



Evidence Summary

Comparing the Use of Books with Enhanced Records versus Those Without Enhancements: Methodology Leads to Questionable Conclusions

A review of:

Madarash-Hill, Cherie and J.B. Hill. "Electronically Enriched Enhancements in Catalog Records: A Use Study of Books Described on Records With URL Enhancements Versus Those Without." *Technical Services Quarterly* 23.2 (2005): 19-31.

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Abstract

Objective – To compare the use of books described by catalogue records that are enhanced with URL links to such information as dust jackets, tables of contents, sample text, and publishers' descriptions, with the use of books described by records that are not enhanced with such links.

Design – Use study.

Setting – Academic library (Southeastern Louisiana University, Sims Memorial Library).

Subjects – 180 records with enhancements and 180 records (different titles) without enhancements.

Methods – The study identified the sample of unenhanced records by conducting searches of the broad subject terms "History", "United States", "Education", and "Social" and limiting the searches to books. The enhanced sample was derived in the same manner, but with additional search limiters to identify only those records that had URL enhancements. An equal sample of enhanced and unenhanced records (50 or 30 of each) was tracked for each of four search terms. Only records for books that could be checked out were included, as use statistics were based on whether or not a book was borrowed. While half of the enhanced records had full-text elements (such as descriptions) that were indexed and thus searchable, the rate of use for these records was not tracked separately from the

enhanced records that only had URL enhancements.

Main results – Books described on records with URL enhancements for publisher descriptions, tables of contents, book reviews, or sample text had higher use than those without URL enhancements. Only 7% of titles with URLs, compared with 21% of those without, had not been borrowed. 74.67% of titles with URLs had been checked out one or two times, compared with 69.5% of those without URLs. The number of titles with enhanced records that had 3 or more checkouts was almost double the rate of unenhanced titles (18% to 9.5%).

Conclusion – The authors conclude that catalogue records that have electronic links to book reviews, cover jackets, tables of contents, or publisher descriptions can lead to higher use of books, particularly if textual enhancements such as descriptions are also searchable.

Commentary

The topic of this study is of considerable interest to librarianship as the profession reconsiders, reworks, and repositions the library catalogue in the context of Amazon and Google.

Yet, while the findings of this study seem intuitively valid, they should be accepted with extreme caution. If all catalogue records were enhanced, would the overall volume of loans increase? The evidence is not clear.

The authors acknowledge three limitations of the study:

- The sample sizes are small owing to the relatively small numbers of enhanced records, and the need to keep the samples of enhanced versus unenhanced records equal.
- Some of the works included in the sample were on ‘hot topics’ and therefore might have attracted high use whether or not they were enhanced. (The example given was of a book, *John Kerry*, with an enhanced record. It is not clear from the write-up whether this uncontrolled variable was thought to apply equally to both enhanced and unenhanced records).
- In-house use was not included in the assessment of use. (For some reason, the authors seem to suggest that this may have resulted in an undercounting of only the electronically enhanced sample.)

However, there may be other limitations, as the control of variables is difficult with this study methodology.

- Record enhancements may have been disproportionately added to the ‘best books’ records (whether ‘best’ be defined as most recent, most topical, best book jacket, most authoritative author, best title, or whatever).
- It is possible that users choose enhanced records over unenhanced records. But given the methodology, their choices of records are not known – only their choices of books to borrow are documented. The user may have decided which titles to borrow at the shelf based on qualitative assessment of the books in hand rather than deciding from their records.
- It is possible that the order of records in the users’ search results would influence their choice of records to examine (a likely precursor to borrowing the books).

This would be especially true for the broad subject searches that were part of the study methodology, as the user would end up with large search results. Records appearing on the first screen, likely the first 10-20 titles, could be by their placement the most likely to be borrowed. We do not know whether enhanced records were likely to predominate on these screens, or not.

- The same variable, the order of search results, would likely be affected if the tables of contents and summaries in enhanced records were full-text indexed. Exactly half of the enhanced MARC records (90 of 180) had textual enhancements in the 505 (Formatted Table of Contents) or 520 (Summary) fields, which were full-text indexed and therefore searchable. This is described in a curiously inconclusive manner in one section of the article. The authors do not address the possibility that all, or a disproportionate amount, of the increase in use was on the books for which their records had indexed enhancements.
- It is not clear whether from a results screen the user would have been able to identify enhanced records

and might therefore be attracted to examine those first, possibly influencing the likelihood that those books would be borrowed.

A more valid methodology would have been to study the usage based on a sample of unenhanced records for a period of time, then add enhancements to those records and measure the usage on the same set of books for a subsequent equal period of time. (Of course, this may have not been operationally feasible, and such a methodology would not control the variable of the order of search results and could introduce new variables such as the diminishing likelihood of a book being used over time.)

A different methodology could also have tracked whether textual enhancements such as tables of contents were being full-text indexed, and if so whether that affected those records' rankings in search results, and as a direct consequence further influenced the comparative rate at which usage increased.

The statistical analysis of the findings also falls short. The statistical significance of the differences in loan rates between books with enhanced versus unenhanced records should have been measured and reported, both for the samples presented in the tables and for the entire records sample.