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What User Studies Tell Us

WHAT DO PEOPLE really want from digital sources? As librarians, we wonder if they prefer print or electronic journals, and whether they would rather do everything themselves or sometimes ask for help. Do they even still need the library? Hundreds of research studies in the past postweb decade seek to answer these questions and more about user behavior.

In a project for the Council of Library and Information Resources (CLIR), I recently read and analyzed over 200 studies of how users interact with online information resources and the role of the library in their digital lives. Taken together, some common conclusions made and lessons learned may help librarians design better electronic services, decide what resources to purchase, and aid in developing user instruction. The full report is available at www.clir.org.

A variety of methods

Valid conclusions about user behavior should only be made within the research method used by each study. For example, if a researcher interviews academic faculty to determine if they prefer print or electronic sources, the conclusions should only state what faculty prefer, not what faculty actually use. Each of these methods allows different types of conclusions: together we can get a full picture of what users actually do, why they do it, what they would prefer, and what they are likely to do in the future.

High-profile studies of the last few years use a variety of research methods. A study commissioned by CLIR and the Digital Library Federation and conducted by Outsell interviewed hundreds of faculty and students in American universities and asked them both what they use

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and what they prefer. OCLC, the Urban Libraries Council, and the Pew Internet and American Life Project all interviewed students and the public to ask their opinions—and report on their use—of the physical library vs. the web. Donald W. King and I have surveyed thousands of subject experts to discover how

> Experts in different subject disciplines have different usage patterns and preferences for print or electronic format

much they use electronic journals and for what purposes. See a link list with this article at www.libraryjournal. com for links to these reports and others.

Print vs. electronic

Looking at all of the studies together reveals some common conclusions. In answering the questions of what people really want from digital sources and do they prefer print or e-journals, the studies repeatedly show the following:

Both faculty and students use and like electronic resources and most readily adopt them if the sources are perceived as convenient. They reach electronic journals through a variety of channels, including bibliographic databases with full-text links; full-text databases; recommendations or links from colleagues or, in the case of students, from professors; and through a web search engine, most often Google.

Experts in different subject disciplines have different usage patterns and preferences for print or electronic format. There is no one correct solution for every subject discipline. Even science faculty favor printed journals for their personal subscriptions, with medical faculty conducting a lot of current awareness reading in print journals.

Print is still used for some reading and is a part of research in almost every discipline. A majority of e-journal users still print out articles, making a format like PDF popular.

Browsing through a small number of core journals is important (in print or electronic forms), especially for subject experts and for current awareness searching. Searching by topic in an article database is important for all other purposes. Users will read articles from a wide variety of journal titles and sources if available to them, although a majority of the readings will come from a relatively small number of journals.

The library's future

In answer to the questions of whether users still need the library and would they rather do everything themselves or sometimes ask for help, the picture is less clear. However, personal journal subscriptions continue to decrease, so users rely more on electronic subscriptions subsidized by the library and on the Internet. Many academic users are not aware that the resources they access in their offices or dormitories are selected and paid for by the library.

A majority of journal readings are of articles within their first year of publication, but a sizable minority of readings come from older materials—almost always from library-subsidized electronic collections.

College and high school students use the Internet more than the library. Students exercise some quality judgments about Internet materials, but those judgments may not exactly match faculty criteria. Many faculty believe that students need instruction on evaluation. Students rely on recommendations from faculty, peers, and, to a lesser extent, librarians for specific information sources. They often need help but are reluctant to ask for it.

Research often confirms what we already know but also provides new insights into how libraries can better serve their wide variety of users. The one assurance from almost all of these studies is that there is no single answer, no one typical user, nor one preferred pattern of use.