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ADVISOR REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

Mobile App Usage Assessment in the Academic Library

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Abstract

This column discusses different approaches, and methods to assess app usage. In the following we exemplify mobile strategies and initiatives set up by some universities that libraries can adopt.

Introduction

Embracing mobility services and resources, as well as mobile teaching in our daily work, helps us become mobile leaders within our communities. Whitby (2014) states that due to “the acceptance of the smartphone as the truly personal computer of choice for most Americans, it stands to reason that educators should be modeling and mentoring its use for the very skills we are touting as ‘21st century.’” Academic librarians are important role models in the mobile usage field. The assessment of app usage and mobile strategies gives us a chance to analyze the current landscape, and develop a framework of what we need to do in the future.

Assessment for App Usage

The cost of subscription databases continues to rise while library budgets remain stagnant. Data analysis now plays a pivotal role in a library’s collection development and the allocation of electronic resources. Consequently, many libraries carefully examine database usage on a monthly or annual basis, which often includes the number of downloaded full-text articles, searches for an article and cost per search. Quantitative analysis and qualitative assessment are both equally important in developing a usage narrative on apps. Apps are a relatively new component to the digital ecosystem of libraries, and we are researching the different quantitative and qualitative methods libraries can use to assess app usage.

App Usage: Quantitative Assessment

UNIVERSITY/COLLEGE/INSTITUTIONAL APP

According to a Pew Research Center Report, “nearly two-thirds of Americans own a smartphone, and 19% of Americans rely to some degree on a smartphone for accessing online services and information” (Smith, 2015). Higher education institutions have embraced the mobile realm for quite some time, with many offering apps to prospective and current students, as well as faculty and staff. Boopsie, a platform-as-service provider, surveyed library leaders in 2016 and found that “44% of libraries offer mobile apps, with most of these apps being native (39%)” (Boopsie for Libraries, 2016).

Whether your library has its own app or is included in your institutional app, it is worth examining its usage data. Our library’s app is embedded into Lehman College’s app, which is available for Android and iOS devices (<<http://www.lehman.edu/itr/mobile-central.php>>), and was developed by DubLabs (<<http://www.dublabs.com/>>), Lehman’s information technology department, in collaboration with the library. If you use a third-party provider to develop your app, usage statistics can usually be accessed via the internet. In our case, DubLab’s administrative console provides our in-depth statistics.

From August 2015 until September 1, 2016, Lehman’s app was downloaded a total of 5,480 times. The majority of downloads (3,619) were from Apple’s App Store, followed by Google’s Play Store (1,860). This data is only part of the equation, however, as studies show that 75% of apps are downloaded and only opened once (Griffith, 2016); we also need to look at access statistics for different components of the app. Actual usage during the same time period showed that the app’s home page had 17,050 views. In the same time period the library component in Lehman’s app, received only 847 views.

STATISTICS FOR SUBSCRIPTION-BASED APPS

Today, fewer subscription-based databases have an app counterpart than they did just a few years ago. When mobile apps first started hitting the market, several vendors released apps as an add-on to their subscription databases. Notable examples included ScienceDirect, ebrary, Gale’s Access My Library and EBSCO’s EBSCOhost and eBook app, all of which are still available to libraries. Unable to find app usage statistics in the administrative consoles for EBSCOhost and Gale databases, we contacted the companies directly. According to Gale, there are no separate statistics for app usage available at this point, therefore we cannot determine the level of student usage of the Gale app. EBSCO’s technical support disclosed that from August 2015 to August 2016, we had 158 visitors with 704 searches and 67 PDF full-text downloads for the EBSCOhost app. In comparison, the usage for EBSCO’s eBook app from December 2015 to June 2016 was low with just 15 visitors and 32 searches.

RANKING OF POPULAR APPS

Librarians can monitor app stores, statistical databases, and websites to assess what is popular with consumers, including students and faculty. The two most popular app stores, Apple’s App Store and Google’s Google Play, and statistics databases such as Statista provide current, quantitative ranking data on the most popular apps. An app search in Statista results in various rankings and usage statistics, broken down by region and subject. A recent report ranked the top fifteen apps in the U.S. as Facebook, Facebook Messenger, YouTube,

Google Maps, Google Search, Google Play, Gmail, Pandora Radio, Instagram, Amazon Mobile, Apple Music, Apple Maps, Pokémon GO, Snapchat, and Pinterest (comScore, TechCrunch, 2016). Websites that offer analytical tools, such as AppAnnie (<<https://www.appannie.com/>>), also provide quantitative data. Even though these sites are mostly geared toward companies, advertisers and developers, they can still provide meaningful information for librarians. In AppAnnie's free version you can view statistics by platform (iOs, Android, and Windows), by country, by categories (e.g., education, research), publisher and more.

App Usage: Qualitative Assessment

APP STORE USER FEEDBACK

Reading user feedback about the Lehman College app in the app stores helps us gain insight into the user experience. As of September 8, 2016, there have been 18 reviews of the Lehman College app in iTunes (iTunes Preview, 2016), and 50 reviews in the Google Play Store, (<<http://tinyurl.com/haxadj6>>) (Google Play, 2016). Examples of user feedback in the Google Play Store include, "I love this app is [sic] makes things easier. I don't have to keep going to the Lehman website." and "This is a good application, the only downside to it is that some information is not refreshed on time." (Google Play, 2016); in iTunes (<<http://tinyurl.com/j98rjcd>>), users wrote, "Handy, available, a step closer! A great attempt" and "Great app for enrolled students" (iTunes, 2016). Reading user reviews helps us determine what is important to app users as we begin to develop the library's future mobile strategy.

IN-PERSON/REAL TIME FEEDBACK

The best qualitative feedback we receive is always via in-person discussions with students, faculty and staff. We ask about their experiences with the app when we are in the classroom, during reference desk interviews, and during workshops, and as part of our teaching, the app is a major component of certain information literacy classes. The Library and the Office of Student Disability Services have collaborated on two Apps and Technology Share workshops. During these informal workshops students share their favorite apps and explain how they use them and why. This is also an opportunity for librarians to highlight and promote apps that assist in academic research.

The Juxtaposition of Qualitative and Quantitative Assessment

Data does not exist in a silo. Data is only useful when put into the broader context of the academic ecosystem. As such, we suggest comparing quantitative and qualitative app usage assessments. Quantitative statistical data and qualitative customer reviews from mobile app stores provide a descriptive timeline for app performance and engagement. This information assists in making improvements to the mobile strategy of the university app. While evaluating the quantitative and qualitative results of the Lehman College App's downloads and usage, we find that there is a gap between user perception of what the library component of the app offers and our marketing efforts. We need to improve our library's mobile marketing strategy and outreach to faculty and students through the library's social media outlets, and have conversations with our own library faculty to develop ways to enhance our mobile strategy.

Mobile Strategy in Higher Education

A school's mobile strategy should recognize that "More and more students are not just mobile-first, but are mobile-only" (DubLabs, 2016). To engage and retain students in higher education, a mobile strategy must help bridge the technical mobility of students with their educational goals. Mobile strategies are being implemented by universities that include building Android and iPhone apps, mobile websites, portals, and creating a larger mobile web presence. Cornell University, Binghamton University and Boise State University are three schools with clearly defined mobile strategies.

Cornell University's mobile strategy, (<<http://tinyurl.com/gudfwan>>), provides a detailed plan with guiding principles, strategies, and a "Development, Distribution and Branding Summary" that includes an app development data control diagram. We appreciate how they have developed the infrastructure to create apps that serve as "data central" for the university, as well as for departments that meet more specific needs, and even those developed by students. (Cornell University, n.d.). Binghamton's mobile strategy, (<http://www.binghamton.edu/mobi/strategy.html>), includes a mobile position statement, recommendation features and a feature comparison graph. Their mobile strategy focuses on the audience, academic stakeholders, and an audit/assessment of department's mobile sites, infrastructure requirements, security, and standards (Binghamton University, 2014). Boise State, (<<https://mobilelearning.boisestate.edu/>>), has a Mobile Learning Initiative specifically for faculty development. Faculty are provided with mobile teaching strategies for their courses, as well as networking opportunities to help meet their pedagogical goals and for student learning (Boise State University, 2016).

Conclusion

The vast and rapid changes in technology have made a tremendous impact on the educational system in recent years. Predicting how mobility and m-learning will transform education is impossible. Yet, according to Advanced Distributed Learning, "the future capabilities for education and training with ubiquitous access to connected devices cannot be overestimated and will continue to expand" (What's Up with Mobile Learning, 2011). Being aware of new mobile trends also helps establish an immediate rapport with our students. That said, our critical app usage assessment highlighted a disconnect between our constituents (students, faculty and staff) and the actual utility of our app. Thus, if mobile devices are the new norm, we as librarians need to make the effort to fully embrace this "new normal" for our academic professional work. How can we do that? Some ideas and suggestions are:

At the reference desk: Instead of searching the desktop, let students use their own device and teach them how to find the book in the mobile catalog. Not only does this promote the mobile website and the mobile catalog, it's also environmentally friendly since the students will have the call number on his/her device.

Research and educational apps: Integrate the use of these apps into your information literacy classes. Although we teach mobile information literacy classes, we allow students to use their own mobile devices in our traditional classes. For example, ask the class to search for a word's definition via the Merriam-Webster or Dictionary.com apps or let them search for an article via the EBSCO app or mobile website.

Discuss your current favorite app and/or mobile website with students, faculty, and peers: Start a dialogue about what apps teachers

might use for their courses. Also inquire about which apps/mobile resources they would like to see purchased by the library (and perhaps pre-install them on the library’s iPad).

Libraries are an integral part of a university and therefore the creation of a mobile strategy benefits students and enhances the university community’s mobile learning focus.

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