Apps: finding the best

The introduction of the iPhone in 2007 transformed the mobile computing landscape, bringing near-ubiquitous network access together with a simple marketplace for small, low-cost software applications or ''apps.'' Between Apple's iOS, Android, Blackberry, and HP/Palm's emerging WebOS platforms, users and librarians face a dizzying array of choices for professional, personal, and consumer health apps. Mobile products have been featured in this column in recent issues, mainly mobile versions of familiar subscription resources. In reviewing any electronic resource for a quarterly column, one always runs the risk that the product will change by the time of publication. But when it comes to mobile apps, three months is a whole generation. New apps come out every day, and major updates occur frequently. Because most apps do not have a ''free trial'' mechanism, it can be tedious and costly to try out large numbers of apps looking for the gems. This issue's column will be a ''meta-review,'' a guide to sources of reviews for mobile apps of use to medical libraries. (Note: This column includes many links, some of which are quite lengthy. If you are reading this in print, you may find the online version of this article to be easier to use!)

Independent reviews

iMedicalApps <http://www.imedicalapps.com> is an excellent source for reviews of medical apps by medical professionals. The site can be filtered by platform (Android, Blackberry, iPad, iPhone), medical specialty, or app ''type'' (calculators, drug reference, textbooks, etc.). Postings include reviews of individual apps, comparisons of similar apps, and ''top 10'' type lists by topic, as well as news stories about the mobile industry in medicine. Reviews are written by a team of physicians and medical students. The reviews generally include screenshots and describe the app in context with others in that category. Strengths and weaknesses are highlighted, and individual user pricing is provided. A really simply syndication (RSS) feed is available. The reviews and categories are aimed at medical professionals looking for apps to use on their own devices. Information about availability of site licensing is generally not provided. An area of relative weakness for the site is the nursing category. The reviewing team has no nurses at present, and there is little content in this category. Consumer-oriented health apps are generally also not reviewed here, although some are listed under ''patient education.''

PCWorld writers review apps for Apple and Android on PCWorld's AppGuide <http://www.pcworld.com/appguide/>, alongside user-contributed reviews. It is easy to spot the PCWorld-written reviews versus user-contributed reviews. A few of the health app reviews were written by invited health professionals, but most are not. Reviews focus on functionality, interface, and ease of use rather than quality of evidence. As in the official app stores themselves discussed below, there is a distinction made between ''health'' and ''medical'' apps. The former are mainly focused on wellness, nutrition, and fitness, while the latter include apps for health professionals as well as emergency response tools.

The Gizmodo blog <http://gizmodo.com/apps/> focuses on productivity and utility apps. Detailed reviews of medical apps are not presented here, but thorough reviews of the very latest apps for each major platform are on the blog, as well as useful monthly roundups of apps that medical librarians should know about. Unlike most other sites, Gizmodo includes coverage of Windows7 smart phone apps.

User-generated reviews and ratings

Android, Apple, and Blackberry each have their own official source for downloading apps:

- Android <https://market.android.com/apps/> (see the May 2011 *MLA News* for a nice roundup of Android medical apps)
- Apple IOS <http://itunes.apple.com/us/genre/ios/id36?mt=8>
- Blackberry App World <http://appworld.blackberry.com/webstore/>

Apps are listed and described, and the listings include user-created reviews and ratings. Users often focus on interface, usability, and stability issues rather than the quality or credibility of the content. Still, stability and ease of use are important considerations, especially if the reader is evaluating apps to be recommended on library-created guides.

The Apple App Store's web-based catalog interface is very basic. It is much easier to browse and search for apps using Apple's free iTunes software. Apps are divided into iPad, iPhone, and ''universal,'' in other words, apps that are optimized for both. If you cannot use iTunes, there is a third-party site called AppShopper <http://www.appshopper.com> that offers the ability to browse and view lists of popular apps by category, with descriptions and screenshots straight from Apple's App Store listings. AppShopper does not reproduce the user-contributed reviews. You can find the name of an app in AppShopper, then go to Apple to read ratings and reviews. AppShopper also offers price change and popularity trend data.

At the time of writing, PalmOS did not offer a full, browsable app catalog on the web.

Library guides

Many medical library websites now offer guides for users of mobile devices. Many of these focus on informing users of mobile access to existing subscription resources, such as clinical tools, drug databases, and so on. Sometimes these guides also provide recommendations of other useful apps in health sciences or general productivity. While not rising to the level of full reviews of apps, these guides provide useful tips for users about how certain apps are best used, as well as notes about access for subscription-based resources. The following are some useful examples of library mobile guides.

■ Duke University Medical Center Library <http://guides.mclibrary.duke.edu/content.php?pid=11651>

■ Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center Library: Nursing Mobile Resources <http://libguides.mskcc.org/content.php?pid=178991&sid=1588524>

■ Nova Southeastern University, Health Professions Division Library <http://www.nova.campusguides.com/content.php?pid=104950&sid=835769>

■ Oregon Health & Science University Library <http://www.ohsu.edu/xd/education/library/research-assistance/handheld-pda-resources.cfm>

■ Scripps Clinic and Green Hospital, Kresge Library <http://www.scripps.edu/library/open/shmobile.html#apps>

■ Washington University School of Medicine, Bernard Becker Medical Library <http://beckerguides.wustl.edu/content.php?pid=92697>

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