Which Collection Is Used the Most: Print-Based versus E-Based Serials Collections

Literature Review

By
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The seemingly unlimited potential of electronic-based serials collections to provide everything its print counterpart provides, including full-text access, retrospective holdings, and discipline specific indexes but with a level of speed, efficiency and targeting unmatched by print-based collections, present academic libraries, large and small, with an uneasy but unavoidable conundrum: at what point is it feasible to discontinue supporting print-based serials collection whether renewing or starting new print subscriptions when an electronic version is available or housing retrospective serial runs. In reality many academic libraries are not waiting to have these questions answered before discontinuing their print subscriptions or offloading their large, space-consuming print back files. Budgetary constraints and physical space demands are requiring libraries to accept certain assumptions about serials use before sufficient data is collected, namely that users have gravitated to electronic-based serials to such an extent that supporting a print-based collection is no longer necessary or cost-effective. “Big deals” from publishers are also making it easier for libraries to transition to e-only serials collections.

Given the tremendous stakes involved and the cost and space implications for academic libraries in having this assumption confirmed, studies around print versus electronic critical to assessing accurately users’ needs and preferences governing use of serials collections. One study appears to all but confirm the above assumption largely on an evaluation
comparing print versus electronic journal use using data collected between
1998 and 2001 against data on use collected between 2001 and 2003 applying
the same quantitative methodology in each study. (Brady, McCord, &
Galbraith, 2006) Compelling the follow-up study is the conclusion reached
from the earlier study, namely that print use increased after the introduction
of electronic journals. To test whether this represented an enduring trend in
opposition to other studies indicating just the reverse, Brady, McCord and
Galbraith limited their follow-up research to journal titles used in the earlier
study. To measure use, the researchers, as in the earlier study, used
circulation statistics to capture remote use and direct observation to capture
in-house use by introducing strict controls on re-shelving procedures during
the study period.

The conclusion reached by the authors of the follow-up study is that, in
general, total electronic use in increased dramatically while print use
decreased although the data also revealed exceptions to this general trend
among certain titles and academic disciplines where an increase in print use
was observed, confirming the earlier study. (Brady, McCord, & Galbraith,
2006) The authors speculate that these exceptions could “indicate use of older
literature” or that the electronic version of a title was inadequate to meet
users’ needs. It is precisely at this point that a qualitative analysis able to
illicit more precisely why users continued to prefer print for certain titles
could prove beneficial to the study.

One study that does utilize qualitative analysis in support of its
quantitative findings is found in Kacherki and Thombare’s 2010 article
investigating print versus electronic journal use. (Kacherki & Thombare,
2010) Kacherki and Thombare’s investigations yield results quite different
from those reported in the Brady, McCord and Galbraith study. Using a survey designed to measure users’ preferences and actual use regarding print versus electronic serials use, the researchers found that across all categories of users in the study, a substantial majority of them preferred having their serials collection available in both print and electronic formats. The survey was conducted using a sample size of 125 respondents representing three categories of users proportional to the larger population for the academic library studied on the whole. In addition to measuring users’ preferences and their history of use, Kacherki and Thombare collected data aimed at exploring possible motives behind users’ preferences. Kacherki and Thombare’s qualitative analysis reports on users’ perceptions about the advantages and disadvantages associated with print and electronic journal using survey respondents’ selections to predetermined choices of likely advantages and disadvantages. The results of Kacherki and Thombare’s study appears to suggest that while users are gravitating in large numbers to electronic-based serials, confirming the assumption generally accepted across the academic library environment, they are not doing so to a degree to warrant discontinuing support for a print-based serials collection.

A 2012 article exploring the information seeking behavior of students and researchers supports Brady, McCord and Galbraith's 2004 conclusions regarding print versus electronic use. (Chaurasia & Chaursia, 2012) The 2012 study has particular interest because, for one, the library used in the study has a large and extensive print and electronic collection; two, the study itself comes later in the electronic serials life cycle where judgments about trends can be made with greater security; and three, Caurasia and Caurasia’s data suggests their conclusions can be generalized across different types of
collection material. Similar to Kacherki and Thombare, Chaurasia and Caurasia employ a questionnaire given to 100 students and researchers randomly selected to measure electronic serials use compared with print serials use. While the study is largely quantitative, respondents were also asked to report on any problems they may have experienced in using electronic resources from a predetermined list of likely problems.

One limitation of the study was that the study population was not representative of the broader user population with an equal number of students and researchers participating in the questionnaire. Remote use was also not factored into the study, an important methodological detail to consider when collecting data on use. (Pesch, 2011) That said, the study confirms the general hypothesis that collection use is trending toward electronic based formats, whether serials or monographs. Further suggest that libraries accelerate these current trends by increasing awareness about electronic availability and offering additional training programs in electronic resources use. (Chaurasia & Chaursia, 2012)


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