

Ebook lending in UK public libraries

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Abstract. This research aims to investigate ebook lending in UK public libraries. A mixed method approach will be utilised to gain an understanding of how ebook lending is currently being achieved and to determine its affect on traditional library services. Initial results from the first phase of the study are presented and discussed.

Keywords: ebooks, ebook readers, public libraries

1 Introduction

The ebook revolution is coming; driven by innovative business models, supported by impressive technological developments, and fuelled by apparently endless content. Despite difficulties in obtaining reliable data on ebook sale figures [1], evidence from the International Digital Publishing Forum suggests that sales of ebooks in America are growing rapidly, from 1.5 million dollars in Q1 2002 to 91 million dollars in Q1 2010 [2]. Public libraries are receiving active encouragement from government to provide ebook services [3] but face lukewarm responses by library users [4] and a volatile sector in which Google, Amazon, Apple, and a host of other organisations fight for a share of the marketplace. The provision of ebook services in the academic library sector is relatively widespread - over 60% of students utilised them in their studies in 2008 [5] - but while ebook services have been established in US public libraries for a number of years [6], the available data suggests that the majority of UK public libraries are yet to offer ebook services [4]. The British Library recently estimated that by 2020 the vast majority, 95%, of new works published will only be published in electronic form [7].

Despite a significant body of research on the design of ebooks [8], and their use in an academic context [9, 10] there is a lack of research concerning ebook lending services in public libraries. The objectives of this study are to investigate ebook service provision, both within public libraries and other library sectors, in order to develop an understanding of the myriad challenges involved and to provide guidance on how collection development policy must evolve to meet new demands. The potential benefits of ebook service in public libraries would be an actualisation of the 24/7 virtual library for all users as well as being of significant interest to specific user communities, such as the visually impaired, reading groups [11], and the young. This research will be of interest to library practitioners wishing to introduce or optimise ebook lending services.

2 Research Questions

This research intends to examine current and future practice relating to ebook lending provision in the UK in order to develop a best practice model that will be useful to public library practitioners wishing to develop or enhance such services. The research questions are as follows:

1. How have public libraries addressed ebook service provision in the UK?
2. How do librarians and library users view the provision of ebook lending services?
3. How can the effectiveness of ebook lending services be measured?
4. What challenges and opportunities exist in incorporating ebook lending into other reader services?
5. Is it economically viable to lend ebook reading devices from public libraries?
6. How can effective ebook lending services be developed?

3 Related Work

Whilst ebooks are now commonly found in academic libraries [5] the available data suggests they are yet to fully penetrate public libraries in the UK [4]. Ebooks in public libraries have attracted less research interest than ebooks in academic libraries; the majority of work in the UK has been undertaken by James Dearnley and Cliff McKnight of the Department of Information Science at Loughborough University. Public libraries in the UK lag behind the US in offering ebook lending services [6], in the US public libraries first offered ebook lending through the aggregator netLibrary in 1998 (Genco, 2009). The first public library authorities to lend ebooks in the UK were Richmond [12] and Blackburn and Darwen [13]. Whilst research into ebooks in academic libraries has recently been characterised by large scale surveys [5, 14] the equivalent work in the public library arena has been on a smaller scale. Recently more attention has been paid to ebooks in public libraries and Highwire Press of Stanford University [15] released a report that included a large number of public libraries in the sample. As public libraries increasingly begin to adopt ebooks and offer digital lending it is likely that interest from the scholarly community will follow. Currently the majority of public libraries in the UK do not offer ebook lending services but the number is increasing rapidly. It seems that the aggregator Overdrive has a commanding market share amongst public libraries in the UK and the US [12] but this is liable to change in a highly volatile market place [1]. Public libraries face a number of challenges in the following areas when offering ebook lending: selection, acquisition, cataloguing, access, preservation, and management.

Dearnley and McKnight [16] conducted two pilot studies that investigated the potential usage of Rocket eBook ebook readers in a public library context. The first of these studies was carried out at Loughborough University and the second at Market Harborough public library. It resulted in a trial period of lending ebook readers in Market Harborough public library. The study was ostensibly an evaluation of ebook lending in a public library context but was more accurately a usability evaluation of the Rocket eBook ebook reader and Glassbook ebook reader software. The conclusions drawn at the end of the study were that ebook readers would have to be significantly improved before ebooks achieved mainstream acceptance.

Manyard and McKnight [17] investigated the provision of ebooks for children in public libraries. They found a positive attitude towards ebooks as a method of enhancing the children's services that the library offered. A common problem identified by the librarians in the survey was that lending ebooks was limited by the possibility of children not having access to hardware that would allow them to use the ebook.

Dearnley and McKnight [13] published a further paper in 2003 that again explored ebook use in a public library context. An overview of ebook lending in the US was provided and the conclusion was reached that the situation in the UK was less well developed owing to the limited availability of ebook readers, lack of UK specific ebooks, and the lack of commercial ebook vendors. It was found that lending the ebook readers was problematical for staff and the Rocket eBook was not a suitable device. However the paper concluded that a new generation of ebook reading devices could offer benefits to public libraries.

Vidana [18] provided insight into the process that the library authority would have to undertake in order to prepare for lending ebooks: choosing ebooks providers and formats, selecting titles, resolving technical issues, training staff, developing evaluation processes, launching and publicising the service, and monitoring and assessing the progress. Vidana also mentioned the possibility of using ebooks to form consortia which is currently a strong trend in the US [19].

Garrod [6] gave an overview of the ebook market place, which she conceded was a complex topic. Garrod notes the importance of marketing the service, which has been a common theme in the promotion of ebooks in academic libraries [20] as well as suggesting consortia based solution to collection management.

Dearnley, McKnight, and Morris [21] report on user and staff reactions to a personal digital assistant (PDA) based ebook collection. The conclusion that ebooks were to be viewed as supplementary to physical collections was also aired. Again it was found that the hardware used in the study was not sufficiently usable as to be practical to be lent from the public library.

Dearnley, McKnight, and Morris [4] present the results of an online questionnaire that collected data on the ebook collection held at Essex County Libraries. The collection was provided by Overdrive and Ebrary. The conclusions reached was that marketing of ebook collections was paramount in their adoption by users and that certain genres, especially science fiction, were more popular than others. Again the study concludes optimistically with the promise of further advances in ebook reader technology driving the ebook market forward.

Landoni and Hanlon [11] used two reading groups in public libraries in Glasgow to explore the utility of fiction ebooks. Despite the negative reactions for the participants Landoni concluded that there 'is undoubtedly a role for e-books in the public library service'.

The scale of these various studies differs but is generally fairly low; the largest of the studies surveyed 58 people [4]. Despite the low numbers involved the conclusions from the studies are encouraging and this researcher believes the time is right to revisit the issue of ebook lending provision in public libraries, particularly now that many libraries are beginning to loan ebooks.

4 Methodology

The methodology of this study consists of a five-phase pragmatic mixed-methods approach to investigate ebook lending in UK public libraries. The five phases are as follows:

1. Website survey
2. Questionnaire
3. Targeted Freedom of Information (FOI) requests
4. Case studies in five Scottish public libraries
5. Ebook reader lending trial

Currently only the first phase of the research has been carried out with the following phases scheduled to be completed in early 2012. This section describes the methodology of the completed phase and briefly summarises the anticipated methodologies of the subsequent phases.

4.1 Website Survey

The objectives of the website survey were as follows: to enumerate the total number of UK public libraries lending ebooks, to determine how the library lent ebooks (i.e. was the services provided by an aggregator and if so which one?), and to determine if any UK public libraries were lending ebook readers. This research tool was designed to answer the first research question, “How have public libraries addressed ebook service provision in the UK?”, by giving a cross-sectional baseline figure for the number of public libraries currently offering ebook and/or ebook reader lending services. This research method was informed by Vasileiou’s [1] investigation of ebook aggregators in the academic library sector. Vasileiou took data from ebook aggregator and vendor websites and summarised them to indicate aspects of the service the organisations offered, such as number, format, and subject categories of ebooks, and offered a discussion of the state of the ebook marketplace. This research tool broadly follows the conventions of a content analysis approach, albeit a shallow one. In the case of this website survey the population and the sample were one and the same. The website survey was piloted by selecting a number of Irish library authority websites and tested the metrics and the researcher’s operating procedure.

The research took place during a one week period in September 2011 and consisted of the researcher identifying and visiting the websites of UK library authorities. As there are a fairly small number, 204, of library authorities in the UK it was felt that in this phase of the study all the authorities could be investigated. When examining the websites the researcher identified key measures, such as whether the authority offered ebooks or ebook readers that were available for library patrons to borrow, the aggregator(s) used by the library, and the terminology used by the library when describing the service. The researcher also noted a number of measures, both quantitative and qualitative, related to the visibility, or prominence, of the offer on the webpage: number of mouse clicks required to navigate to the ebook offer, whether a search for the term “ebook” on the library website and the libraries online public access catalogue (OPAC) returned valid results, and details relating to the visibility of the offer on the webpage, such as graphics used to advertise the offer and the number of links to the offer on the homepage. These measures were entered onto a spreadsheet and then analysed to give a qualitative assessment of the prominence of the libraries ebook offer. The study also investigated whether the ebooks offered were searchable on the library OPAC by identifying and searching for two ebooks from the ebook lending service. Where possible the numbers of ebooks offered for loan by the library authorities were enumerated.

4.2 Questionnaire

The objective of the web based questionnaire is to gather a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data on the manner in which UK public libraries lend ebooks. Data from the website survey identified a binary state of library authorities in relation to lending ebooks and ebook readers, either they do or they do not, and the web based questionnaire is designed to return richer data. The objectives of the study are to return data on the perception of ebooks from the point of view of public library practitioners, and to explore why and how ebooks were or were not lent from individual authorities. This research tool will answer RQ2, “How do librarians and library users view the provision of ebook lending services?”. The questionnaire has been designed to provide a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data and as such consists of a variety of open and closed questions. As the initial research tool, the website survey, identified two distinct types of library authorities, lenders and non-lenders, two different questionnaires were developed and authorities will be sent email links depending on their status with the option to correct their status if it has been wrongly identified by the researcher. As the sample was relatively small it was decided to include all library authorities. The appropriate contact details for each library authority were gathered during the website survey.

4.3 FOI Requests

The objective of the FOI requests is to return data, mainly quantitative, relating to ebook lending. The first and second phases of the study will identify library authorities as either lenders or non-lenders and it is the intention of this element of the study to survey lenders only. This research tool was designed to feed data into multiple research questions, especially RQ3, “How can the effectiveness of ebook lending services be measured?”. The sample will be self selecting, any library authority that was identified as a lender by either of the first two research tools will be sent an FOI request.

4.4 Case Studies

Bryman [22] states that ‘The basic case study entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case’ however in this instance, as ebooks are a relatively new phenomenon in UK public libraries, it was felt that a comparative approach would best enable the researcher to establish common and differentiating factors that existed in the respective libraries. Yin [23] states that the objective of a representative case study is to ‘capture the circumstances of an everyday or commonplace situation’ and it was felt that the issues relating to ebooks in libraries, both operational and philosophical, could best be investigated by the researcher as an observer to the everyday workings of ebook lending public libraries. The role of the researcher in the case studies will be as a participant observer using overt ethnography [22] and semi-structured interviews with a variety of stakeholders to build a picture of the way in which libraries lend and users consume ebook lending services. This holistic method will involve semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in addition to participant observation. The case studies will take place in five library authorities in the UK, each with different demographical characteristics.

4.5 Lending trial

The lending trial will seek to investigate RQ5, “Is it economically viable to lend ebook reading devices from public libraries?”. The library authorities taking part in the case studies have expressed an interest in taking part in the lending trial but the methodological approach and the logistics of the trial are yet to be finalised as the procedures will have to be agreed with the participating authorities. Elements of the study have been trialed in a paper published by the researcher [24].

5 Initial Results

The first of the five inter-related studies conducted was a website survey looking at all 204 UK local authority websites. This section discusses the results obtained from the website survey. As previously stated the main objectives of the website survey were to establish a cross-sectional view of the public libraries in the UK that offered an ebook lending service, to identify the aggregators and publishers used by the libraries in delivering

ebook lending services, and to assess the visibility of the ebook lending services on the websites. Further objectives were to gather contact details for the libraries to utilise in the next two stages of this investigation. As the survey looked at all the UK local authority websites there was no need to construct and justify a sample frame.

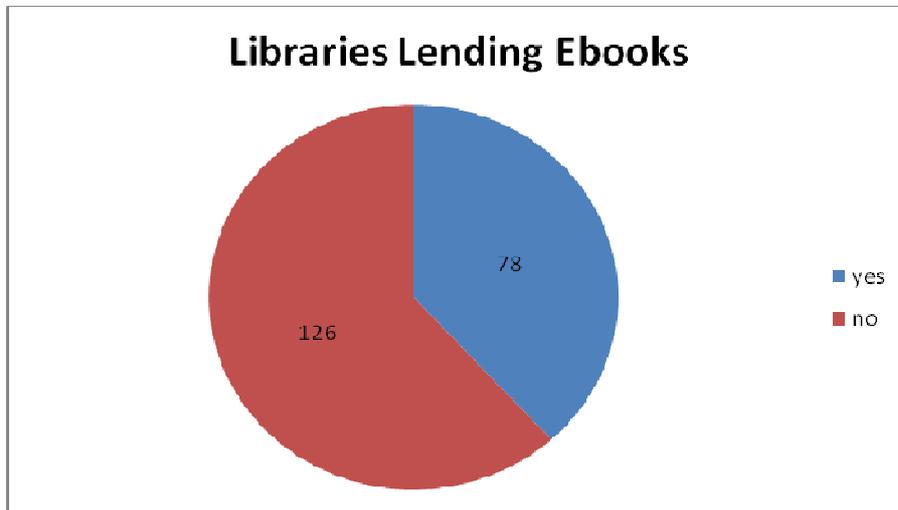


Fig.1. Libraries lending ebooks

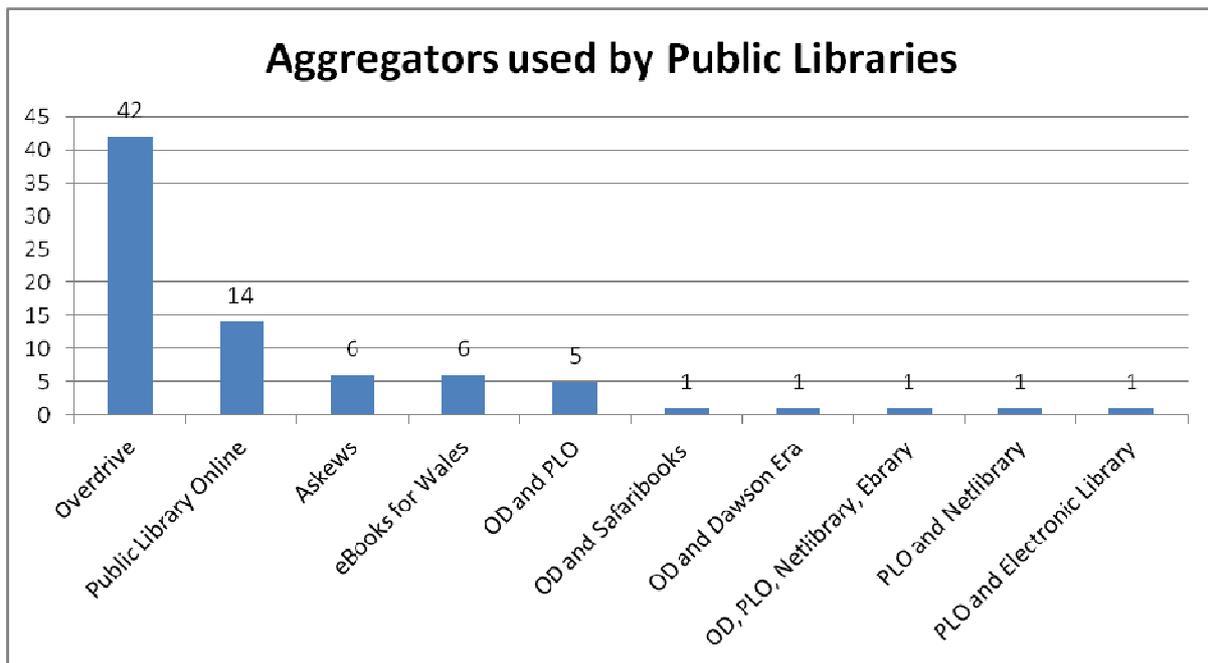


Fig.2. Aggregators used by public libraries

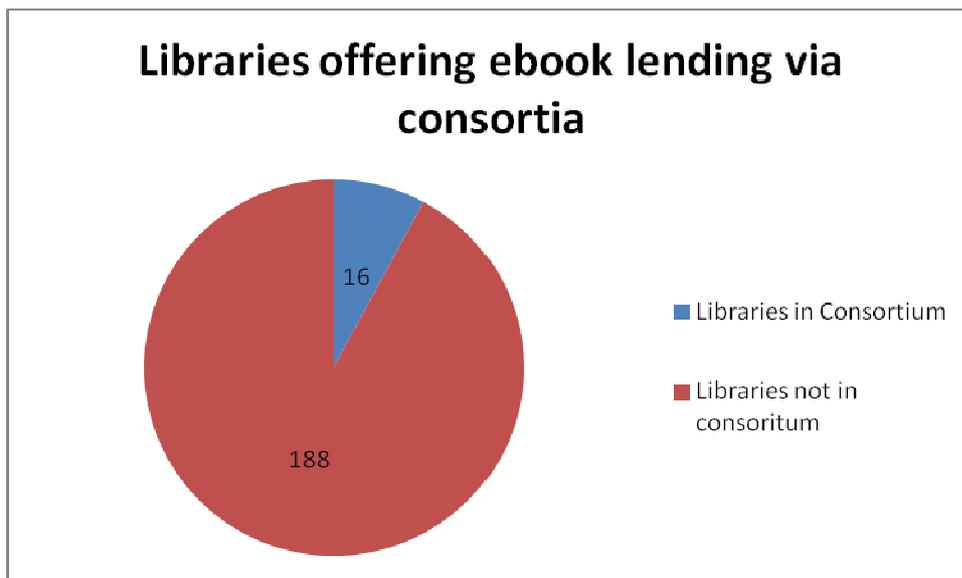


Fig.3. Libraries in consortia

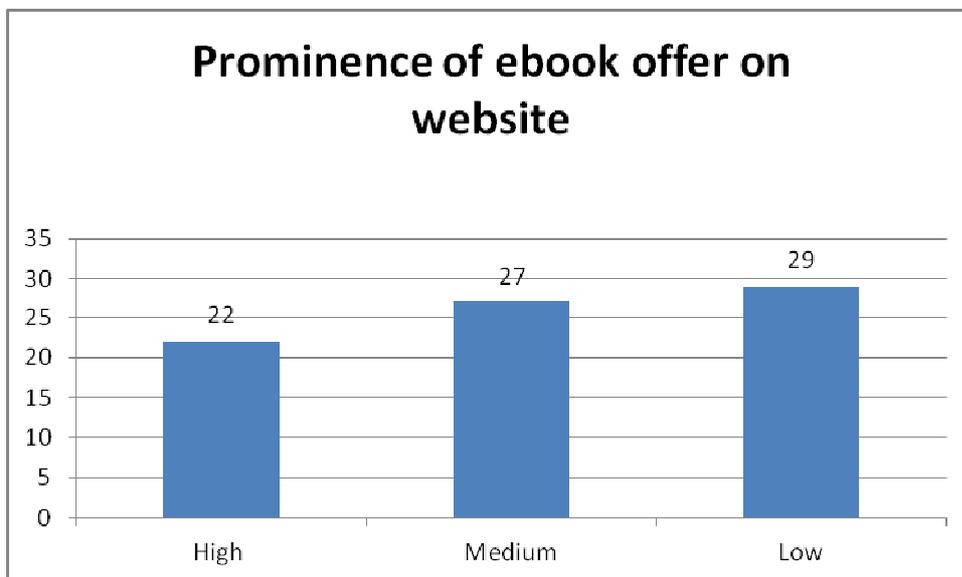


Fig.4. Prominence of ebook offer on website

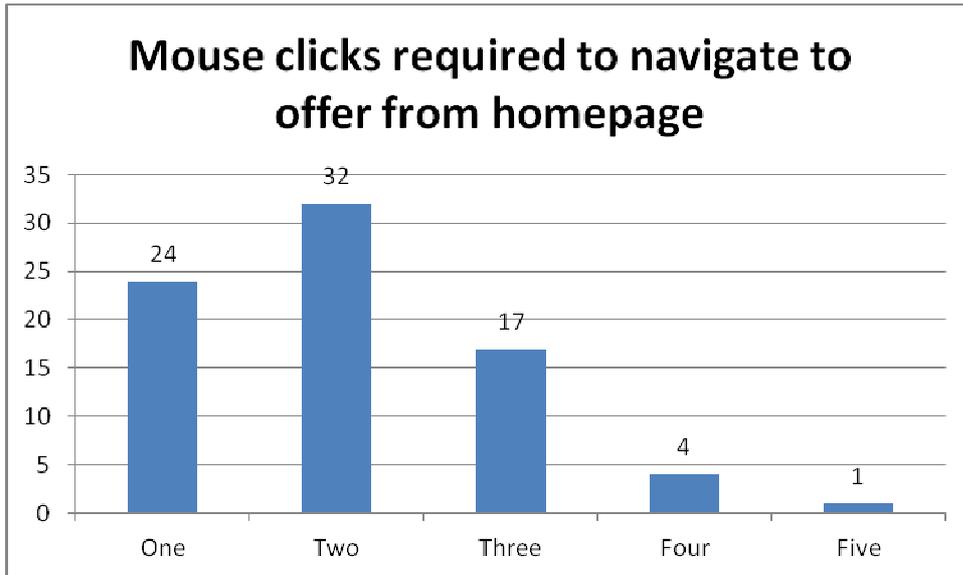


Fig.5. Clicks required to navigate to offer from homepage

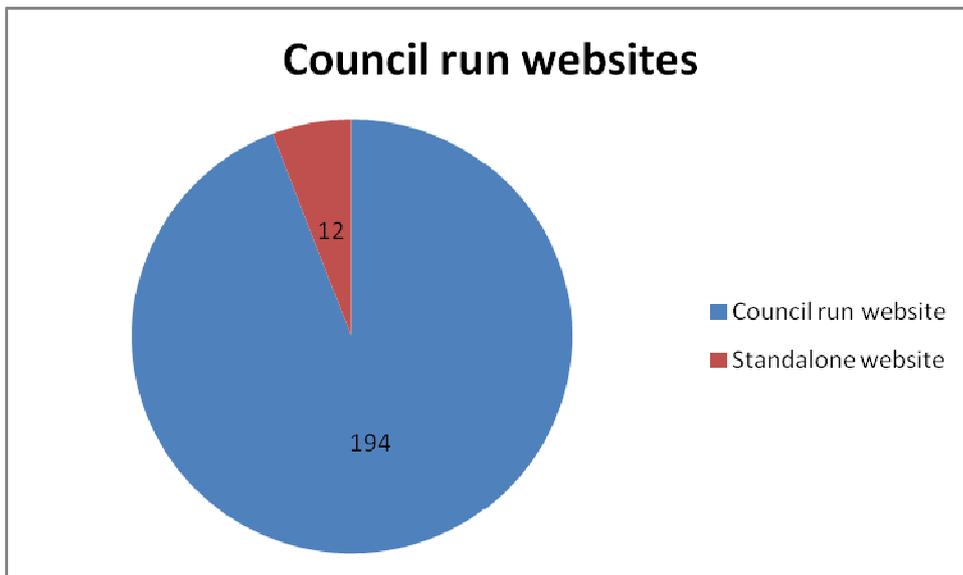


Fig.6. Council run websites

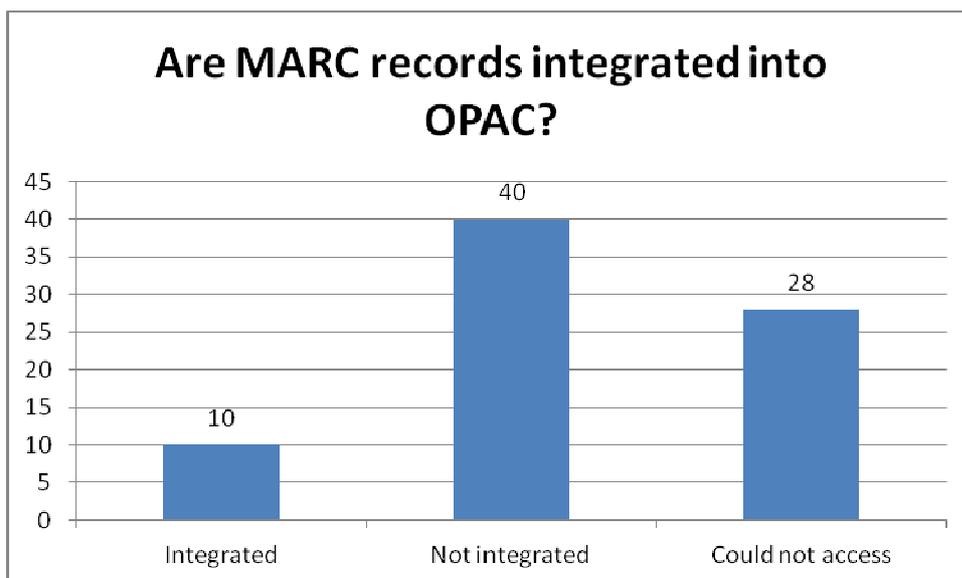


Fig.7. MARC record intergration

The data returned from the website survey indicates that as of September 2011 38% of 204 library [fig.1.] authorities offered some form of ebook lending service compared with 8% in November 2010 [25]. This is a significant increase in the number of library authorities offering an ebook lending service and suggests that ebook lending is on its way to becoming common practice in UK public libraries. The data also indicated that OverDrive was the clear market leader. Nine aggregators in total were involved with the 78 libraries offering an ebook lending service and 10 library authorities offered ebook lending from multiple aggregators [fig.2.]. Two consortia were identified in the study, Ebooks for Wales and the London Libraries Consortium [fig.3.], suggesting that while consortia are being formed in the UK the practice is not as common as in the US [19]. The number of ebooks on offer from the library authorities ranged from 128 to 6189. As it was not possible to gather data from all the libraries offering ebook lending in the website survey it is hoped that more details relating to the number of ebooks can be established in subsequent phases of this study. At the time of the survey no library authorities were offering ebook readers to their patrons. The survey also found that there was considerable variation in the terminology used by the library authorities to advertise their ebook lending offers, which confirms research undertaken by Buchanan and McMenemy [26], as well as considerable variation in the prominence [fig.4,5.] of the offer on the library homepage. This was anticipated by the researcher as the vast majority of websites are run by local councils [fig.6.] and are extremely diverse in terms of design and quality. In the 50 cases where it was possible to run tests only 10 library authorities had integrated MARC records from their ebook holdings into their OPACs [fig.7.] suggesting that there is an issue with MARC records for ebooks that will be further investigated in subsequent phases of this study.

6 Conclusion

The first phase of the study suggests that ebook lending is beginning to be become an established part of public libraries in the UK. The subsequent phases of research will take a deeper look at the way the service is managed and how it is viewed by both the administrators and users of the service. Anticipated outcomes of this research include gaining an understanding of current practice in the UK. By mapping the current state of play it is thought that a best practice model could be developed aiding public library practitioners wishing to introduce or optimise ebook lending from their library. This research has the potential of offering a great deal of knowledge exchange, both with librarians and with private enterprise seeking to provide third-party support to libraries offering ebook lending. It is anticipated that library users will benefit from the opportunity to air their opinions about ebooks.

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