while remaining rooted in the hybrid present. For the Western Languages Division of Widener Library, the long-term collection development strategy involves the strategic acquisition of both print and e-books, acquiring the same content in both formats where there is a demonstrable benefit. This "access acquisition" model is thus not collection building so much as collection management, where the library grants users an alternative means of access. E-books will be acquired alone where necessitated by evolving publishing models and where there is a clear preference for this format, accompanied by a demonstrable decline in print use. This strategy will be evaluated on field-by-field and publisher-by-publisher bases to refine short- and long-term strategies.

E-BOOK PILOT PROJECT

As an initial step in this process, in spring 2014, the head of the Western Languages Division initiated a six-month e-book pilot with the scholarly publisher Brill. Brill was a natural choice for a number of reasons, including the high quality of its publications, its longstanding presence on the publishing market, its rapidly expanding e-book offerings, its experience working with academic libraries on licensing agreements, its technological capability to implement the pilot, and its adoption of certain digital best practices, such as using COUNTER statistics and archiving its electronic collections.

Over 1,200 titles from two of Brill's collections, Classical Studies (CS) and European History and Culture (EHC), were made available and advertised to the community. Since Harvard owned over 90% of these titles before the start of the pilot, and acquired the rest soon after, this pilot afforded a unique opportunity to investigate the intersections between the use of print and e-books at this time of *both/and* rather than *either/or* collection development.

Four overlapping goals drove the project. 1) The authors aimed to assess, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the print and e-book preferences and practices among a portion of the humanities community. 2) Given the inherent difficulties of comparing print and e-book use, the authors sought not to compare the use of each format directly, but rather to analyze whether access to digital versions of books would impact the use of print. 3) Through trial and error, the authors attempted to develop strategies for

promoting e-book collections. 4) The authors hoped to use the results of the pilot to articulate ground rules for guiding future collection activities and refining business models for e-book acquisitions.

The present case study, only a small part of larger evaluation activities at Harvard, discusses some of the findings after six months of data and responses. After describing some of the project's successes and failures, the authors consider the implications for collection development at Harvard and beyond.

Pilot Setup

In February 2014, the authors downloaded lists of e-books available in CS (236 titles) and EHC (994 titles), combining them into one list for each discipline, covering the years 2007 to January 2014. On the basis of the individual ISBN numbers in each list, the authors used IBM's Cognos software to extract acquisitions information about the university's print holdings, and then matched the resulting lists to the original Excel lists to identify and fill any gaps in the university's holdings. In the end, 1,206 items were selected as available and appropriate for analysis.

Next, metadata staff added the e-book links via batch load directly to the print records. This was done, first, because Harvard adheres to a single record standard, and second, because adding e-book records to the catalog not only enhances discovery (Connaway, Densch, & Gibbons, 2002), but also presents users with a choice at the point of discovery. Would users be satisfied with the link to the e-book, or would they forego this easy access and seek out the physical volume?

To collect and compare data, the authors set up Excel tables illustrating use at the collection and title levels. Circulation data for regular loans, excluding reserves, could be pulled via Cognos at any point, for any period of time, but Brill only provided COUNTER 4 statistics on a monthly basis. The authors also created a dynamic survey with Qualtrics that featured up to 30 questions, depending on user responses (e.g., faculty, student, staff, e-book user, nonuser).

Pilot Promotion

From the outset, the authors knew that promoting the pilot and the survey would be important. Throughout the literature, one of the most frequently cited reasons for not using e-books is lack of awareness. As Shen (2011) writes,

“Students who would be happy to use e-books often did not realize such titles were available through their university libraries” (p. 187). Unfortunately, even if librarians are generally aware of the basic tools available for marketing e-books, few libraries have established a strategic approach (Vasileiou & Rowley, 2010). As a result, the authors took several steps to promote the e-book collections and the survey following the official start of the pilot on March 17.

March

- Announcement on the library’s homepage.
- E-mail to faculty in relevant departments, with title lists and links to collections.
- Departmental liaisons from reference and collection development enlisted in promotion.
- Pilot included in weekly e-resource trial announcements.

April

- Survey promoted via link on Brill’s website.

May

- Flyer posted on bulletin boards on campus and in relevant departments, each including tear-off tabs with TinyURL links to collections and survey.

Late in the spring, the authors requested and were granted a three-month extension of the pilot, through December 2014. Since the pilot began nearly two months into the spring semester, this extension accommodated a full semester in the fall. Over the summer, then, the authors devised new strategies for promoting the collections.

October

- E-mail from research librarian promoting e-books, featuring pilot and soliciting feedback.
- Displays in classics and history departments featuring flyer and free bookmarks advertising pilot, and two print-on-demand (POD) copies of popular titles. The displayed POD titles were part of Brill’s MyBook program, which allows researchers to purchase an affordable, \$25 paperback copy of a title if the library owns the relevant e-book collection (currently available for about two-thirds of the titles).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Use Data

The initial results of the pilot were unsurprising. E-book use in the second half of March was more than 21 times the number of print circulations (38), and nearly 8 times the monthly print record within the previous year. In fact, e-book use for this half-month exceeded the annual circulation figures for all but one of the preceding seven years. This indicates that the initial promotion was successful in encouraging users to investigate the collections; over 200 titles in both CS and EHC were accessed in two weeks, constituting 87% and 22% of the respective collections.

What was surprising, however, was how quickly the e-book figures fell off. Between March and May, the numbers dropped by an average of 50% each month before flatlining for the next four months (see Figure 1).

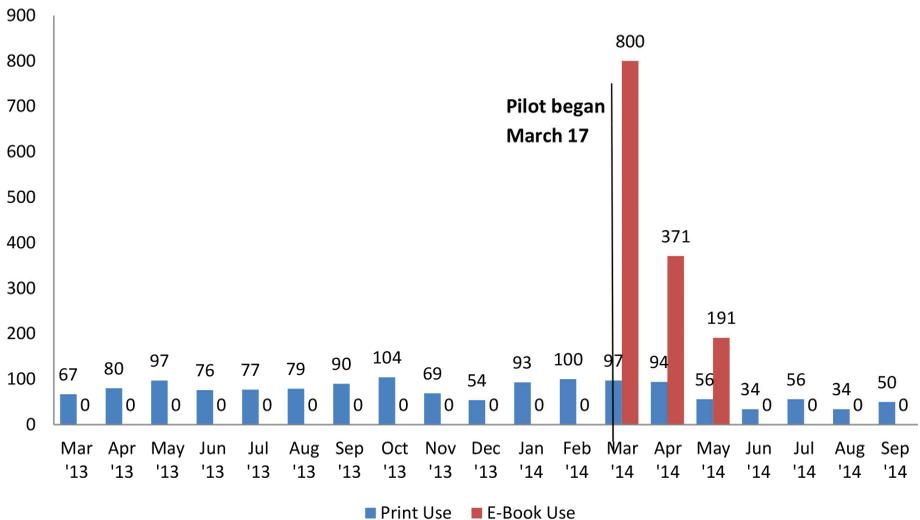


Figure 1. Print and e-book use during pilot, with previous year of print.

Print circulation of both volumes and titles declined within the second month of the pilot, after which the numbers were lower both than the average of the preceding year and the equivalent months in 2013. A few of these months saw less than half of the 2013 use, which is significant since, on average, total use has been increasing each year. However, it is difficult

to identify access to e-books as the cause of this decline since this was (a) the start of summer session and (b) the same period when e-book use was flatlining.

One important observation so far is that there appear to be differences in the number and percentage of titles accessed in each format, for each collection. As Table 1 shows, users explored a far greater percentage of e-books in CS than in EHC (93% and 37%, respectively), despite similar percentages in print use (20% and 22%). There is a similar disparity in the titles accessed only as e-book (74% and 27%). This difference is most likely due to the relative size of the collections, which makes it easier to browse the CS offerings thoroughly.

Table 1. Comparison of print and e-book use for two Brill collections, Classical Studies (CS) and European History and Culture (EHC).

| | CS | | EHC | | Total | |
|----------------------------------|-----|--------|-----|--------|-------|---------|
| Titles available | 234 | 19.40% | 972 | 80.60% | 1206 | 100.00% |
| E-book titles used | 218 | 93.16% | 358 | 36.83% | 576 | 47.76% |
| Print titles used | 46 | 19.66% | 209 | 21.50% | 255 | 21.14% |
| Titles used only as e-books | 174 | 74.36% | 264 | 27.16% | 438 | 36.32% |
| Titles used only in print | 2 | 00.85% | 115 | 11.83% | 117 | 09.70% |
| Titles used in both formats | 44 | 18.80% | 94 | 09.67% | 138 | 11.44% |
| Titles not used in either format | 14 | 05.98% | 499 | 51.34% | 513 | 42.54% |

Survey

At the time of writing, survey participation has been modest: 39 total responses from faculty (11), graduate students (16), undergraduate students (2), and staff (10), with an unfortunate 44% completion rate, meaning that there are questions for which a maximum of 17 responses are available. These low response and completion rates are due to what is called *survey fatigue*, engendered by the barrage of survey requests received by these groups at the beginning and end of each year, particularly the latter. Last spring saw the lowest participation, which has increased in the fall with renewed promotional efforts.

Most respondents consider themselves to be “somewhat familiar” (59%) with Harvard’s e-book offerings. Half use e-books “occasionally,” with all but one of the rest selecting “frequently” and “rarely” evenly. When using an e-book, respondents were most likely to read a chapter or section, followed by browsing or searching for content. When faced with the choice of print or e-book, responses ranged across the spectrum, with “Sometimes print” and “It depends” sharing the top spot.

Reasons for preferring print are familiar: ease of reading and interacting with the text. Researchers feel more comfortable working with multiple articles, books, and other print resources than with their electronic counterparts. Most expressed a desire to write on a text or, as one respondent phrased it, “scribble on them.”

Suspecting (hoping!) that respondents were not writing in the library copies of books, the authors updated the survey in June to ask respondents about the likelihood that they would purchase their own copy of a book and, if so, how much they would typically spend. Only a handful answered this question so far, but those responses are “often” or “very often,” with all willing to spend over the \$25 Brill MyBook price. Since, according to one survey, 40% of faculty considered their personal collections or subscriptions “very important” (Housewright, Schonfeld, & Wulfson, 2013, p. 36), the authors suspect that POD options will prove popular among researchers, possibly increasing their enthusiasm for e-book collections. Early feedback from faculty and staff reaffirms this suspicion.

Reasons for preferring e-books ranged from access and portability to cost and environmental concerns. Significantly, responses here illustrate how print and e-book preferences can overlap depending on a user’s research activities, and how e-book collections can supplement rather than supplant print ones. This is particularly important for traveling scholars and institutions with research centers or libraries elsewhere.

Harvard’s Center for Hellenic Studies (CHS) in Greece serves as an example. In the current recession, universities are unable to renew digital and sometimes even print subscriptions. As a result, the CHS Digital Library has been met by researchers with great enthusiasm, as indicated by the following survey response:

For every researcher who visits the Center’s Library in Greece the e-collection is priceless because it provides access to content

they could find nowhere in Greece but here. We all wish this pilot project to last forever and we would like to thank you for all your efforts to enrich the collection and provide access to it.

Among those respondents who report using the Brill collections, all found it at least “somewhat useful,” with most “very useful.” Faculty mostly found it “somewhat useful,” with some of the ambivalence resulting from difficulties with discovering books or navigating the publisher’s website. When asked what Harvard’s strategy for collecting print and e-books should be, most answered that Harvard should collect both print books and e-books, depending on the subject matter, with a strategy prioritizing print beating one prioritizing e-books by one vote.

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Six months into the pilot, the biggest problem facing the researchers is the limited data. At the time of writing, e-book data from only one month in the fall semester are available. Will use increase as faculty and students, now exposed to the collections, settle into the semester?¹ It is also too soon to tell whether the most recent round of promotional activities will pay off. Even though the pilot was extended for three months, the authors recommend at least a full year for a pilot, if not more—ideally synced with the academic calendar.

The project has also suffered from survey fatigue. Does this mean that future surveys need to be shorter, or perhaps more enticing, to encourage participation and discourage falloff? Can the importance of this input be better communicated? Should alternate forms of feedback be promoted? If so, how can these be aligned and compared?

Other challenges arise from the information itself. As mentioned previously, comparing e-book and print use has historically been intractable due to the tendency to overcount e-book “use” online (compared to the likelihood of undercounting print use). In the case of the Brill pilot, the authors face the opposite problem. Since users can download PDF files of chapters or entire books, it is impossible to know whether users have continued to take advantage of these resources offline (whereas a print copy would at least need to be renewed periodically). In the case of CS, where 218 of the 234 titles (93%) have been accessed 736 times, it is uncertain to what extent, or whether, any of these users will return to the collections online.

With Harvard's recent adoption of Ex Libris' discovery tool Primo, branded HOLLIS+, e-book collections now have an additional site for discovery and access. What impact will this have on e-book use in general? Further, will it be possible to compare any new data arising from this discovery layer to varying forms of data provided by vendors?

Of course, the most pressing challenge is determining how to meet the diverse needs of the hybrid present. Considered holistically, the current strategy of the Western Languages Division is decidedly print-preferred, even if, in accordance with the strategic plan of the Harvard Library, it is charting paths toward trustworthy electronic resources. Pilots such as the one presented in this case study, shortcomings notwithstanding, can inform that process by providing important data about the preferences and practices of a subset of the user community, but this is only one part of an elaborate picture. However that picture looks in the end, it will undoubtedly be a heterogeneous and dynamic one that will evolve over time.

NOTES

1. After submitting this case study, the authors learned that e-book use did in fact resume in October, returning to and slightly surpassing the pre-lull level in May, in terms of both volumes and titles used.

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