Comparing apples and pears:
the challenges of measuring e-book use

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Against a backdrop of increasing pressure on library budgets, demonstrating a return on investment for costly e-resources is critical. Data is driving decision-making in libraries, supporting provision of appropriate, user-focused content and resources. However, whilst academic libraries are spending a significant and increasing allocation of their budget on e-books each year, gathering data about their use isn't always easy. Within this context, access to consistent data and effective tools is of paramount importance.

The Jisc Usage Statistics Portal (JUSP) aims to remove some of the pain associated with managing usage data by offering librarians access to accurate and comparable statistics to analyse the value and impact of their e-resources. JUSP's recent focus on e-book usage data has highlighted a series of challenges in this area that warrant further exploration. Issues affecting development, delivery and management of consistent e-book usage data and effective services is the subject of research currently being undertaken by Jisc. The issues raised are not specific to the UK or the academic sector but are of global concern. The primary aim of this activity is to translate challenges into practical, actionable recommendations. This work will ultimately be of interest to anyone who has responsibility for creating, managing, developing, delivering and supporting usage statistics and standards for e-books.

Background

JUSP is a Jisc funded initiative. Through its portal JUSP aims to save academic libraries time and duplicated effort by offering a single point of access to COUNTER compliant usage statistics from participating publishers. In addition to the portal, the JUSP team conduct research, offer advice and support individuals and organisations involved in creating and managing usage data throughout the world. Initially focused on journal usage data (journal reports JR1, JR1a, JR1 GOA, JR2, JR5), the portal started to include e-book usage data (book reports BR1, BR2 and BR3) from March 2016. However, implementation of an e-book element to the service highlighted a general lack of clarity and consistency around treatment of e-book usage data. At the same time, it was abundantly clear that there were significant opportunities for greater standardisation, communication and collaboration in this area.

Identifying the challenges

In July 2016, Jisc coordinated a forum event in London, inviting representative publishers,

aggregators, librarians and standards bodies to attend. This group met to discuss current challenges involved in development, delivery and utilisation of consistent, reliable usage statistics for e-books. The meeting was intended as an initial step towards:

- informing the future release of the COUNTER standard
- providing greater clarity around use and analysis of book reports
- exploring opportunities for greater optimisation of services and support mechanisms
- developing a shared understanding of challenges from all perspectives

A report describing the forum and indicating key challenges is available.

Subsequently, work is underway during November 2016 to review published literature and ascertain key themes based on feedback from the e-book forum and our initial research. These themes will be explored in more detail through a series of case study interviews with library consortia, academic libraries, publishers and aggregators.

Themes and challenges

Work to date indicates some key themes that will be verified through further research and explored in more detail through the planned case study interviews. Themes include:

- the number of e-books within academic libraries is increasing with a higher proportion of the monograph budget now being spent on e-books
- there is a range of different purchase models, with DDA (demand-driven acquisition) appearing to emerge as a model of choice according to a recent review of literature and general discussions
- assessing and evaluating e-books is complex and challenging with processes and workflows still emerging and in development. A transition to e-books appears to represent a significant change for libraries
- much of the literature reviewed to date highlights the importance of usage statistics in supporting purchase decisions

Several challenges that have emerged through discussions, during the Jisc e-book forum, JUSP service development and a review of the literature:

- there's a lack of COUNTER compliant data, particularly for many e-book aggregator products that are being used by a significant number of libraries
- bringing together both COUNTER and non-COUNTER reports with information such as subjects, purchase models and reading lists is often very difficult, time consuming and inaccurate due to a lack of common identifiers and accurate entitlement lists that are required to interpret usage statistics meaningfully
- differences in the way that e-books are represented across different platforms makes comparing usage problematic
- there are problems arising from inaccurate or inconsistent metadata eg ISBN formats, publisher names
- keeping accurate information, keeping track of added or deleted titles or identifying titles that have been dropped from packages or platforms is tricky

What's next

Research is currently underway and a series of case study interviews are scheduled to take place during December 2016.

This work seeks to gather further information to illustrate how libraries and library consortia are acquiring and evaluating e-books, how usage statistics feature within library workflows, the challenges and resulting impact as well as requirements for change. Discussions with publishers

will focus on how usage data is being used within the organisation, the requirements of customers and the challenges involved in providing usage data for e-books.

A report will be published in 2017 containing a series of practical, actionable recommendations. For anyone interested in learning more about this subject, the outcome of this research will be published in Insights in mid 2017.

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