Art E-book Usage Patterns at an Academic Library

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Introduction

The acquisition of e-books at many academic libraries has been increasing over the years, and in some cases, may exceed the number of print monographs purchased. E-books for the visual arts may present special challenges due to a number of issues, such as usability and availability. I was interested in reviewing usage data for art e-books at VCU Libraries, and making comparisons with the available print collection.

Virginia Commonwealth University, an urban public research university located in Richmond, Va., enrolls over 31,000 students and offers over 200 programs. It includes the School of the Arts, which consists of more than 3,000 students and 25 degree programs. VCU Libraries makes available print and electronic resources to support these programs, providing access to over three million volumes, including approximately one million physical book titles and over one million e-book titles.

Overview of Art E-book Collection

The collection of art e-books at VCU Libraries consists of a combination of firm order titles and subscription packages held by the library, along with a number of consortium subscription collections. For the purposes of this study, I limited the scope of the art collection to analyze to the Library of Congress Classification areas of N-NX (Fine Arts) and TR (Photography). The number of total e-book volumes in this collection is 13,421, representing 10,009 unique titles.


Call number range percentage for e-books
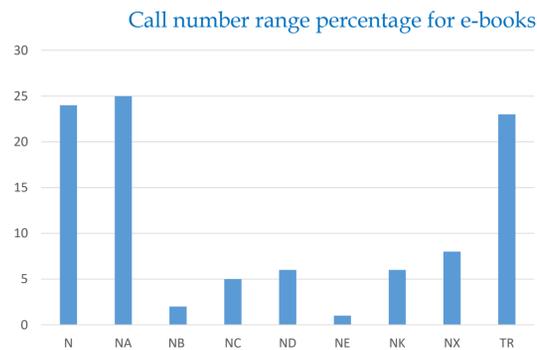
The majority of the titles in the entire art e-book collection are classed in N, NA and TR, with fewer titles in the ranges of NB-NX. This distribution is more likely a reflection of the large subscription packages to which the library subscribes, rather than firm order purchases of e-books. It may also be a result of the availability or unavailability of certain subjects in e-book format.

Usage data

Using available data from the Ebook Central Academic Complete (subscription) and Ebook Central Perpetual collections showed that between 2016-2018, there were 1,801 reported uses for art e-books in this collection, representing 454 unique titles. While there was some usage data available for 2016, the data mostly covered the years 2017-2018. During this time, the number of uses in 2018 was almost double the number from 2017.

Top five e-books used:

- Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521-1821
- Professional Practice for Interior Designers
- Photography and Its Origins
- Art History and Visual Studies in Europe : Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks
- A Companion to Media Authorship

Call number range percentage for e-books used
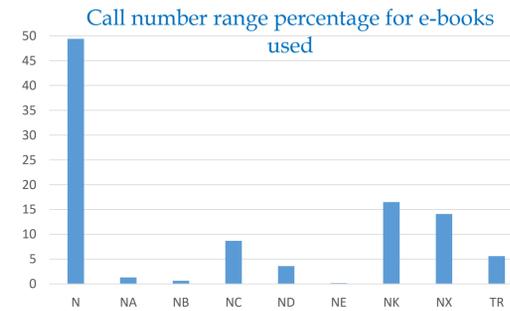
Usage statistics for titles used	
Average number of uses per title	3.9
Average number of uses per title for firm order titles	7.6
Average number of uses per title for subscription titles	3.4
Percentage of instances book was downloaded	5.2
Average number of pages read per use	14.9
Average number of pages printed per use	10.2

Print Collection Circulation

For comparison, the number of print titles in the art collection in the N-NX range and TR range is 108,917. The total number of print volumes that circulated in this range between 2016-2018 was 19,942. Adjusting for titles with multiple volumes and titles used over different years, the number of unique titles circulated during that time period was 16,003. This represents approximately 15 percent of the art print collection.

Circulation rates (not including in-house loans) for the years 2016-2018 for the art print titles showed some decrease in rates.

Print circulation 2016-2018
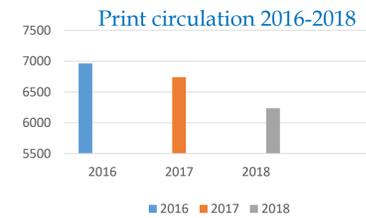
Top five print titles circulated:

- Art history / Marilyn Stokstad
- Theories and documents of contemporary art : a sourcebook of artists' writings
- Art since 1900 : modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism
- The diary of Joseph Farington
- Artistic anatomy

A comparison of the call number ranges for all art print titles versus the circulated print titles showed a large use of titles in the N, NC and NX ranges.

Call number range for print (available) / overall percentage

Call number range for circulated print / overall percentage
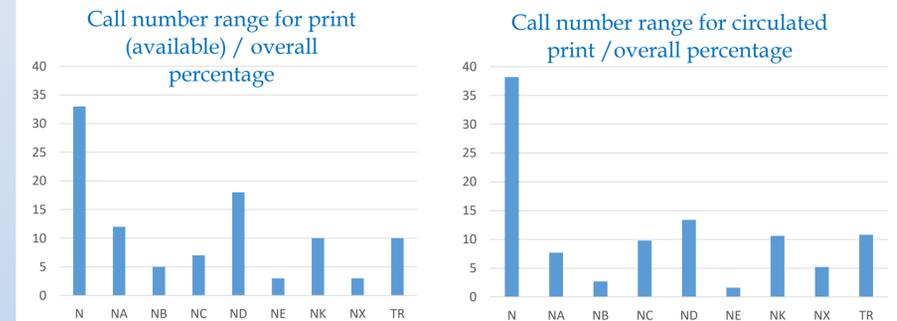
Future Directions

While this was a small analysis, it did provide some interesting data. It appears that art e-book usage is increasing, while art print book circulation may be decreasing. It was interesting to see usage data for downloading, online viewing and printing, and this could be used to inform platform options. It was encouraging to note the higher use of purchased e-book titles. The availability of e-book titles in various subject area could also be examined in more detail. It would be helpful to expand a future analysis to include other areas in the arts, such as museum studies, drama and crafts, to get a better picture of how the art e-book and print collections are being used. By incorporating more vendor data in the catalog, it would also be possible to expand the analysis to include more collections.