Forging the Future: Connecting Research to Communities

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The Covid-19 minority health disparities in New York State Engaged Researchers Working group is an interdisciplinary group assembled in April 2020 at the request of governor Andrew Cuomo. The group was specifically charged with making practical policy recommendations to address the disproportionate impact of covid-19 on black and latinx New Yorkers.

Because the intended audience was non-academic, consideration was given the the format and publication of the group's work products. The group published an issue brief and a final report, as well as a collection of white papers published in Scholars Archive, University at Albany's institutional repository, and other peer reviewed research.

In 2022, I began a project to learn more about the apparent disconnect between academic researchers who prioritize creating peer-reviewed scholarship and non-academic information users, such as policy makers, advocates, or nonprofits, who do not have access to peer reviewed journal subscriptions and databases.

Related research has been presented at the eastern new york chapter of ACRL and ALA in 2022 and a chapter is forthcoming this year.

As part of this research, I surveyed New York state government workers and nonprofit organizations in New York's capital region to learn about how they find and select information.

The survey is limited geographically, and response rate was really low. Despite the low response rate, the responses seem to follow trends of similar research on how policy makers use research and other information sources in their work.

Respondents came from government offices, such as state agencies or legislative staff; advocacy or lobby groups; and charities.

Non-academic information users rely on several information sources in their jobs, mostly web pages and news sources, followed by government information and professional or trade magazines. Journal articles are tied with social media content; policies or standards; and books and e-books.

But how important are these top sources to government and nonprofit workers? When asked to rank the importance of information sources to their work, government and nonprofit workers rate news, policies, websites, and government information as more important than peer reviewed journal articles.

Respondents rely on web search engines, news sources, and government websites to find information for their work. University repositories, library searches, and subject repositories are among the least used tools

Respondents were asked to rank these 7 statements about the information sources they choose for their work. The most important quality is that the information is available for free online.

While users reported they use peer reviewed journal articles and find them to be of some importance, "Published in a peer reviewed journal" is the 5th most important quality of an information source.

Availability online, currency, trust in the author, and ease of understanding were rated more important qualities than peer review for non-academic users.

When a desired information source is behind a paywall, users reported they will always or frequently continue to search the web for a free version; or they will frequently or sometimes give up, choosing not to seek alternative access to the resource.

They are less likely to use interlibrary loan, request the source directly from the author, or reach out to their professional network. They also rarely or never pay for access to the source.

As a librarian with responsibilities in scholarly communication, I am interested in learning about the potential to use the institutional repository as a way to close the distance between policy researchers and a non-academic audience. For instance, policy workers value peer reviewed scholarship, but paywalls present an access issue. Paywalls also prevent community users, who are often the subjects of research, from accessing peer reviewed scholarship.