Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Academics are Reading More Electronic Journal Articles in More Subjects, Using Varying Strategies to Find and Manage Them

A Review of:
Ollé, C., & Borrego, Á. (2010). A qualitative study of the impact of electronic journals on scholarly information behavior. *Library & Information Science Research, 32*(3), 221-228.

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Abstract

Objective – To assess how the increase in number of electronic journals available to academic scholars has changed their information-seeking or consulting behaviour, with respect to 1) the amount and diversity of sources they read; 2) strategies they use to keep up-to-date in their fields; 3) use of personalized information services; 4) determining the value and relevance of articles; and 5) personal management of scientific information. This study is a follow-up to an earlier quantitative study (Borrego, Anglada, Barrios, & Comellas, 2007) in the same setting.

Design – Qualitative, using an open-ended questionnaire, followed by personal interviews of a small group of the respondents.

Setting – Universities that are members of the Consortium of Academic Libraries of Catalonia (CBUC), which is made up of the eight public Catalan universities and the National Library of Catalonia, Spain.

Subjects – One hundred thirty-seven scholars from the member universities of diverse ages and disciplines. Eleven of these academics were selected for personal interviews.

Methods – The authors used a two-staged approach to gather comments from researchers on their use of electronic journals. First, an open-ended, self-administered questionnaire (with some pre-testing done)

was sent by e-mail to some 490 academics who had provided e-mail addresses in the quantitative study; 137 were returned and analyzed. Personal interviews were then conducted with 11 scholars who had given the most detailed answers in the questionnaire. Their ages ranged from 28 to 67; each was from a different discipline, and from six of the universities.

Informed consent sheets (describing the study and guaranteeing anonymity) were given to the 11 interviewees. Personal interviews were conducted in the subjects' offices by one of the authors, and lasted between 45-60 minutes. In the interview stage, the authors wanted to examine: use and assessment of the library, access to electronic information, and impact of e-resources on information behaviour. Subjects were also asked to provide three suggestions on improving access to scientific information.

Main Results – The amount of reading and number of electronic journals and other sources consulted among the scholars who participated in this study has increased. Three-quarters of survey respondents consult more journals and read more articles. The scholars reported that they are grateful for the increase in electronic information and its enhanced ease of access, and are not overwhelmed by it. Their reading has become more discriminatory, though, with many reporting "skimming" much of what they read to save time. Scholars keep up-to-date in three main ways: web browsing of journal issues, library database searches, and TOC e-mail alerts. More than 90% of survey respondents reported conducting database searches. Google and Google Scholar were often mentioned ahead of specific library database names. In determining value and relevance of an article, its author and abstract are key for scholars. In addition, personal information management techniques used by scholars were all over the board. The three main methods were use of print or electronic folders, reference management software, and no system. Many of the academics felt their information management systems were "rudimentary" (p. 225).

The request for suggestions and comments on the questionnaire was not answered by "most of the sample" (p. 226). Those who did respond to this request asked for more library resources. The main complaint expressed by scholars concerned the difficulty and complexity of finding journal article content using the Library website (e.g., varying databases, difficulty of interpreting what journal electronic and print holdings are available). Because of this, a number of scholars used Google to find library-subscribed content.

Conclusion – By having greater and easier access to e-journals, scholars accessing the CBUC read more articles from more disciplines. Scholars would prefer a simpler library interface to search for online content. Due to the complexity of finding article content, they use web search tools like Google and Google Scholar to get to what they need faster. The authors of this study believe research should be conducted on the use of the Consortium's metasearch tool to reduce the complexity. Research should also be conducted on value-added features of search interfaces for particular disciplines.

Commentary

As the authors note, in qualitative research, a representative sample is more important than a large response rate. The relatively low return rate of 28% of the 490 scholars who actually received the survey is mitigated by the fact that the disciplines and ages of the academics appear to reflect the population at large. The exact time frame for the end of collection of surveys is not stated; collection of questionnaires appeared to last a month and a half (mid November through December).

Neither the self-administered questionnaire nor the interview questions are explicitly included in the article; even providing a link to the survey and interview questions or responses would have been helpful. Individual responses are important to study because of the effort involved in writing them,

as well as the richness and context they provide, but it is difficult to glean if there may have been additional insights provided by the scholars if these responses are not summarized or included in some manner. The respondents' ages and disciplines are represented in tables, but the responses are not similarly represented for the reader. Further, there is sometimes confusion in the article about where responses were captured: the questionnaires or the interviews?

The authors state they wanted to find out how a scholar's age might be related to his/her information-seeking behaviour. However, they do not address this in the discussion or conclusion. The authors also include several non-sequitur statements that have a tendency to detract from their main points. For instance, they state in their Problem Statement that ". . . the question of whether sociocognitive factors and technical barriers may be affecting the adoption of electronic resources at Catalan academic libraries has not been addressed" (p. 221). The authors never return to this issue. The research of Tenopir and her colleagues (Tenopir, King, Spencer, & Wu, 2009) has further indicated that issues such as purpose, work assignment, and productivity of the scholar are also related to reading patterns.

The authors state that the results of their survey bear on library allocation of resources, in light of increased spending on e-resources and tighter academic library budgets. The results do not really elucidate, though, where money might specifically be better allocated (e.g., more in a specific discipline) for the scholars at the Catalan universities, nor are there stated plans by the authors to study this in more depth.

From this reviewer's perspective, one of the most interesting results from this study is the range of personal strategies that academics reported using in an attempt to manage journal content/references they read and collect. Some scholars had faulty beliefs about the capabilities of bibliographic software. This could bear on library education efforts. According to the authors, the CBUC provides

a consortial license to RefWorks, although there is no explicit mention of training on it provided by library staff. In this Spanish university setting, could there be cultural aspects to faculty adoption of reference management software? Or, are there commonalities in the use (or not) of such software by faculty, regardless of the national/cultural setting? At any rate, studying information management and organization strategies is an area that needs further investigation. Much will also likely need to be studied at levels of learning and cognition, and personal traits of scholars (Doong & Wang, 2009).

References

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Tenopir, C., King, D. W., Spencer, J., & Wu, L. (2009). Variations in article seeking and reading patterns of academics: What makes a difference? *Library & Information Science Research, 31*(3), 139-148.