The challenge of ebooks: Consumption
Briefing for project stakeholders

A summary of research on reading habits of undergraduates

Blog report of presentation by Alice Keller, Editorial Director, Library and Information Science & History, De Gruyter Saur

In print or on screen? Investigating the reading habits of undergraduates using photo-interviews

Laura's dark Archive (blog) 26 July 2010 (NOTE the date pre iPad--)

https://darkarchive.wordpress.com/2010/07/26/in-print-or-on-screen-investigating-the-reading-habits-of-undergraduates-using-photo-interviews/

This morning I attended a lecture entitled: "In print or on screen? Investigating the reading habits of undergraduates using photo-interviews". The lecture was presented by Dr Alice Keller, who has carried out this research as part of her MSc Education (E-Learning). Dr Keller previously worked for the Bodleian Libraries as Assistant Director for the Collections and Resource Description department.

She was interested in finding out more about students' use of print and electronic resources particularly for the following **reasons**:

- Usage statistics for e-books are high, and yet lending figures have not dropped
- E-journals are now well accepted, but books still demonstrate staying power
- Implications for libraries and their use of space – is it still useful to devote a lot of physical shelving space to books?
- Should libraries be investing in print resources or electronic resources?
- Are members of the Net Generation book-lovers or are they glued to their computers?

Her **research questions** were:

1. What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of print and electronic formats that appear to influence the students' choices between reading in print or on screen?

2. Which of these factors determine the students' choices between reading in print or on screen for different types of reading (study and leisure reading)?

3. How important are attitudes towards the medium in students' choices for reading in print or on screen?

Method

12 undergraduate students took part in her study: 7 studying English and 5 studying Philosophy. These subjects were chosen deliberately as many of the e-books that have been purchased at Oxford are in Humanities subjects.

Each student kept a photo-diary of everything they read over a three-day period, and these diaries were then discussed in individual interviews. For the purposes of this study, "reading" was defined as any deliberate reading, whether for leisure or study, but excluded incidental reading such as checking the weather forecast.

Here are some points I found interesting:

- The students read in various locations: libraries, gardens, their own rooms. Different devices were used to access e-content e.g. laptops, desktop computers. ==There were more instances of reading on screen versus in print,== but time period was not recorded for this study.
- ==Students in this study did not print out much to read== – it didn't occur to many of them – having the item in print was only important if they wanted to annotate it or would be carrying it around (e.g. when travelling). Cost did not seem to be the main issue for printing out items.
- No use of online books was recorded for leisure reading. The main print items used were books.
- No print journals were used – only read on screen or printed out.

The students' choice of format was influenced by:

- Attitude towards the medium
- Economic factors
- Physical factors (health)
- Affordances* of the medium
- Engagement with content

Affordance means an action that you can perform with the object – *what you can do with it*

Comments

- Students were passionate about books and had ==an emotional investment in this medium==. ==24/7 access was important as many students== chose to work at night-time. This highlights the role for college libraries, many of which are open 24 hours a day. These students believed that reading should be an enjoyable experience (suggestion that this may be different for students in other subjects?), ==so medium has to be enjoyable too==, and many expected a comfortable seat as part of their reading experience.
- 3 out of the 12 students interviewed did not experience eye strain. Many cited the ==distraction factor of being on the computer/ having internet connection==

- For some people, holding the item when reading was very important. Having the physical object gave a sense of where you are in the book and made the reader feel that they were making progress through a finite text.
- ==Search functionality is a major plus of online books.== The issue of missing pages from the online book was a major problem for some, whereas others didn't mind as they could still get the essence of the text even if a few pages were missing.
- The students tended to ==associate using the computer with something ephemeral; not serious reading==. Perhaps they have not been taught how to read online in a concentrated way or how to avoid distractions. Some choose to work in libraries with no internet for this reason. The ==influence of role models at home== is strong: they way they have read at home will affect their acceptance of different media.
- Some aspects were differently perceived as positive or negative depending on whether they were reading for leisure or study, e.g. in leisure reading, they ==enjoy the distraction/ variety of hyperlinks, but found this negative when reading for study==. Alice suggested that e-books and e-journals don't have many useful hyperlinks, so perhaps they are not as distracting as online newspapers?

Which factors drive decisions?

Primary texts: ==electronic format rules for reasons of access and keyword searching==. But for all other aspects, print wins.

Secondary sources: ==convenience is important==, and portability, so any print advantages could be easily overridden by electronic accessibility advantage. Personal preference for print will drive some individuals to find and borrow print version.

Attitudes are not a good predictor of overt behavior, but intention is. Alice concluded that a rational model would apply to this context: for study, ==students will allow practical considerations override emotional preferences==. *"Competition favours rational individuals"*.