

Editorial

What students told us about their experiences and expectations of print and e-books

Based on a panel session held at the UKSG One-Day Conference: London, November 2015

For the last 13 years at least, many of us have participated in the debate about the development of e-books to support education. Librarians, publishers and intermediaries all have a view about the format and the business models to support it and, of course, studies and surveys of students have informed that debate. However, it is not often that information professionals have the opportunity to sit down with a group of students, listen to their perspective and ask them questions. The UKSG One-Day Conference held in London in November 2015 offered such an opportunity with a panel session of students chaired by Jeremy Upton, Director of Library & University Collections at the University of Edinburgh. The debate uncovered the continued role of print alongside emerging e-book models.

The students shared with us their frustrations in accessing the books they need, the financial challenges they face in terms of purchasing books and their expectations about library provision of books. This article is a summary for those readers who were unable to attend the session to hear for themselves the frank and eye-opening views from the student panel. As one member of the audience put it, the students provided us with gold dust.

The students who so generously gave us their time were Tess McGovern, student of English literature and Cameron Myers, a law student, from King's College London; Saleh Ahmed and Thomas Ash, who are postgraduates in library studies from City University London; and Lucy Hensher, a geography student and Lenart Celar, a psychology student, from the University of Sussex.



Jeremy Upton began by asking the students about the role the book played in terms of their last piece of work and what sort of role it played alongside the other types of materials they had used. The students reported that they found articles and e-books easier to get hold of than print books, particularly if they did not often have the opportunity to visit the library. However, there was definitely a preference for print when it is available.



Lenart Celart articulated the problem of currency. 'I mostly use articles because they're more up to date than books, but in my coursework, books would have a supporting role. I would use a book to get a general idea of my essay, for example, and then I would base my statement on the book, and from the book I would get other references to other articles and then I would try to find more recent research in that area.' Saleh Ahmed added, 'Journal articles have a lot more functionality, for example I can click on an annotation and it will take me to that reference and straight to the bibliography. The [print] book just isn't always available in the library

because ten people have taken it already, so you have no choice but to use the e-book. Print books are just easier on your eyes and tangible, whereas e-books? You just can't feel it in your hand and it's just not really the same for me. A [print] book is an asset that you've got, whereas e-books just feel like it's something in the background that you don't really own.'

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Do students buy books?

Jeremy explored the issue of ownership of a book in his next question, when he asked the students if they are currently actively buying books or if they rely almost solely on the library to provide them with access.



The students were unanimous in declaring that the purchase of an academic book or an e-book is the last resort. If purchase is the only option, the students will explore the second-hand market first. Lucy Hensher explained, 'Well, if I was to buy a book, it would probably be second-hand, mainly because it's too expensive for me to buy every book. I would choose to buy a book if I knew I was going to use it for more than a year or more than a term, because it makes no sense to buy a book for a year and then throw it away or sell it on for half the price. And I wouldn't buy a book if I had a copy in the

library, and I would expect to have all the core readings in the library.'

Cameron Myers raised some librarian eyebrows when he explained that, as a law student living in London, he could not afford any books and said, 'I've heard stories of people hiding law books in other departments of the library so that no one can get their hands on it and they can just take it out whenever they want. So yeah, I've had to rely on the library this year for books, but it's still quite a significant problem for me.' However, if Cameron was able to purchase a book it would be in the print format. 'I much prefer buying print books, just solely for the fact that if I'm going to spend £30–40 on a book I want to be able to hold it in my hand, and also be able to sell it on afterwards.'

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Perhaps not surprisingly, Tess McGovern, a literature student who is set four novels a week to read, does buy books, but said that although she would buy a work of fiction, she would never buy an academic book. 'I'd buy a piece of fiction which has an academic introduction to it, but I'd always expect that in the library they would have the supplementary material I'd need for my course,' she explained.

This was interesting, if disappointing, news for the publishers in the audience, one of whom asked students what they would think a fair price would be for an e-book set in their area of study. The students recognized that e-book prices include VAT, but nonetheless, their price point is low. One student said that somewhere between £5 and £10 would be reasonable. Cameron again raised the issue of resale value, explaining that a fair price for an e-book would depend on the equivalent price in print. 'If an e-book is £30 and the print book is £35 or something like that, I'm not going to buy the e-book. I don't think it's going to be value for money if it's not something that I can sell on afterwards or hold in my hands ... but maybe if it was something like £10-15, I would consider it.'

Tess told us, 'Last year for first year we had to buy these things called course packs that had everything in it that we needed and I think I shelled out about £50 in total for these course packs. Some of them were substantial, some of them were tiny, and we used them once and ... none of the material has ever been used again ... I'd say it'd have to be under £50 because those things drove me mad ... and then my university made them free because we all complained! So, victory!' Lucy agreed and recounted a similar story. 'We got the same offer in the first year, to buy all the [print] books for the first year and the price was £300 and I feel sorry for people who bought them. I bought one, which I did use, and then I bought a second one that I used for a term, which is 12 weeks, and then never again, so to spend £300 every year – that makes it around a grand for a book you're going to use once or twice before your exam – is quite horrific.' Lenart recalled a similar horrific purchase: 'The most I've ever spent on a print book was £45, which was a new edition that the lecturer said wait for it, it's coming out, so two months after the module started we bought it, we all bought it, and we barely used it. So since first year I've learnt, "Don't spend the money!"'

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Print books versus e-books

Jeremy probed a little more, asking the students about what they saw as the advantages and disadvantages of e-books and print books. Lenart summed up the advantages of the print format: 'One advantage [of print] is that I can take multiple copies and I can organize my workspace one book after another, one next to another, and then I can cross-check or cross-reference books, and at the same time take notes from different books. If you think about the same process on a computer, that would mean having five to ten different windows open. You'd have to be quite good at managing and multitasking those windows to know what's where. Whereas if you have it on your desk and you have everything annotated with sticky notes or whatever, you know where you're at, where you're going and where all your notes are.'



Cameron also preferred the tangible properties of the print book for reasons many of us will have sympathy with. 'I tend to use print books a lot more than I do e-books, primarily probably for the reason that a lot of the books that I have to read for my course are very long, hundreds and hundreds of pages long. Maybe it's a psychological thing, but I like to know where I am in the chapter or in the book, I like to keep flicking back to the end of the chapter to see how far I'm going.'

However, all the students appreciated and acknowledged the search functionality that e-books provide. Lucy explained, 'I also really like e-books. I like that you can search through chapters and, specifically for me, geographical terms and theories. It is also easier to cite from e-books as well, as opposed to typing it in from a printed book.'

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Lenart also raised another issue, the academic credibility of the e-book, explaining that his lecturer marked him down by 10% in a recent assignment when he cited e-book sources. Tess said that this was also a problem in her field of English literature: 'If you hand in an essay which has got about 75% e-books in your references and not as many print books, there's this kind of snobbery of, "You didn't try hard enough."'

Improvements to the e-book format

Jeremy asked the students what, if there was an opportunity to make one improvement to the current e-book format, they would want to see developed. Cameron responded by saying, 'This is unlikely to happen, but I would say that probably making e-books cheaper, significantly cheaper than the print books, so that people would be more encouraged to think that they're getting more value for their money.'



DRM (digital rights management) is Saleh Ahmed's biggest bugbear. 'It feels pretty much like medieval armour or a chastity belt. I want to be able to use e-books on different devices and I do understand everything, but if you don't treat the users with respect, they will go somewhere else or they will try to remove it. If you buy something, you feel it's yours and that's one of the reasons why if I bought a PS4 or an X-Box, I wouldn't want to buy downloaded games from the cloud, because I wouldn't feel it's mine and I can't really do anything with it. So where you have something physical I can lend it to my friend, a book, etc.'

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Another issue is the PDF format. Thomas Ash acknowledged that it is universal, but nonetheless a constraint. 'If you look at e-journal articles you get the HTML and the PDF full text. I think if you look at web design nowadays, you have responsive web design, which adapts to your device and I think e-books should be responsive. And also, (and I don't know whether open access would play a part in this) obviously as it's digital, you've got the option to add in more content, so you could have links to videos or other content within the e-book. The only difficulty is when you're writing a book, you're writing a

monograph, you don't want to necessarily think about extending the content, but I think the future could be potentially more interactive, as it were.' Also frustrated by the lack of interactivity is Lenart. He would like to see links to articles on the publishers' websites instead of to the reference section at the end of the e-book. 'If that were possible,' he said, 'it would save every researcher and every student so much time.'

'e-books should be responsive'

The limitations of the e-format in terms of diagrams and visuals is an issue for some disciplines. Lucy, who studies geography, explained, 'A lot of it is still in black and white and with my subject, a diagram of a river, it doesn't make sense in black and white.'

A member of the audience asked the students if they had run into any access problems with e-books provided by the library, where they had clicked and been turned away from accessing an e-book. Three of the students have experience of a publisher's platform turning them away from an e-book, and Cameron explained how we could make it a less frustrating problem. 'I was quite confused that there was a time limit on how long I could have it open for. Perhaps it wasn't so much the fact that there was a time limit that frustrated me, but the fact that I didn't understand why. An e-book is supposed to be something, at least in my opinion, that is not only easily accessible but also accessible to everyone at the same time, it's the internet if that makes sense. It's not like a print book, where only one person can be reading it at one time. So maybe if they can't have more than one person reading it at one time, or if they can only have a limited time period in which people can use e-books, maybe figure out how to explain the reason why. I think that would go a long way in helping people to not be so confused and frustrated when they're using them.'

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Jeremy summed up the session by concluding that we still live in a very mixed world where there are choices being made about which formats for very good, sound reasons; but also clearly there are a lot of barriers in place in terms of what our students are wanting to do with the material. It was evident that in light of the student debt they are incurring, the students who attended the session have high expectations of their university libraries and do not expect to buy books themselves unless they will get long-term use from them or get some resale value.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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Lorraine Estelle
Co-editor, *Insights*
E-mail: lorraine.estelle@counterusage.org

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7941-9848>

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