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A USER SURVEY OF A SITE PROVIDING CITIZEN INFORMATION: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF SHIL.INFO

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Abstract

This paper is about studying citizens' information needs through a collection of different research lenses. We were interested in users of online, citizen rights web sites, such as the SHIL (<http://shil.info>) site. Our results report findings from three parallel data collection efforts. In order to gain a better understanding of how the SHIL website is used, and to compare the information needs and information sources used by SHIL, users and potential users unaware of the existence of the Website, were surveyed, using a trio of methods. We report several interesting differences between the three groups, and suggest future work on analyzing the site, its users, the content it provides and the needs it serves.

Keywords: on-line survey, citizen information, information and referral

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper is about studying citizens' information needs through a collection of different research lenses. Our results report findings from three parallel data collection efforts. The project intended to elaborate on what people need to know in the areas of rights and interaction with government services, for the purpose of aiding the provision of online support. Users and potential users were sought out via email questionnaires, hand-delivered paper-and-pencil (print) questionnaires and an online web-based questionnaire.

Citizens are often puzzled where to turn to when they have problems related to public and government services. In several countries Citizen Advice Bureaux (CABx) or Information & Referral services have been set up that serve as intermediaries between the citizens and the available services (e.g. Marcella & Baxter, 1999b or Saxton, Naumer & Fisher, 2007). In Israel, the Citizen Advice Bureau is called SHIL. SHIL was established in 1957 and has more than 50 offices in Israel, a telephone hot-line and an Internet site (<http://shil.info>) and almost 1,000 volunteers (Tractinsky, Rafaeli & Pliskin, 1998; Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, 2009). SHIL is operated by volunteers and coordinated through the Israeli Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services in collaboration with the municipalities and local government.

Internet use in Israel is widespread, according to a survey published at the beginning of 2010 (Ynet, 2010), 4.4 million Israelis above the age of 13 use the Internet, and about 80% of the households are connected. About 30% of the users spend over three hours a day on the Internet. In spite of the large number of Internet users and the amount of time they spend on the Internet, a recent survey on the population's information needs in the area of citizen and social information showed that there is very low awareness to the Israeli Citizen Advice Bureau (SHIL) website (Bar-Ilan et al., n.d.). This finding is also supported with a log analysis of the SHIL website (Ravid, Bar-Ilan, Baruchson-Arbib, Rafaeli, 2007), that showed that the large majority of the users reached the SHIL website from search engines, for specific topic queries and not by looking for the SHIL website. In order to gain a better understanding of how the SHIL website is used, and to compare the information needs and information sources used by SHIL users and potential users unaware of the existence of the Website, were surveyed, using a trio of methods.

There are a few previous studies on the information needs of Israeli citizens. In 2002, an extensive telephone survey of the citizens of the city of Herzliya was conducted (Shemesh, Baruchson-Arbib & Shoham, 2002; Baruchson-Arbib, Shoham, Yaari & Shemesh, 2006) to understand the community information needs of the citizens. Fourteen problem areas were defined and each respondent was allowed multiple choices. The most frequently chosen problem areas were (in decreasing order): neighborhood matters, education, transportation, matters related to government/ministry and leisure and entertainment. The preferred information sources were (again in decreasing order): the municipality, newspaper, the Internet, government agencies and personal connections. In terms of information channels, the most preferred channel was the telephone, followed by face-to-face meetings and printed materials. Rather interestingly, the Internet emerged as least preferred, because it was not ranked by all the participants. However among those who did include the Internet in their rankings, for 64% it was the preferred information source.

In 2006, 300 residents of the city of Rishon LeZion in Israel (Leshem, 2009) participated in a telephone survey on their citizen information needs and information seeking patterns. The results show that when in need of municipal information, most respondents used the municipality's hotline. Only about 7% consulted the municipality's Web site. The major municipal topics of interest, in decreasing frequency were: welfare, education, culture, registering businesses, health and environmental issues and engineering. The preferred modes of receiving the information were over the phone (63.5%), followed by face-to-face consultation (47.4%), email (7.4%), regular mail (5.1%) and fax (4.1%). Most of the surveyed residents (92.9%) were unaware of the existence of face-to-face SHIL services in the city.

In a newly released report (Smith, 2010) the PEW Internet and American Life Project, reports on the usage of the Internet by American citizens for receiving information and interacting with government services. The results show that the majority of the American citizens looked for information or completed a transaction on a government website during 2009. Smith (2010) found that high-income and well-educated Internet users are more likely to use online government services. A very large percentage of them reach the government websites through the use of search engines, and the majority of the users reported that their interaction with the government website was successful. Even though the Internet is utilized heavily, offline methods, like phone calls or sending a letter are not abandoned, and often a mixture of online and offline methods are used. Among the population as a whole, telephone contact is still most preferred, however Internet users prefer online contact over offline contact.

2 THE SURVEY

The survey questionnaire was comprised of 37 questions. The questions were highly similar to the questions in the offline survey (Bar-Ilan et al., n.d.), which allowed us to compare the results. Hand-delivered surveys were distributed to a snowball/convenience sample, and generated 437 responses. The participants of the online survey belonged to two groups. The first group of users clicked a banner on the SHIL site (100 respondents). The banner was shown on the site for ten weeks, yielding 100 voluntary, self-selected responses. The second group of users visited the SHIL website previously and provided their email. These users were contacted and were asked to fill in the online questionnaire – 247 users responded to our request. The emailed versions of the survey were sent to 1791 addresses who have self-identified themselves on the site. The most conservative estimate of the response rate here is 13.7%, however, we believe this to be an underestimate as many of the addresses used were not valid and numerous emails bounced. In the following we report on the comparative distribution of responses across sampling methods.

3 PRELIMINARY RESULTS

We are still in the process of analyzing the survey answers. The preliminary analysis shows that there are differences between the three groups (offline, email, online) in terms citizenship related information problems and in terms of the sources consulted when trying to solve their problems.

3.1 What are the major citizen-related problems on which the respondents seek help?

The respondents were presented 18 topics, corresponding to the top level hierarchy on the SHIL website. The results are presented in Table 1 and in Figure 1.

Major topic	# resp. print	% resp. print	# resp. email	% resp. email	# resp. online	% resp. online
Health	204	46.70%	97	39.30%	12	12.00%
Transportation	202	46.20%	82	33.20%	20	20.00%
Education	161	36.80%	48	19.40%	12	12.00%
Consumer issues	135	30.90%	80	32.40%	17	17.00%
Social security	128	29.30%	110	44.50%	27	27.00%
Taxes and fees	123	28.10%	57	23.10%	9	9.00%
Economics	110	25.20%	52	21.10%	3	3.00%
Work relations	101	23.10%	114	46.20%	29	29.00%
Law and legislation	81	18.50%	82	33.20%	15	15.00%
Welfare	81	18.50%	25	10.10%	12	12.00%
Housing	77	17.60%	35	14.20%	7	7.00%
Army and defense	69	15.80%	14	5.70%	8	8.00%
Environmental protection	60	13.70%	21	8.50%	3	3.00%
Family affairs	53	12.10%	32	13.00%	2	2.00%
Registrars	50	11.40%	12	4.90%	1	1.00%

Senior citizens	34	7.80%	36	14.60%	5	5.00%
Immigration and absorption	16	3.70%	2	0.80%	1	1.00%
Other	13	3.00%	6	2.40%	0	0.00%

Table 1: Major citizen/social issues for which the respondents needed help in the six months prior to answering the questionnaire

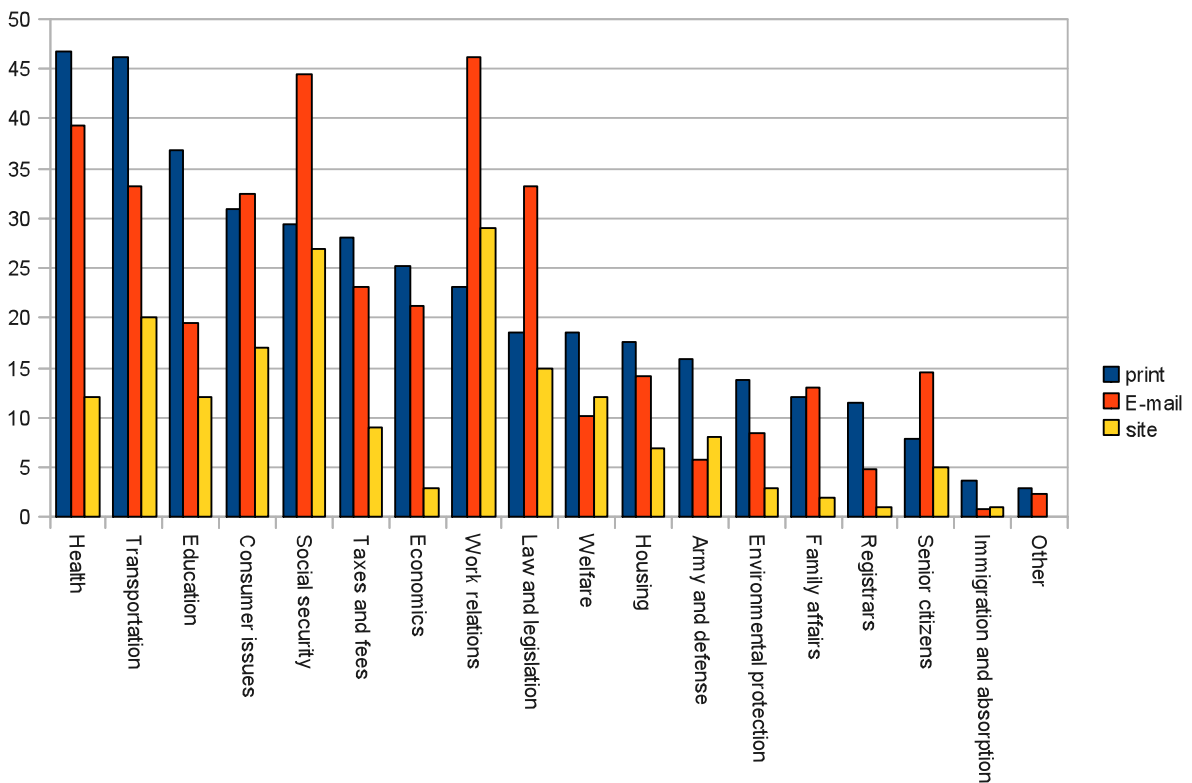


Figure 1: Major concerns during the previous six months

We see that there are differences between the three groups. Online respondents identified many fewer topics, when compared to the topics of interest indicated by the print and questionnaire respondents. Print respondents' answers average to 3.8 options, email respondents selected 3.6 topics on average, while the web-based questionnaire respondents averaged 1.8 topics per respondent.

While print respondents viewed health related issues to be most important. Both email and web-based respondents placed work-related issues highest on their agenda. It might be worth knowing that early analyses of the discussion forums on the site seem to indicate that when open-ended questions are added to the forum, these are heavily dominated by work and unemployment related issues.

Information about senior citizen issues appeared to be prominent mostly in responses by email, and fared as less important in both print and web-based questionnaire responses.

3.2 What information sources/channels are consulted in order to solve citizen-related problems?

A list of eight possible sources was listed, and for each source, the participants were asked to mark how important this source was to them when trying to solve a citizen/social problem. The possible answers were: very important, important, of medium importance, of low importance, not important at all. The sources were: friends & family, Internet, experts (e.g. physicians or lawyers), government offices, books or pamphlets, TV/radio, printed newspapers and public libraries. The comparative results for this question are presented in Figures 2 and 3.

Perhaps not surprisingly, but of importance nonetheless, respondents in the print sample reported that family and friends were a source that they consulted on a more frequent basis. The internet was suggested as the most prominent go-to source for information by respondents in the web-based (site) questionnaire sample, and as a fairly important source by the email sample.

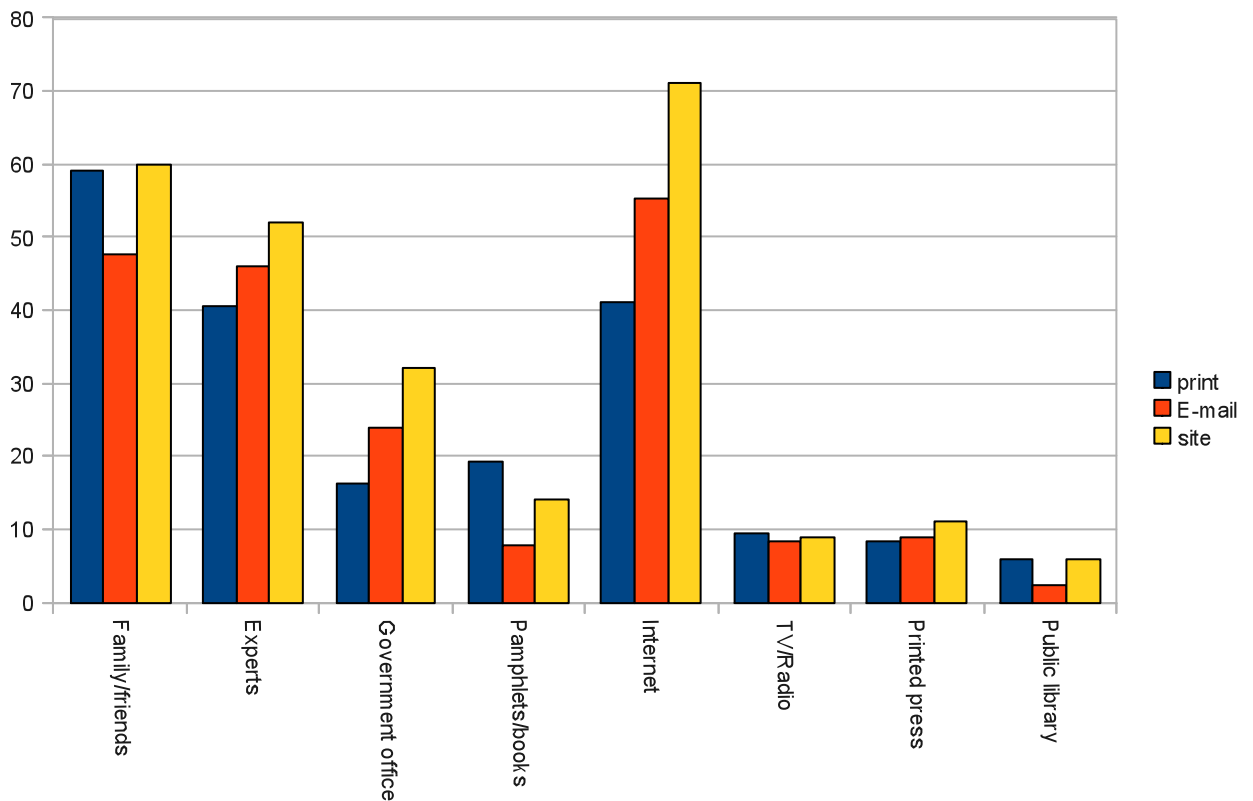


Figure 2: Very important and important sources when in need of citizen/social information

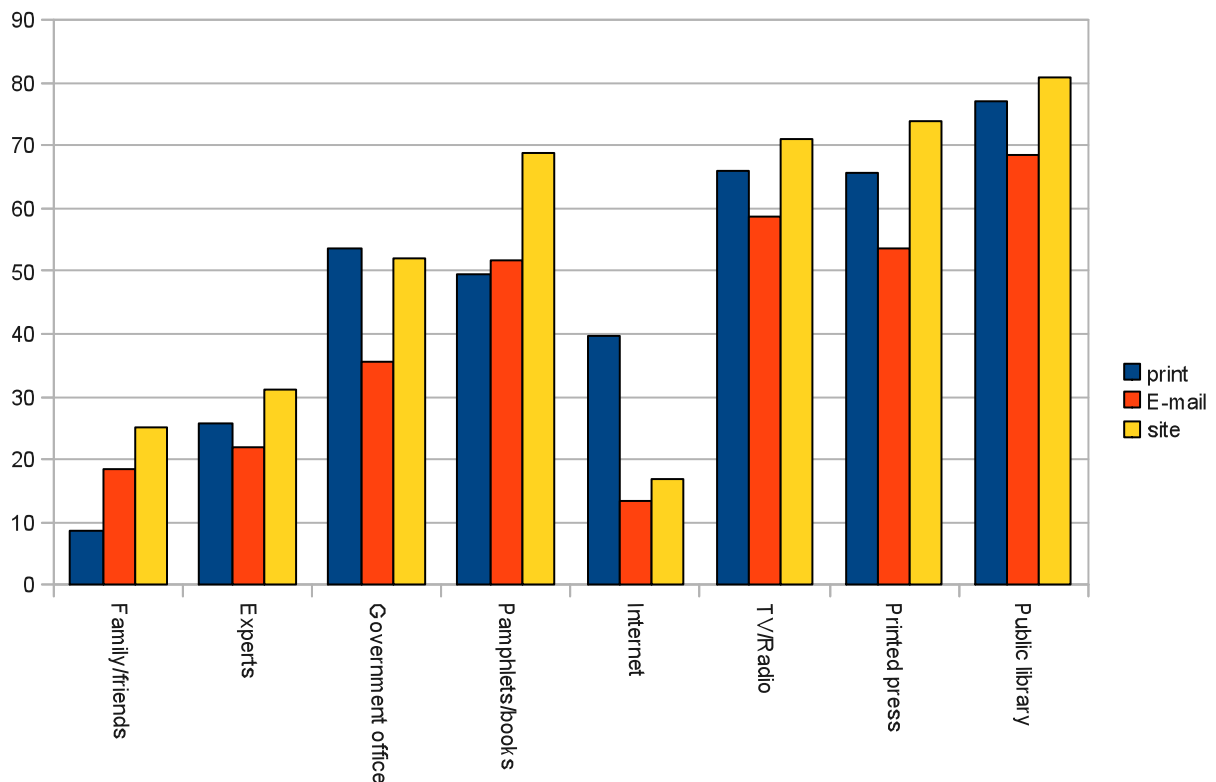


Figure 3: Unimportant sources and sources of low importance when in need of citizen/social information

4 FUTURE WORK

We are in the process of analyzing the survey results. In the future we intend to compare the results with additional relevant surveys. On the basis of the survey results recommendations will be made on how to improve the usability, the efficiency and the visibility of the SHIL website.

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