



Evidence Summary

Scholars in the Humanities Are Reluctant to Cite E-Texts as Primary Materials

A Review of:

Sukovic, S. (2009). References to e-texts in academic publications. *Journal of Documentation*, 65(6), 997-1015.

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Abstract

Objective – To explore the role of electronic texts (e-texts) in the research and citation practices of scholars in the humanities.

Design – A mixed-methods approach, employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods extended by semi-structured interviews.

Setting – Six universities in Australia and one university in the United States.

Subjects – Sixteen humanities scholars participated in the study, including nine historians and seven literary scholars.

Methods – The study had two stages. The first

stage included in-depth, semi-structured interviews, examination of participants' manuscripts and published works, and evaluation of some e-texts mentioned during interviews. The second stage involved detailed data gathering from a group of four participants selected from the participants in stage one, followed by a final interview. Data were collected throughout 2005 and 2006. In total, the study investigated thirty research projects.

In stage one, participants were asked to discuss one finished and one current research project in which e-texts were used as primary sources. Participants in the second stage were asked to record data about their interactions with e-texts during the current research project on forms and audiotapes. Researchers

who completed forms and recorded comments were asked to discuss their view of e-texts in the research process. The interviews and tapes with comments were transcribed and coded to protect participants' anonymity and strengthen the interpretive validity of the study.

Data were analyzed by adopting a hermeneutical approach. The study results do not have any statistical significance and the findings cannot be generalized beyond the study data.

Main Results – Participants in this study used a wide variety of e-texts for their research, but seldom included citations to these electronic sources in their published work. E-texts included digitized materials from libraries, archives, and private collections as well as 'electronically born' documents, works of art and popular culture artifacts. Of the 22 works resulting from the research projects examined during the study period, half did not cite e-texts as primary materials. The 11 works that made at least one reference to an e-text included 4 works in which the only reference was to e-texts created by the actual author. In total, only 7 works referred to e-texts created by outside authors. These 7 final works were written by 5 participants, representing 31 percent of the total number of study participants.

Analysis of the participants' citation practices revealed that decisions to cite an electronic source or omit it from publication were based on two important factors: (1) the perceived trustworthiness of an e-text and (2) a sense of what was acceptable practice.

Participants established trustworthiness through a process of verification. To confirm the authenticity and reliability of an e-text, most participants compared electronic documents against a print version to verify provenance, context, and details. Even when digitized materials were established as trustworthy sources, however, hard copies were often cited because they were considered more authoritative or accurate.

Traditions of a particular discipline also had a strong influence on a participant's willingness to cite e-texts. Participants working on traditional historical topics were more reluctant to cite electronic resources, while researchers who worked on topics that explored relatively new fields were more willing to acknowledge the use of e-texts in published works. Traditional practices also influenced participants' decisions about how to cite materials. Some participants always cited original works in hard copy, regardless of electronic access because it was accepted scholarly practice.

Conclusions – The results of this study suggest that the small number of citations to electronic sources in publications in the humanities is directly related to researchers' doubts about the reliability and authenticity of e-texts. Electronic resources provide a large body of primary data for research in literary and historical studies; however, the uncertain trustworthiness of many primary materials in electronic form makes these texts less acceptable for academic publications.

The study provides suggestions for further research into the social dynamics that underpin and determine academic research practices and contemporary processes of knowledge production.

Commentary

This study attempts to go beyond the citation studies of previous researchers by providing a meaningful analysis of the decision-making process directly related to citation practices in the humanities. The author provides a comprehensive overview of the research literature and presents evidence to support two competing theories of behaviour that frame the results of the study: normative and social constructive views. The discussion of these theories offers important insight into the contemporary research practices of scholars working in literary and historical studies and the reasons why researchers decide to include or exclude digital resources from publications.

The author's analysis of the reasons for citing preferences and practices provide evidence to support a strong relationship between citation and the influence of social rules in academia. The study, however, struggles to provide insight into the characteristics of acceptable academic (versus non-academic) electronic sources in the context of humanities scholarship. Participant responses seem to offer conflicting definitions of primary materials and what constitutes "real" scholarship. Some of the responses may be determined by the researcher's age or topic rather than by characteristics of the online resources themselves. The author makes passing mention to these contributing factors, yet does not extend the analysis to include these important attributes.

The methods used to collect the data in this study are insufficiently described in this article. Although the author does point to an earlier publication in which more details about the study's methodology can be found (Sukovic, 2008), a sample of the study questions and responses would have been a useful appendix to this article.

As the author notes, this study was based on in-depth data gathering from a small group of participants; the study has no statistical significance and the findings cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, to anyone working in the humanities the description of researchers' use and non-use of etexts will seem quite familiar. The results from the study seem useful, especially the insight into the social constructs of authority and acceptable academic practices in shaping the way researchers interact with and use electronic resources.

References

- Sukovic, S. (2008). Convergent flows: Humanities scholars and their interactions with electronic texts. *Library Quarterly*, 78(3), 263-284.