



*Evidence Summary*

**Academic Historians in Canada Report Both Positive and Negative Attitudes Towards E-books for Teaching and Research**

**A Review of:**

Martin, K. & Quan-Haase, A. (2013). Are e-books replacing print books? Tradition, serendipity, and opportunity in the adoption and use of e-books for historical research and teaching. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 64(5), 1016-1028.  
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**Abstract**

**Objective** – To understand academic historians' attitudes towards, and perceptions of, e-books for use in teaching and research.

**Design** – Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews using a grounded theory approach.

**Subjects** – Ten faculty members in departments of history at academic institutions in Southwestern Ontario participated.

**Methods** – Participants were recruited using flyers and email distribution lists. The authors conducted semi-structured interviews lasting

30-60 minutes, between October 2010 and December 2011. After 10 interviews, the authors determined saturation had been reached and ceased recruitment. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding. Analysis was conducted using grounded theory procedures incorporating Roger's Innovation decision model.

**Main Results** – The authors elicited participants' perceptions of e-books without providing a common definition for the concept. Consistent with previous studies, participants were confused about what constituted an e-book, particularly the distinction between e-books and electronic journals and databases. Several comments

included illustrate this confusion, indicating the responses collected may represent perceptions of e-resources more generally, rather than e-books in particular. The authors mention that at least one participant who initially responded that they had not used e-books later changed their response as the interview progressed. Unfortunately, the exact number of participants who did so is not reported.

Participants reported both negative and positive attitudes towards e-books. Attitudes varied depending on the characteristic discussed. The characteristics identified focused primarily on the delivery mechanism, rather than the content, of e-books. The authors identified four factors each as contributing to positive and negative attitudes. Factors associated with a negative attitude included availability, serendipity, cost, and tradition. These factors stemmed from concerns about changing student research behaviours resulting from the differences between e-books and print books. Factors associated with a positive attitude included convenience, teaching innovations, research practices, and cost benefits. These factors largely reflected benefits to students, such as the ability to access e-books easily (convenience), increased access in general, and the perceived relatively low cost of student e-books. The factor directly benefitting respondents was improved speed and accuracy in their work, enabled by particular technological features. While participants were eager to use e-books in the classroom, there were concerns about implications for research practices. Participants worried that the benefits of browsing and serendipitous discovery would be lost as students chose materials based on convenience rather than other factors, such as quality. Finally, the perceived lack of digitized historical documents available for use as primary sources was also of concern.

**Conclusions** – The authors state that confusion regarding the nature of e-books slows adoption. While participants were exploring ways to incorporate e-books into their norms, values, and research practices, they are unlikely to rely solely on e-books as primary

sources. This stems from two perceptions. First, current e-book formats and platforms do not authentically represent all the characteristics of print books. Second, there are insufficient primary sources available as e-books. The validity of these perceptions is not addressed in this article.

### **Commentary**

Literature on humanists' information seeking behaviour and use of technology suggests that they are often early adopters if it improves the efficiency of their research. This belies the popular notion of historians as reluctant adopters of technology. In fact, historians seem to approach new technologies pragmatically. While there is substantial literature on technology use of humanists in general, there is little literature on information and communication technology (ICT) adoption practices in particular disciplines. While examining e-book use as an ICT enables separation of content from the package and delivery mechanisms, confusion remains about the nature of e-books. The confusion centers on the distinctions between the content and the delivery mechanism and the e-book format versus other e-resources. What is the difference between an e-book and another long-form document available electronically?

The article was evaluated using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme Qualitative Research Checklist (CASP, 2013). The choice of semi-structured interviews and analysis based in grounded theory are appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study. The rationale for the study is generally strong and includes careful consideration of Roger's Innovation decision model. The choice to limit questions to two phases of the model – knowledge and persuasion – limits the usefulness of the results and introduces uncertainty regarding the conclusions. A second concern is the lack of detail provided for sampling and recruitment methods. More specifically, demographics of the population sampled, recruitment strategies, development of the interview guide, and the process for developing the coding scheme need to be described in greater detail.

Given limited information about the population and sample, it is difficult to determine the relevance of these results for other populations of historians. Future studies should include questions addressing all phases of the adoption process. However, considering the lack of evidence regarding the uptake of e-books by particular communities, this study begins to fill a gap in our understanding of historians' considerations for adopting new ICT.

Participant confusion about the distinctions between e-books and other e-resources likely is reflected in the data. It is unclear how comments on other types of e-resources were handled, which raises questions about validity of the data. At times, the authors themselves conflate issues related to content versus delivery. The authors conclude that participants were in the beginning stages of adoption. Since the interview questions did not include later phases of the model, this conclusion is unsubstantiated.

This confusion speaks to the diversity of functions and features provided by online reading tools, digital rights management software, reading devices, and search interfaces (e.g., Google Books). Since the adoption of a standardized set of features is unlikely in the near future, librarians can increase researchers' understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of e-books through educational programs and individual consultations. These opportunities could include discussions about balancing the risk of

lost serendipity in the discovery process with the increased ease in discovery, access, and analysis, thus addressing the relative advantage of e-books. Additionally, collaborating to develop ways to replicate browsing experiences and serendipitous discovery would engage historians more deeply with the technology and provide useful insights into their research practices. As mentioned by the authors, evidence quantifying e-book availability for this group would be valuable information for both historians and librarians. Librarians are often challenged to make collection decisions based on little or no evidence about the practices of our patrons. Evidence on the adoption of e-books by various disciplines, along with attitudes and relevant practices, would allow librarians to make better informed collection decisions and use of increasingly limited funds. Finally, researchers addressing this topic going forward should clearly define the scope of the e-book for participants, perhaps even differentiating consumption by device or platform.

## References

- Critical Appraisal Skills Programme. (2013). Qualitative Research Checklist. Retrieved 14 Jul. 2013 from <http://www.casp-uk.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/CASP-Qualitative-Research-Checklist-31.05.13.pdf>