

# Scholarly eBooks: Understanding the Return on Investment for Libraries



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PAPER

# Scholarly eBooks: Understanding the Return on Investment for Libraries

The Return on Investment (RoI) of scholarly eBooks in research and academic libraries can be difficult to determine, as the factors considered can vary from library to library, or even from person to person. RoI can be defined as a performance measure used to quantify and evaluate the efficiency of an investment in library resources or to compare efficiency among different investments. While it may seem simply to be a question of money in versus money out, the real difficulty of expressing the overall value of this resource for an institution comes from many contributing factors:

- ▶ Time saved by library staff and researchers
- ▶ Convenience of constant access and online search capabilities
- ▶ Effect on research output and teaching
- ▶ Physical space saved in the library by using electronic resources

RoI can be articulated by libraries to provide justification for ongoing development of collections within an institution and to ensure that current resources may be prioritized in terms of the value they provide to the institution as a whole.

In this report, Publishers Communication Group and Springer present a broad overview of the current state of eBooks valuation in academic and special libraries along with its trends and dominant challenges. In addition, this report addresses some ways in which the scholarly eBook landscape is likely to change in the future and the anticipated impact on measuring the RoI of eBooks throughout the library community

PCG has interviewed experts in the field as well as librarians taking on greater responsibilities for their institution's eBooks collections throughout the United States and Europe. Their opinions, along with information available from studies such as the Lib-Value Project and recent reports from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), have formed the basis of these view points. We thank the following contributors to the study for their invaluable input:

## Expert Contributors

- ▶ **Donald W. King**, Distinguished Research Professor, University of Tennessee and Bryant University
- ▶ **Sue Polanka**, Head, Reference and Instruction, Wright State University Libraries
- ▶ **Carol Tenopir**, professor at the School of Information Sciences at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and the Director of Research for the College of Communication and Information, and Director of the Center for Information and Communication Studies

## Librarian Contributors

- ▶ **Emre Hasan Akbayrak**, Associate Director, Middle East Technical University Library
- ▶ **Sandra Crumlish**, Manager, Corporate Medical Research Library, St. Jude Medical
- ▶ **Nancy Gibbs**, Head, Acquisitions Department, Duke University Libraries
- ▶ **Almudena Pascual del Pobil Valdenebro**, Head of Processes and Services, University Library, University of Seville
- ▶ **Tina Chrzastowski**, Chemistry Librarian and Professor of Library Administration, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Librarians continue to grow their eBook collections (see Figure 1), and while many are seeking to establish more formal systems of measurement to determine the value of these collections, it can seem a daunting task without precedents on which to base their decisions.

For librarians and administrators working to meet competing demands with limited resources, understanding the value of eBooks will continue to be of great importance for the foreseeable future. The ability to evaluate the



most cost-effective and beneficial scholarly content allows for librarians to prioritize resources for their patrons and demonstrate the ongoing value of the library for their institution. As with journals over the past decade, a phase of identifying common challenges and solutions for eBooks is necessary before they become a ubiquitous presence in libraries across the world. This process is well underway, as more and more librarians are now obtaining enough data about their institution's eBook usage to evaluate and inform their future purchasing decisions as well as any access issues that may arise. The significance of end user feedback will continue to grow in order to provide the context for eBook usage, and allow librarians to more deeply understand what this resource brings to their institutions. *But, the clearest path forward seems to indicate the need for publishers to offer COUNTER-compliant eBook usage statistics, including in-depth chapter-level evaluation, and greater flexibility in acquisition and access methods.*

The evidence of this study shows that the evaluation of the Return on Investment of eBooks is both a feasible and worthwhile endeavor. However, finding the best approach is the biggest challenge.

## The Short Story on eBooks

### The recent rise of eBooks

eBooks are an incredibly popular topic of conversation in the publishing industry, but only recently a reality for many library collections. This section is a very brief introduction to the current consumption and analysis of scholarly eBooks in libraries around the globe. Only in the last five to six years has the eBook trend grown significantly in the scholarly market, with Springer as the first to market with an STM eBooks product in 2006. However, eBooks are anticipated to become as hugely influential over print publications as eJournals have been in the last decade. In fact, the Middle East Technical University Library in Turkey, early adopters of the format, boasts a collection of more than 120,000 eBooks since beginning their collection in 2003.

During the annual Library Budget survey conducted in 2011 by Publishers Communication Group, 509 institutions were surveyed worldwide to uncover trends and make predictions for the future of institutional library budgets. Academic, medical, governmental and corporate libraries were included in the survey. Librarians were asked to share information concerning their overall book budgets, and in particular the proportion of that budget spent on electronic books, as shown in Figure 1.

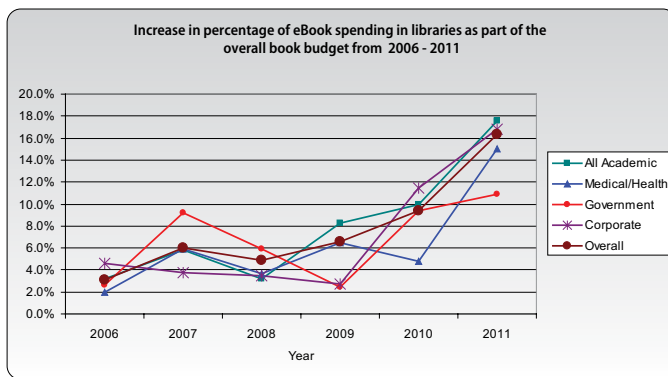


Figure 1: eBook spending as part of the overall book budget has been trending upward over the last year, most significantly in the academic and medical markets.

Source: 2012 Annual Library Budget Survey, Publishers Communication Group

Over the last 6 years, eBooks have experienced a general upward trend. 2010 to 2011 showed a significant increase in the percentage of funding spent on eBooks, with an overall jump from 9.4% to 16.4%. In particular, medical and health libraries increase from 4.8% in 2010 to an average of 15% of the institutional book budget dedicated to electronic books in 2011.

### Why and how libraries are purchasing eBooks?

eBooks offer a number of benefits to the library and library users, most obviously the added convenience for users who no longer need to travel to the library and the physical space saved by using electronic access instead of print books. Nancy Gibbs, head of the acquisitions department at Duke University Libraries, described this in a story of a traveling professor who was without print resources for a group of university students meeting him in mere days in China.

Situations such as this highlight the desire for libraries to provide access without the restrictions imposed by Digital Rights Management (DRM). This is critical in a lecture scenario that might, for example, require multiple users

► Without eBooks, we certainly wouldn't have gotten the books to the professor on time – and the students were able to use the electronic version of the text by the time they got to Beijing.

► Nancy Gibbs, Duke University

to access the content simultaneously. While DRM continues to be a hotly debated topic, some publishers such as Springer have decided not to impose it on any eBooks sold to library customers. DRM remains a top concern for librarians because of the potential impact on their patron's ability to benefit from library holdings.

Currently, acquisition of eBooks generally center around purchasing larger packages of titles or single titles based on faculty requests. Some librarians are also exploring options such as short-term loans and Demand-Driven Acquisitions (DDA) to limit the money going to less used content. Investigation of the best business models for eBooks will continue, by both publishers and librarians, for some time.

## What is the current state of eBook valuation?

As libraries adjust to shrinking budgets and strict demands on resources, the need to analyze the value of current resources, to predict the return from potential purchases, and to express this information to institutional administration becomes increasingly important. Much of the information readily available to librarians on the understanding of RoI for their resources, and in particular eBooks, is based on anecdotal evidence and the opinions of those closest to the users. Even at institutions with a robust library infrastructure, librarians are in some cases limited by the lack of data or data quality from only a few years of eBook usage. Most of the large-scale studies being conducted to establish the parameters of RoI focus on academic libraries, such as the IMLS-funded Lib-Value Project.

Our interviews showed that evaluating usage data is the most common and obvious method for evaluating RoI. Other factors affecting value such as time spent processing records and marketing eBooks to users are often more difficult to quantify. User surveys are a common tool for providing much more context for how library patrons are interacting with eBooks and their perceived value. Nearly all of the librarians contacted during this study expressed the importance of communicating with their users to learn more about who is using eBooks, when they are using them, and why.

In 2010, a report from the ACRL entitled “Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report” prepared by Megan Oakleaf outlines 10 areas in which academic libraries should seek to prove value and can be a guideline for academic libraries beginning to explore the value of eBooks:

- student enrollment
- student retention and graduation
- student success
- student achievement
- student learning
- student experience
- faculty research productivity
- faculty grants
- faculty teaching
- institutional reputation

Carol Tenopir and Tina Chrzastowski, along with researchers and librarians at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), Syracuse University, and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), are working to improve the understanding of library valuation methods and provide tools for librarians to more easily express the return on their resources, including eBooks. Known as the Lib-Value Project, their work is now in the third phase and will show the potential, as well as the difficulty, of this concept.

Phase two of the Lib-Value project specifically explored the benefits of library resources on the grant funding process, tying the amount of funds won from grant proposals to citations acquired from library electronic collections, as shown in figure 2.

“For every monetary unit invested in academic libraries, the parent institutions received a return on investment of between 15.54:1 to 0.64:1 in research grant income. In 6 of the 8 countries, the RoI for grants is more than 1:1. RoI for grants varies according to the goals of the institution (e.g., research-intensive vs. teaching-focused, or emphasis on science/technology/medicine vs. emphasis on social sciences and humanities) and the availability of competitive funding sources.” – excerpted from University Investment in the Library, Phase II: An International Study of the Library's Value to the Grants Process



	Univ. 1	Univ. 2	Univ. 3	Univ. 4	Univ. 5	Univ. 6	Univ. 7	Univ. 8
Percentage of faculty who say citations are important to grant awards	95.50%	94.90%	92.60%	95.10%	98.50%	94.40%	80.40%	95.85%
Percentage of proposals that include citations obtained through library	94.50%	99.80%	83.60%	90.00%	100.00%	95.70%	83.60%	95.53%
Average size of grant	101,596	134,416	780,174	#	#	123,731	#	139,537
Total library budget	19,429,400	12,671,725	192,634,000	#	#	79,096,878	#	14,192,000
Rol	3.44:1	15.54:1	1.90:1	13.16:1	0.75:1	1.31:1	0.64:1	1.43:1

Figure 2: A sample of the several factors included in RoI calculations for library resources as tied to university grant funding

Source: *University Investment in the Library, Phase II: An International Study of the Library's Value to the Grants Process, Library Connect*

On a smaller scale, numerous universities are embarking on studies to identify usage habits of their library patrons in part to pursue more informed eBook acquisition approaches. Duke University, located in Durham, North Carolina, has recently created an eBook strategy committee to investigate how the needs of users can be met by eBooks and establish a plan to move their collection forward. The Middle East Technical University also has a team in place studying eBook RoI in the library, and has done so since 2008.

Research to date validates the following ways in which library collections, including eBooks, support their institutions and show avenues of measuring the value of these resources. Some of these factors include:

- ▶ Support for collaborative and cross-disciplinary research - The enhanced discoverability enabled by eBooks – particularly in terms of the time it takes to find relevant research – supports the growing body of collaborative and multi-disciplinary work being done by researchers. Robust search tools across large bodies of content (particularly databases that include both books and journals) reveal the content of those works in a way not possible with print.
- ▶ Influence on grant applications - Research done by Judy Luther in 2008 as part of her Library Connect case study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and corroborated by Carol Tenopir in 2010 shows that grant applications with more citations to scholarly literature have a higher rate of success. Use of library collections is critical to researchers having a higher number of citations in their grant requests, and the ability to access electronic content in particular makes this possible.
- ▶ Increase on awareness in field of research –Additional findings with in the Library Connect study show that Faculty and researchers have reported in surveys that increased access to newly published research improves the quality of their teaching and research. Both improvements result in increased visibility for the institution and support future recruitment efforts of new students and faculty members.

## The Challenges to Measuring the Rol of eBooks

The initial challenge faced by institutions is that Return on Investment in the library context is difficult to define, and librarians may find it hard to agree on qualifying terms. Tina Chrzastowski explained that measuring RoI for eBooks has easier aspects, such as evaluating usage data as compared to price, but qualitative aspects provide a bigger challenge. Additionally, the relative newness of eBook collections means that the variety and flux of workflows and policies do not always allow for meaningful valuation.

### Purchasing and acquisition

A necessary first step when measuring RoI is calculating direct expenses to the library for eBooks, but even this step can present a challenge. It is essential not only to track the price tag of the resource, but also to consider the cost of the time needed to go from the point of purchase until a researcher can use an eBook. This includes time spent processing MARC records, setup and upkeep of discovery systems, marketing the resource, training users and troubleshooting patrons' questions. Without considering these factors, it is difficult to get a full picture of the cost to the library.

Another challenge during the acquisition phase for eBooks is the limited purchasing options available. Often, librarians are faced with either purchasing large subject collections of eBooks or choosing individual titles on behalf of faculty members. While the idea of easily obtaining subject collections appropriate to their researchers is appealing, it also presents challenges for some libraries. Without an option to choose the titles included in the collections, as is the case with many eBook collections to date, libraries may be left with many titles receiving

▶ We evaluate the usage statistics and research output (number of articles published) of METU during the year. Special reports are generated on an annual basis and submitted to the University Administration. We use the usage statistics and calculate the cost per article downloaded.

▶ Emre Hasan Akbayrak, Middle East Technical University Library

► It would be very helpful if more publishers were COUNTER-compliant and included titles that receive zero-use. This would simplify at least one aspect of measuring the value to libraries.

► **Tina Chrzastowski**, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

► Having an aggregated 'snapshot' view of usage would help tremendously – to see how long users are in an eBook, if they're highlighting sections or taking notes, how they're searching – it would give us a much better idea of what our users appreciate about eBooks.

► **Nancy Gibbs**, Duke University

► Because they're electronic, people have higher expectations of the data available for eBook use. We really have a limited knowledge of how print books are performing in our libraries compared to what we know for electronic resources.

► **Sue Polanka**, Wright State University

little or no use. The Middle East Technical University Library has found this to be the case, and looks forward to when they might be able to see more flexibility on the acquisitions end. With such extensive collections, it may be a question of greater staff time and effort needed to be spent on marketing the breadth of titles to faculty or researchers. On the other hand, evaluation, selection and processing of individual title acquisitions can be laborious and inefficient. *More and more libraries are exploring Demand-Driven Acquisitions (DDA) and short-term loans; the librarians who commented on this felt that it is still too early to determine if this offers a greater RoI for libraries than other business models, but believe it is important to explore all options.*

## The case for consistency

Usage statistics form the basis for understanding RoI. In the case of eBooks, there is a significant lack of consistency across vendors. While the majority of journals adhere to COUNTER standards, the bulk of available eBooks are using proprietary, platform-specific measures for usage statistics. This means, as Sue Polanka from Wright State University points out, that eBooks from the same publisher but supplied through different sources – for instance, the Ohio LINK Electronic Book Center and the Springer site – will provide different sets of use data. Librarians are currently comparing usage by hand, a labor-intensive process requiring substantial patience.

Chrzastowski also explained that if publishers are part of COUNTER it is critical that “zero use titles” are tracked because excluding them skews the statistics and ultimately changes the information the librarians are using.

Along with usage statistics, the variety of user interfaces affects RoI because of the time spent by librarians to first learn and then train users on these resources. A core set of shared functionality would be welcome by librarians, but a challenge for publishers looking to continually improve the user experience.

## Understanding user interaction

eBooks are used much more for individual chapters rather than an entire book, but current search mechanisms and usage statistics often do not reflect this. SpringerLink is among those that currently allow for this, but many publishers have yet to implement search functions to this level. Having a good way to search books at both the chapter level as well as by title is critical for allowing users to optimize eBook formats.

Usage statistics also need to reflect more context of how users are obtaining content on the chapter level. In our interviews, librarians expressed the need to understand the context of usage -- the “how” and “when” as much as the “what.” That information could range from where users are discovering the content, to how much time was spent interacting with the book, or even to the type of tools users are engaging once they are interacting with the content online.

Information is also lost when individuals print sections of eBooks, making usage virtually impossible to track beyond the point of download. Ironically, while Digital Rights Management (DRM) may offer a solution for this issue in part by preventing or restricting the amount of printing that can occur or the ability to copy and paste the content, it also potentially limits the amount of usage for those resources. The RoI for an eBook without DRM is generally believed to be greater than an eBook with usage restrictions, but the lack of print usage statistics? remains frustrating.

## The evolving role of librarians

With the move to electronic content of all kinds, a shift has occurred in the role of librarians themselves. For instance, much more time is being spent on technical issues than 10 years prior. Librarians are now required to have computer expertise, and are charged with training their patrons on how to best make use of these electronic resources to maintain the value of the content.

To establish the value of their resources, librarians are also doing much more marketing of their offerings, with assistance from publishers providing advertisements for library websites, posters for the library, and copy for emails to faculty members. Pushing users to focus on library resources rather than a simple internet search is necessary not just to ensure usage but to encourage efficient, authoritative and precise results.

Finally, the difficulty of proving the value of the move to electronic content also stems from a lack of use data from print resources by which to compare. While print usage can be tracked by number of checkouts, the comparison to electronic usage data is difficult. Sue Polanka at Wright State University points out that even knowing this information does not tell us how the book was used, or how much of the book was used.

## The Future of RoI and eBooks

The movement to demonstrate the value of libraries to their institutions is unlikely to go away. It behooves librarians to do more than study usage of materials and to move towards having more comprehensive RoI research available to fully understand their library's value, to inform acquisition decisions, and to express this to institutional administrators.

## Rapid growth

eBooks are relatively new, compared with 15 years of eJournals, but are likely to continue a rapid rate of adoption in the coming years. The industry is in its early development though, and it will likely be a few years before the percentage of book collections have migrated from print to electronic at the same level journals have. Once this happens, faculty and student usage is likely to increase dramatically.

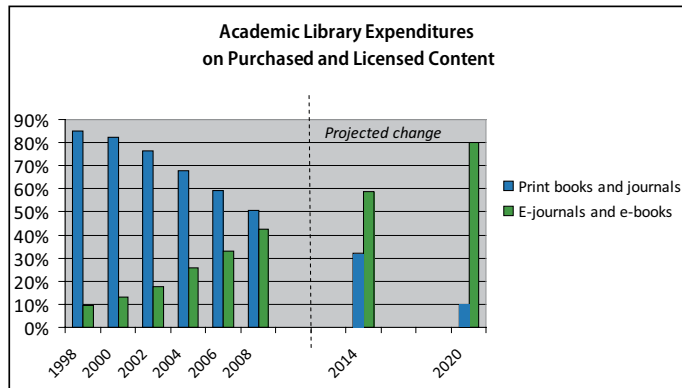


Figure 3: Projected change of academic library expenditures from print to electronic content by 2020

Source: *E-books and E-Journals in US University Libraries: Current Status and Future Prospects*, James Michalko, OCLC Research. Derived by Constance Malpas, OCLC Research, from US Dept of Education, NCES, Academic Libraries Survey, 1998-2008

## Learning from the past

Many of the issues outlined in this study also existed in the early days of eJournals, and it took the industry a period of time to resolve them. For example, when journals first started appearing in electronic form, usage data was difficult to analyze and the standards for COUNTER-compliant statistics did not exist. It took several years to develop consensus around what statistics should be collected, and the first guidelines were released in 2003. The technology then had to evolve to standardize usage statistic reporting to meet the requirements of COUNTER, followed by the development of systems that could aggregate statistics from different platforms. As Figure 4 shows below, eBook usage on SpringerLink has increased dramatically since 2005 and will likely continue to grow rapidly as factors such as COUNTER-compliance across publishers causes more libraries to begin eBook collections for their institutions.

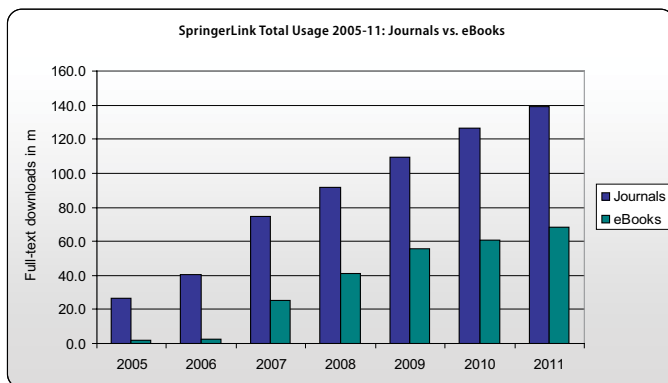


Figure 4: eBook usage on SpringerLink has increased dramatically over the last 6 years to about 68.5 million downloads in 2011 and will likely continue rapid growth over the next few years  
Source: SpringerLink data 2011

As publishers move more extensively toward making their academic books available online, they will get better at complying with the COUNTER guidelines for eBooks, which is essential for librarians to be able to adequately demonstrate their value to the university. Additionally, librarians will need to explore the most beneficial way of measuring usage – whether it is by subject collection, title, or chapter. General consistency of platforms will be a critical factor in how quickly librarians are able to find and analyze data for their institutions, and will also allow for users to more quickly accomplish their research needs. Currently 37 online content providers (publishers and aggregators) are compliant with the COUNTER Project's Code of Practice for Books and Reference Works: Release 1 according to the online register. Additionally, the COUNTER Project has recently published Release 4 of the COUNTER Code of Practice for e-Resources as of June 2012, which updates protocols for all electronic content, including both journals and books. Samples of the updates to these protocols that affect the reporting on eBook usage include:

► Ideally, we'd like to know how users are interacting with the eBook, whether it be printing, downloading, clicking through hyperlinks, reading a specific number of pages, or searching. Understanding how users are consuming and interacting with content can help us with purchasing decisions and interface design.

► Sue Polanka, Wright State University

- A requirement that the type of Section covered in a book in the report by a particular vendor be defined
- A new set of optional usage reports, the 'Title' reports that enable the reporting of usage of full-text items in journals, books and reference works that are published on the same platform in a single COUNTER report.

As COUNTER continues to update their guidelines for working with electronic books, it is critical that publishers actively adjust their usage statistics in compliance with the code as well as offer feedback to the organization to improve the standards across the industry.

## A deeper understanding of users

Publishers and librarians must work together to demonstrate the value of eBooks to potential users, and to encourage new methods of research that uncover their benefits. Gathering feedback from users via surveys will continue to be important and will likely be the best method of gaining a deep understanding of usage habits. Trends and underlying problems, such as whether users of eBooks are reading and searching at the chapter level or title level, can be uncovered through these types of evaluations. This contextual information on usage allows for librarians to recognize what type of data could be most beneficial to evaluate particular resources, which can in turn be fed back to publishers and eventually allow for specific changes to be made, such as increased granularity of usage data.

Additionally, as the number of mobile readers and devices increases, it is critical that eBooks remain functional across the spectrum of products available to users. The growth and value of eBooks would be limited substantially should users become restricted by their reading device, and libraries would be required to weigh the format against the content of the book itself before making a purchase.

## Growing together

Understanding the Return on Investment and the user interaction with eBooks is equally important for publishers and librarians. Working together to improve these methods of analysis and adjusting to meet the needs of users will be critical in moving forward quickly.

Publishers may need to assist librarians in educating their patrons, and must continue to enhance their eBook platforms to make content accessible and discoverable, particularly at the chapter level, through enhanced contextual search. eBook value becomes much more apparent to end users when platforms have a high level of functionality.

## Conclusion

The evidence points to good long-term value for eBooks as an important tool for high quality research output and institutional benefit. Tina Chrzastowski in her 2011 paper *Assessing the Value of Ebooks to Academic Libraries and Users* notes that eBooks at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign offer specific benefits to UIUC library including:

- Low cost for acquisition of content
- Low cost-per-use
- Require less library staff time to lend and preserve
- Require less space for storage in the physical library
- Take less time for users to access (24/7 access from virtually anywhere)
- Enable higher usage per book than print
- Allow a broader collection of books

In order for librarians to inform their acquisitions strategy and show the value of eBooks to their administrations, it is important to stay current with the research coming out of projects in process right now, particularly the Lib-Value Project and Elsevier's Library Connect research. Being prepared to proactively reference this literature when challenged by administrators about how much value the library collection – particularly its electronically delivered content – brings to its faculty and students as well as its global reputation will be valuable. Faculty and student surveys done regularly over the next few years as eBook content grows will help library administrators better manage its services and acquisition of content to fit the needs of its community. Supplying this information back to the publishers will also allow for a response to user needs and improve the ability of librarians to identify and obtain the data for comprehensive RoI analysis.

Understanding best practices for tracking Return on Investment – and thankfully very high quality research is being done in this area – will be the critical point of action. In addition, the confidence that studying and understanding the value of these resources is a possible and worthwhile endeavor will allow librarians to educate themselves and their administrators to move forward with the new wave of library advancements.

Authors: Kate Lara, Janet Fisher, Chris Mirakian of Publishers Communication Group



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