



Evidence Summary

Analysis of Static and Dynamic E-Reference Content at a Multi-Campus University Shows that Updated Content is Associated with Greater Annual Usage

A Review of:

Lamothe, A. R. (2015). Comparing usage between dynamic and static e-reference collections. *Collection Building*, 34(3), 78-88. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/CB-04-2015-0006>

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Abstract

Objective – To discover whether there is a difference in use over time between dynamically updated and changing subscription e-reference titles and collections, and static purchased e-reference titles and collections.

Design – Case study.

Setting – A multi-campus Canadian university with 9,200 students enrolled in both graduate and undergraduate programs.

Subjects – E-reference book packages and individual e-reference titles.

Methods – The author compared data from individual e-reference books and packages.

First, individual subscription e-reference books that periodically added updated content were compared to individually purchased e-reference books that remained static after purchase. The author then compared two e-reference book packages that provided new and updated content to two static e-reference book packages. The author compared data from patron usage to new content added over time using regression analysis.

Main Results – As the library acquired e-reference titles, dynamic title subscriptions added to the collection were associated with 2,246 to 4,635 views per subscription while static title additions were associated with 8 to 123 views per purchase. The author also found that there was a strong linear relationship between views and dynamic titles added to the collection ($R^2=0.79$) and a very weak linear

relationship ($R^2=0.18$) with views when static titles are added to the collection. Regression analysis of dynamic e-reference collections revealed that the number of titles added to each collection was strongly associated with views of the material ($R^2=0.99$), while static e-reference collections were less strongly linked ($R^2=0.43$).

Conclusion – Dynamic e-reference titles and collections experienced increases in usage each year while static titles and collections experienced decreases in usage. This indicates that collections and titles that offer new content to users each year will continue to see growth in usage while static collections and titles will see maximum usage within a few years and then begin to decline as they get older. Fresh content is strongly associated with usage in e-reference titles, which mirrors the author's previous work examining static and dynamic content in e-monographs.

Commentary

This study represents a quantitative comparison of dynamic e-reference titles and collections, and static e-reference titles and collections with attention to the value of these collections to academic library patrons. The author contextualized this study with findings from his previous works which showed that updated content had a positive impact on e-monograph usage. Though collection development literature now frequently features quantitative studies of electronic materials, this article represents one of the first attempts to compare usage between purchased and subscription e-reference materials.

The researcher in this study also provides these materials as a service at the University, but the two types of collections compared in the study were already owned or set up as recurring purchases by the author's institution at the time of writing. A standardized measure of use from the author's other works was used to determine the value to patrons for each title and collection. Additions to packages and purchased titles were determined using simple counts and included all eligible e-reference materials obtained by the Library between

2002 and 2014. The author used a multiple regression analysis to calculate the usage of materials over time. This is an appropriate model, but we have few benchmarks for comparing the usage data from this research with print and e-reference data from other institutions.

The results represent the usage of one library from a collection specifically selected for the particular needs of that library. The resources, particularly static individual e-reference titles, may be tied to individual course assignments that changed over the observation period. The work represents a template that could be tested in other institutions to overcome this limitation. Calculating usage over time, particularly for static e-reference materials, could be used to shape purchasing decisions for the future, even if a sufficient return on investment has already been reached. The results suggest that subscription e-reference titles and packages are a better investment for libraries than static content, especially if annual subscription prices are lower than purchasing titles outright.

The author also makes clear that the content of dynamic subscription e-reference materials is often fundamentally different from the content of static purchase collections and titles. Encyclopedias, dictionaries, and style manuals tend to feature subscription payment models and also contain information that users consult many times in the course of their research and scholarship. Dynamic titles are often also general resources with broad appeal, while many static titles are discipline-specific. Dynamic reference materials represent a much larger lifetime investment for libraries, but that investment may be justified with continuing high levels of usage.