
Ebook QR code project

Jim Green
Digital Library and Marketing Assistant
Forum Library
Academic Services
University of Exeter
j.l.green@exeter.ac.uk

As an exercise in embracing technology alongside the promotion of library electronic resources, we embarked upon a project to link our digital collections with the physical shelf space during the summer months of 2012. The project involved the creation of shelf markers which advertise the availability of corresponding ebook versions on the shelf alongside the physical editions, complete with QR code links to entries on the library catalogue. We had previously introduced QR codes around the library as links to the library catalogue or help resources, and were keen to extend what we could do with mobile access to resources. Whether or not the QR aspect of the project was a success, the promotion of our ebook collection was intended to increase usage and thus value for money, with the added benefit of reducing pressure on finite physical copies of popular titles. It was decided early on that we would restrict the project to those titles held in our short-loan collection, given the high levels of demand on these titles and a manageable sample size.



The first step was experimenting with what the markers would look like. We mocked up a few

designs, including a shelf-talker which hung below the shelf, removable flat plastic and card dividers, and DVD boxes with inserts. The final marker was selected because of its ability to be attached to the shelf and easily read without being removed – hopefully warding off any opportunistic theft while remaining accessible. The large surface area of the marker allowed us to include the QR code along with author, title, class mark

and front cover image, succinctly explaining what the marker was for.

In creating the QR code, the main problem we encountered was with authentication. Some suppliers allowed the standard SingleSignOn intercept when following the QR code and brought up the ebook with no issues. Others reverted back to a generic homepage which encouraged another search by the user, others rejected authentication completely – not the idea of streamlined access we had envisaged. Our solution was to point the QR link to the listing on our library catalogue in all cases, to ensure users got to where they needed to be in the minimum of clicks with a standard approach.

Once design was finalised, the next step was to pull off a list of those ebooks with physical copies located in our short-loan collection. This was easier said than done, although we now have a list of all such titles which can be updated as new books are purchased or titles are moved in and out of the collections. This list includes sections for the retention of generated QR codes and book covers, providing a record of where we are in the process and creating an archive of material that can be referenced and edited if content or links change in the future.



We have since put in place procedures for ongoing generation of QR codes, construction of markers and the addition of new ebook titles to the current list. As additional titles are added to or removed from the short-loan collection, the list is updated as appropriate.

Once a fair number of markers had been produced and placed in situ, we conducted a brief survey to gather some initial feedback from users. The response to the markers was generally positive, with a few unexpected conclusions. From a sample size of 17 students, responding to a survey undertaken in term-time in the short-loan section:

- Thirteen students regularly or sometimes use ebook versions during their studies, with 16 students definitely, very likely, or likely to use ebooks in the future.
- Seven students own a mobile device with a QR reader and sometimes scan QR codes, while 7 students also own a mobile device with a QR reader but 'never' use it. Three students did not own a QR code reader.
- Of the 13 students who had accessed ebook versions, 7 had previously accessed them via a mobile device, and 6 had not. Of those who had, 3 were likely to do so again.
- Of 10 students who had never used a mobile device to access ebooks, 7 would like to try and 3 were not interested.
- Three of the 17 students have used the QR codes on the markers to access an ebook, with 2 of them likely to do so again. Fourteen students had not used the QR codes, with 5 likely to try them in the future.

These responses suggest that:

- Ebook versions are popular and are set to remain so.
- Whereas a large proportion of students own mobile devices with QR code readers, these are rarely employed.
- Accessing ebooks on a mobile device remained rare, and subject to personal preference.
- Students would generally like to access ebooks via mobile devices in the future.

Our discussions with students highlighted the interesting response that many felt the technology was not up to scratch to enable easy access and reading of ebooks on a mobile device. Many felt that device screen sizes were too small to read an ebook, with the suggestion that future uses of larger screen mobile devices could make this aspect more appealing. Students did however like the fact that ebook versions were available for popular resources, with 7 students remarking that they would access the ebook version on a personal computer where they were informed of the possibility by a shelf marker.

The project continues with the generation of markers for the remaining ebooks in our short-loan collections. Once these have been in situ for the next cohort of students it is anticipated that a more in-depth survey will be conducted.