



[Information provision via video](#)

[Integrating the LMS and VLE](#)

[iPads for roving enquiries](#)

[Library apps on the move](#)

[User-centred content via Apple](#)

welcome



This issue's special focus is on mobile devices in libraries and education, complemented by a roster of articles across other leading edge and established technology in use worldwide.

Warm regards,

Catherine Dhanjal, Managing Editor

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03



08



18



26



30

contents

News

Money back for old IT equipment; portrait photograph exhibition; digital preservation	3
Umbrella conference July 2011	4
BFI releases: sex and women's place in society	5

Reviews

Book review: Health Informatics for Medical Librarians	6
Book review: Books, Bytes and Business	8
Book review: Preparing Collections for Digitization	9
Product review: Laplink DiskImage	10

Features: apps & mobile focus

Roving enquiries: smartphones versus iPads	12
Apple's lessons in improving user experience	16
Mobile web goes head-to-head with apps	18

Features

LMS-VLE integration explored	21
Library information provision via video conference	24
Reading lists & VLEs: integration for improved referencing	26
Centralised terminal management using Linux open source	30

Technology roundup

eBooks killing physical tomes? Monitor the online backchannel; agree meeting dates online; automatic updates on website changes; permanent archives to web material for longer lasting citations	33
--	----

and finally...

Coming soon; cartoon	36
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Mobile web vs apps: what's right for your user?



With the advent of ever more sophisticated mobile devices, an increasing number of library users are 'going mobile', accessing the web and apps (AKA 'downloadable applications') whilst on the move. Most phones sold in the UK today may be classed as smartphones, and this combines with the growing profile of

other portable web-accessible devices to give libraries pause for thought; the way in which users are able to access our resources has changed, albeit with some demographic differences. Jon Fletcher examines the way that, despite the perceived ubiquity of the 'all-powerful app' in advertising campaigns (seemingly implying that everyone owns an iPhone), there is much for each library to think about before deciding their own course of action. After all, before you take your service to the user, you'd better make sure they're going to be there to find and use it...

Background: the UK mobile devices and apps market

May 2010 saw over 50m mobile phones in use in the UK, with an estimated 91 percent of mobile phones operational in August 2010 allowing some type of mobile web access (Ofcom, 2010). Usage of mobile web services is not a uniform phenomenon: whilst around 40 percent of 16-24 year olds access the internet on their mobiles daily, this number falls to 23 percent of mobile users overall, and the same survey found 56 percent of users profess to not being actively concerned with access to the mobile web (Intel, 2011). Nevertheless, this still puts almost half of the sample group as being interested in web access, and one only has to combine this with the surge in tablet PC sales (BBC News, 2011) to realise that there is an even bigger audience for mobile information

and services¹. This is a very broadbrush survey — local demographics need to be considered by each library service, and not all users will have the data plans allowing them to browse mobile webpages for free without WiFi. Overall, however, the fact remains that libraries should be catering for this market.

Choosing between apps or mobile webpages: what are you trying to deliver?

When considering which path your library should take, it is essential to consider the pros and cons of each approach, due to the fundamental differences between these offerings:

1. Mobile webpages

Brenann (2010: 76) points out that mobile webpages are largely the same as all other websites, and can, like 'regular' webpages, be built using (X)HTML and CSS and run from hardware traditionally used to host websites. However, variations in device specifications mean that the web might be accessed by everything from devices using WAP ('Wireless Application Protocol' - the most basic form of mobile web access) to those which fully support the latest versions of (X)HTML and CSS. Mobile webpages should also bear in mind that only more recent devices tend to support technologies such as Javascript and Flash (the latter will not run on iPhones or iPads), which have traditionally been writ large in web design. Pages should therefore try to adopt some manner of 'graceful degradation', where bottom-end users can access basic content whilst higher-end users are offered premium-level features as appropriate (Brenann, 2010: 77). This is likely to become a more unified field in the future (cf. Arthur, 2011; Oshiro, 2010), with partial - and increasing - support for HTML5 on all major mobile browsers bar Microsoft's Windows Phone 7, which currently does not support it. Those concerned with tracking site usage can still use tools such as Google Analytics, though some additional code will need to be inserted into webpages (cf. Google Code Labs, 2011).



Illustration: © Sumerik_s | istockphoto.com

One correctly built site can certainly cater for a majority of mobile devices, and, whilst users will require access to a web connection to access these pages, many libraries will offer some form of WiFi for in-house users, thereby allowing many users with web access to at least use these devices for free whilst onsite (Brenann, 2010: 79).

Ultimately, there is no way to ensure that the site you build works on all devices — whilst the operating systems may be a known (though ever-evolving) quantity, the fact is that different handsets will support different versions of operating systems and will have different functionality. Universal functionality cannot therefore be promised. However, mobile webpages can be tested without the need to purchase multiple physical devices, with tools like Firefox's user agent

- ▶ extension allowing your web browser to access a webpage as if it was a specific mobile browser (others also exist); for greater accuracy, there are a number of emulators available which let you test your page on generic versions of operating systems (Brenann, 2010: 78-9). Such techniques can allow you to test how your pages, images and text (etc.) are likely to appear on different phones, and allow for maximum usability.

2. Apps

In contrast to the possibilities for the mobile web, the app market is a fragmented one. Phones capable of downloading apps over the mobile web (via contract or WiFi) must get these from app stores, though these are not cross-compatible; each operating system may only run its own apps. The six largest are as shown (Distimo, 2011: 3).

App store name	Platform	Manufacturer	Number of apps (approx)
Apple App Store (iPhone)	iOS	Apple	300,000
Google Android Market	Android	Various	150,000
Ovi Store	Symbian	Nokia	25,000
App World	Blackberry OS	RIM (Research in Motion)	20,000
Windows Phone 7 Marketplace	WP7 (Windows Phone 7)	Various	10,000

Table: Distimo, 2011

Fourth quarter sales of smartphones in 2010 gave Symbian a 37.6 percent share of the worldwide market, followed by Android at 22.7 percent, Blackberry/RIM at 16 percent, iOS at 15.7, Windows Mobile handsets at 4.2 percent and other operating systems (including WP7) at 3.8 percent (Gartner, 2011). However, this is complicated by the fact that Nokia has now abandoned Symbian (cf. Sorrel, 2011) in place of WP7 (the latest incarnation of Windows Mobile), which is likely to suddenly push Android into the lead and iOS (given recent growth) into second place. Worldwide, the current momentum is with Android and iOS, though WP7 might soon become a real player with its Nokia partnership (and

Samsung are due to launch their own Bada operating system later in 2011). Some cross-platform app stores will actually offer apps for different systems (see list at Wikipedia, 2011), though these app stores are smaller and far less visible to the user.

Overall, apps can offer the same information as webpages, though their key advantage is that they *can* be used offline, although in practice many apps use live data from the web and require a web connection to function optimally. An effective app can do far more than a webpage: built for a specific operating system, this can access the advanced hardware common to devices running this operating system (e.g. microphones, cameras, etc.). This is only necessary, of course, if your library app needs to use this functionality to run. With most relying on RSS feeds and other web-harvested information, it is more likely that a library app will utilise some basic information (in textual/image format) offline and will require a web connection to connect to dynamic, up-to-date data.

Assessing the above information, it is clear that apps which are limited to specific devices will exclude many users who might wish to access this content, though they themselves



can be fairly easy to build (depending on the complexity of the app). Sites such as PhoneGap (2011) allow an app to be designed using standard (X)HTML and CSS before being converted into the format required for uploading to an app store; the same file can therefore be used multiple times. The app then simply needs to be uploaded (along with accompanying explanatory information) and advertised appropriately in order to be located and downloaded. Be aware that an

operating system such as iOS or Symbian will require a developer's licence to be bought before content can be uploaded to app store, whether or not you wish to charge for the app which the end user will download. It must also be borne in mind that app stores will allow users to rate your content and that this can be seen by all who are interested in downloading your app — a few negative comments can act as a big turn-off to prospective users, so it pays to get your production and promotion right from the very start. So how do you get users to download these apps? Effective advertising will be needed to ensure that users know how to find your app, know what it is and also understand the benefits of downloading it... without this process being followed to completion, your app is just a resource which is never used.

Illustration: © treena beena #19739208 | Fotolia.com

► What have others done, and what can work for you?

Libraries which have taken the lead in this department have taken both mobile web and app routes (cf. Library Success, 2011). Accessibility is always a concern either way, though the major operating systems offer APIs (Application Programming Interfaces) and guidance concerned with accessibility, making neither mobile websites nor apps preferable in this respect. One can find both library-specific apps (e.g. Santa Clara County Library, 2011) as well as libraries which have been featured within a larger institutional/organisational app (e.g. ODU Mobile, 2011). It will vary from library to library as to which approach is both allowed and encouraged, though (if the end goal is to be downloaded) either approach can work. Apps have the great advantage that information which is unlikely to need updating often (such as basic

contents, maps and location information) can be included. Other libraries, mindful of the fact that users will need a live data connection to access up-to-the minute information, have taken the mobile-friendly website route (e.g. Simmons Library, 2011) which is a practical way to offer dynamic content. Whilst some libraries (albeit a minority) have taken the approach of making their catalogues fully mobile-friendly, none have tried to put an entire catalogue into an app, due to the sheer complexity of this task. In contrast, websites can be bookmarked and returned to fairly easily from a mobile browser, though they lack the convenience of having a clickable icon which lives permanently on a mobile device. Those wanting to use a mobile site have at least once extra click to make, which – for some – may be one click too many. Ultimately, the dream solution is perhaps to deliver a basic

app which can offer the user some functionality off-line but will also (subject to data connection) point the user to detailed and live information on a website, which is likewise available for those using mobile browsers. If this is not an option, each library service must decide which approach is likely to gain them the most traffic. Whether your service chooses the mobile web or app route, it is important to ensure that you make it as simple as possible for your users to achieve their information goals, thereby gaining maximum user satisfaction and interaction from your efforts. ■

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¹ it is hard to find exact UK stats for tablet PC sales (these are generally amalgamated with desktop PC figures), though all indications are that sales are growing in the UK*

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coming soon...

- Mash-ups
- Blogging platforms for library software
- Visualisation tools
- FourSquare and Facebook places
- News
- Reviews
- Technology roundup

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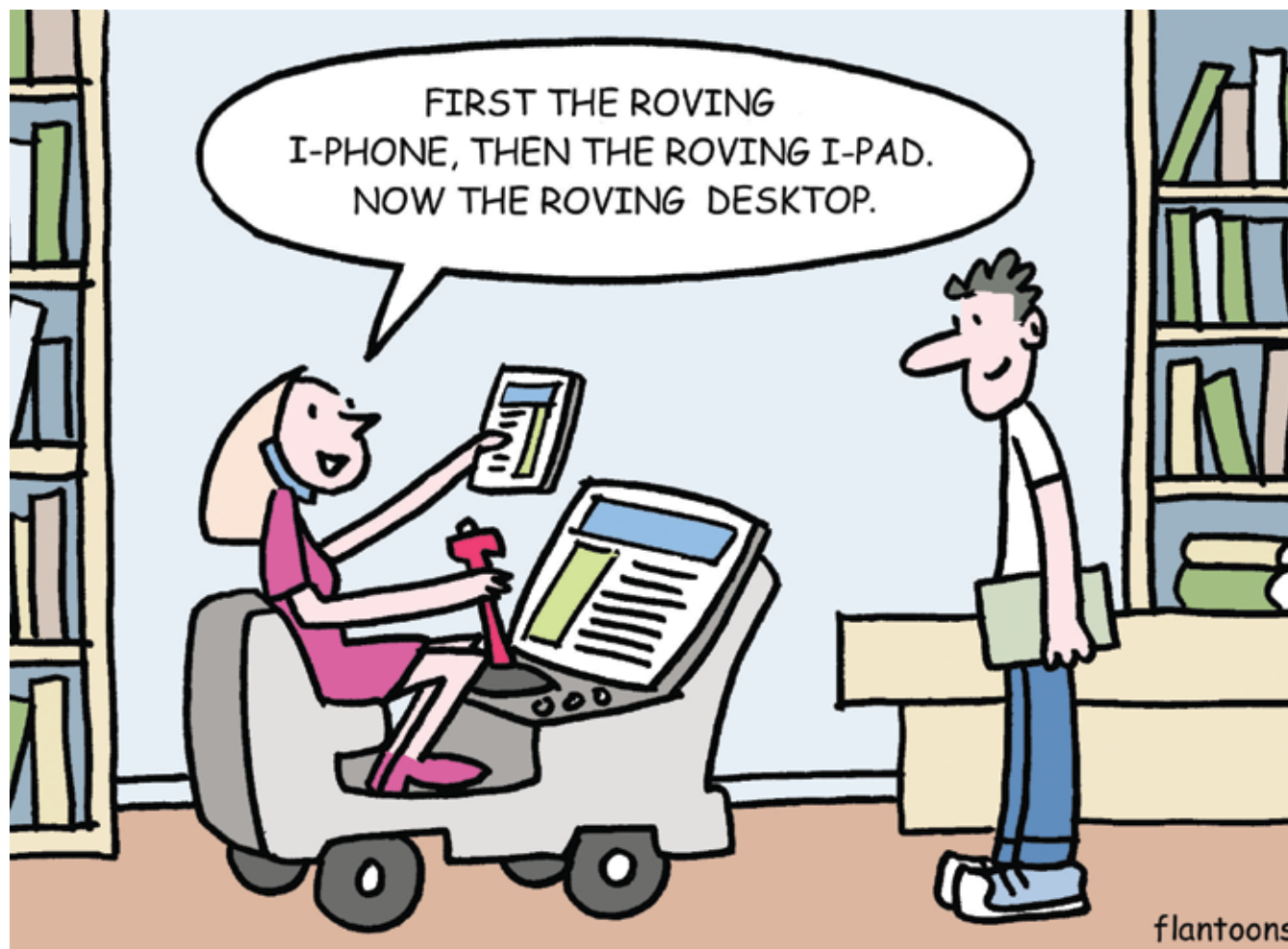
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