

Project survey report

I Survey questions

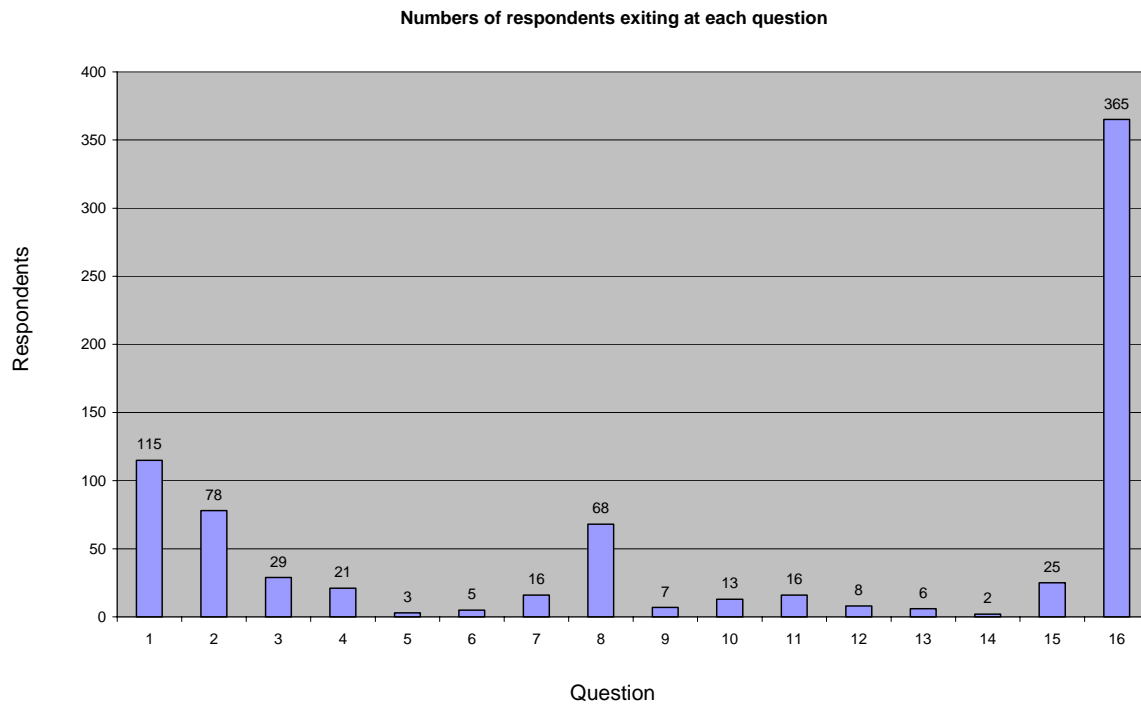
- 1 Age (predefined options, see below)
- 2 Current institution and geographical location (predefined options, see below)
- 3 Occupation (predefined options, see below)
- 4 Areas of interest (predefined options, see below)
- 5 How important is peer evaluation or recommendation in your selection of resources for your personal research? (predefined options, see below)
- 6 Name the three digital resources which you use most often in your own research. Why are these resources of such value?
- 7 Where a resource is available in a variety of formats, which do you tend to use more (predefined options, see below)?
- 8 Can you specify features you have found unsatisfactory in digital resources you have used?
- 9 What is important to you in determining the value of a particular digital resource for your own research?
- 10 What would help you to evaluate the usefulness of a digital resource for your own research?
- 11 What do you regard as they key assessment criteria for digital resources?
- 12 Do you regularly use portals to identify and quality assure digital resources? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these portals?
- 13 Other comments

II Circulation

The survey was circulated through various channels, including IHR mailing lists and seminars, JISC email lists, ADS/AHDS Archaeology and AHDS History mailing lists; personal approaches were made to digital resource creators at the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW), English Heritage, the British Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Library of Scotland. The survey was hosted on the Institute of Historical Research website, and links were provided from the Royal Historical Society Bibliography of British and Irish History Online and the Institute of Classical Studies website.

The survey received 777 responses in total, of which 365 were full responses (that is, respondents worked their way through to the end of the survey, perhaps leaving one or two questions unanswered). The point at which respondents stopped completing the questionnaire was monitored and results are shown in the graph below (see Figure 1). Because database queries revealed no substantial difference in pattern between the respondents who completed the questionnaire and those who partially completed it, all responses for each question were analysed.

Figure 1



III Results

Question 1 – Age

566 responses received

Under 25	75 (13.3%)
25–35	158 (27.9%)
36–50	191 (33.7%)
51–65	125 (22.1%)
Over 65	17 (3.0%)

Question 2 – Current institution

The majority of respondents (56%) came from UK HE institutions.

545 responses received

UK Higher Education institution	305 (56.0%)
Overseas institution	101 (18.5%)
Museum/archive/gallery/library	57 (10.5%)
Other	82 (15.0%)

Institutions listed under ‘other’:

Independent researcher/freelance (13); school (6); cultural resource management company (4); local authority/government (4). [Plus others only mentioned by one person – various types of consultancy.]

Geographical location

528 responses received

Africa	8 (1.5%)
Asia	16 (3.0%)
Australasia and Pacific	13 (2.5%)
Britain and Ireland	300 (56.8%)
Europe	125 (23.7%)
Latin America and West Indies	6 (1.1%)
Middle East	5 (1.0%)
North America	55 (10.4%)

Question 3 – Occupation

557 responses received

Professor/Reader/Senior lecturer	101 (18.1%)
Lecturer	49 (8.8%)
Postdoctoral fellow	20 (3.6%)
Research project officer	33 (5.9%)
Research fellow	20 (3.6%)
Research student	122 (21.9%)
Retired	24 (4.3%)
Other	188 (33.8%)

Occupations listed under 'other':

Student (various types) (24); librarian (22); independent scholar (12); curator (11); teacher (6); archaeologist (5); historic environment record officer (3); project manager (3); archivist (3). [Plus others mentioned by only one or two individuals.]

Question 4 – Areas of interest

Respondents were able to tick more than one box in each category and it was therefore impossible to monitor the total number of respondents.

The most popular types of discipline were social history, archaeology and cultural history. The most popular periods were the 19th and 20th centuries, followed by the 18th and 19th centuries. Britain and Ireland was the most popular geographical area of study, followed by Europe.

Type		Period		Geographical area	
Administrative history	32	Pre-1000 BC	87	Africa	16
Agriculture	18	1000–1 BC	82	Asia	44
Ancient history	39	AD 1–500	89	Australasia and Pacific	17
Archaeology	134	500–1000	110	Britain and Ireland	294
Architectural history	41	11th century	105	Europe	200
Art history	43	12th century	110	Latin America and West Indies	22
Byzantine history	12	13th century	116	Middle East	36
Computing and history	40	14th century	122	North America	55
Cultural history	126	15th century	136	World	48
Ecclesiastical history	75	16th century	163		
Economic history	42	17th century	181		
Epigraphy	5	18th century	196		
Education	22	19th century	224		
Gender and women	56	20th century	224		
Historiography	43				
Imperial and colonial	52				
Intellectual history	56				
International history	30				
Landscape history	51				
Legal history	32				
Literature and history	53				
Local history	77				
Maritime history	21				
Medicine	19				
Palaeography and diplomatic	25				
Papyrology	6				
Philosophy of history	18				
Political history	98				
Population	22				
Science and technology	37				
Social history	155				
Transport	16				
Urban history	67				

Question 5 – How important is peer evaluation or recommendation in your selection of resources for your personal research?

507 responses received

Extremely important	115 (22.7%)
Important	244 (48.1%)
Somewhat important	103 (20.3%)
Not important	45 (8.9%)

Question 6 – Name the three digital resources which you use most often in your own research (such as TLG, EEBO, RHS Bibliography, Old Bailey Proceedings, Oxford DNB; please do not include online journals, library catalogues or search engines). Why are these resources of such value?

This question was designed to elicit thoughtful and discursive responses, and consequently the data cannot be analysed in the same way as the earlier ‘tick box’ questions. Respondents most often mentioned access to information or source material, searchability, comprehensiveness and speed/convenience as attributes of digital resources that they valued.

442 responses received

The top 10 resources listed by respondents (and not excluded by the terms of the question) were as follows:¹

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography	122
Royal Historical Society Bibliography	77
Early English Books Online	58
Eighteenth Century Collections Online	28
Times Digital Archive	24
Archaeology Data Service	19
The Proceedings of the Old Bailey	18
British and Irish Archaeological Bibliography	12
British History Online	11
Canmore	10
Historical Abstracts	10
Thesaurus Linguae Graecae	10

Summary and selected responses

1 Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)

The attributes mentioned by respondents were: instant, convenient and easy access to information, often away from major libraries; good for background details on prominent individuals; good for quick cross-referencing; comprehensive; ‘usually’ reliable; full text searching very helpful; well laid out; searchable across entries – ‘a profoundly important feature’; bibliography and cross-references appreciated; ‘Advanced search functions provide access to information and allow the compilation

¹ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/>> [25 September 2006]; Royal Historical Society Bibliography of British and Irish History Online <<http://www.rhs.ac.uk/bibl/>> [25 September 2006]; Early English Books Online <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>> [26 September 2006]; Eighteenth-Century Collections Online <<http://www.gale.com/EighteenthCentury/>> [26 September 2006]; Times Digital Archive <<http://www.gale.com/Times/>> [26 September]; Archaeology Data Service <<http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/>> [26 September 2006]; The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, London 1674–1834 <<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>> [26 September 2006]; British and Irish Archaeological Bibliography <<http://www.biab.ac.uk/online/index.asp>> [26 September 2006]; British History Online <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk>> [26 September 2006]; Canmore <http://www.rcahms.gov.uk/pls/portal/PORTRAL.wwa_app_module.show?p_sessionid=342401&p_header=true> [25 September 2006]; Historical Abstracts <http://www.abc-clio.com/products/serials_ha.aspx> [26 September 2006]; Thesaurus Linguae Graecae <<http://www.tlg.uci.edu/>> [25 September 2006]

of prosopographical statistics that could only be accessed in the printed edition through a lengthy and laborious trawl.'

2 Royal Historical Society Bibliography of British and Irish History Online

Attributes mentioned were: good for bibliography construction and identifying secondary research; good for completing references, up-to-date citations; time-saving; allows speedy (thematic) survey of literature; comprehensive, including collections of essays; 'now made even more worthwhile by its linkages to online journals and to the DNB'; peer-reviewed ('chosen by historians'); ability to search in chronological order; easy to use; useful for keeping up to date with new publications.

3 Early English Books Online (EEBO)

Attributes mentioned were: direct access to otherwise hard-to-access literature (heavily emphasised); useful search facility; comprehensive/completeness; time-saving; downloadable and printable access; useful for citations, locations. However, the resource was also noted as being expensive and therefore not always accessible.

4 Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO)

Attributes mentioned were: comprehensive/completeness; easy to use, including full text and keyword search; PDF download; access to rare resources; searchability.

'Taking manual notes requires [a] visit to [a] specialist library and the questions I ask of the material may change over time.'

5 Times Digital Archive

Attributes mentioned were: comprehensive; easy to use; searchable; allows users to access information on obscure topics and transient contexts of events and allusions.

6 Archaeology Data Service/AHDS Archaeology

Attributes mentioned were: repository of archives and partnership projects ('grey literature'); includes information excluded from conventional published reports; information not widely available elsewhere; data collections; useful guides to good practice.

7 The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, London 1674–1834

Attributes mentioned were: access to valuable primary archives; 'Gives the opportunity for sideways thinking in examination of speculative probabilities and associations'.

8 British and Irish Archaeological Bibliography (BIAB)

Attributes mentioned were: emphasis on ability to keep up to date with publishing in the field.

9 British History Online (BHOL)

Attributes mentioned were: easy access to sources 'easily available in libraries but often confined/reference only'; searchability.

10 Canmore

Attributes mentioned were: useful for locating study sites and surveys.

11 Historical Abstracts

Attributes mentioned were: allows speedy literature surveys.

12 Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG)

Attributes mentioned were: derived from scholarly editions; access to texts; searchability.

Other comments

'The Newton Project² has easily the highest amount of high-quality transcribed-from-MS XML text online (of any scholarly resource) – and I work on Newton's writings and their cultural contexts. These resources evidently and dramatically change the way historians can work.'

'Clavis canonum³ – the most complete account of canon-law collections anywhere – searchable and fuller than any published account.'

'ProQuest historical newspaper database⁴ – the best resource I have used in ages; it has full text in a relational database, and searches 10ish newspapers from their inception – it would take years to do what you can accomplish in a few hours, if you are at an institution with subscription!'

'[ODNB, RHS Bibliography, EEBO] Since they are such vast resources, I often come away from them with things that I hadn't originally been looking for.'

'[ECCO, Literature Online (LION),⁵ Old Bailey Proceedings] These allow me to access documents from a great distance, and they also allow me to maximise my time at archives by providing preliminary evaluations of rare printed materials.'

'[same] They allow me to conduct primary research from my office, thereby saving me a great deal of time and expense that would otherwise be taken up by dedicated research trips ... This means I can more easily carry out research during term-time.'

'I study British metrology, a subject that frequently needs an oblique approach ... Usually, with digital records, I am searching for references to individual makers, and find any record that includes occupation particularly helpful.'

² The Newton Project <<http://www.newtonproject.ic.ac.uk>> [26 September 2006].

³ Linda Fowler-Magerl, *Clavis Canonum: selected canon law collections before 1140* (CD-ROM, Hanover, 2005).

⁴ ProQuest Historical Newspapers <http://proquest.com/products_pq/descriptions/pq-hist-news.shtml> [28 September 2006].

⁵ Literature Online <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [25 September 2006].

'[BIAB, ADS, National Archeological Database (NADB)⁶] Allow me to easily access reports, research programmes and findings from dispersed projects and geographical areas that would otherwise take significant resources of time etc. to locate and peruse for research processes. Comparative evaluation of projects is more easily enabled through this access, allowing for data to be collected to provide broad-based regional studies.'

'My research is based upon previously unknown connections between related families and a non-conformist way of life from pre-Reformation to the Test Act. Further deep research will be needed in archives but my research would be impossible to prove without access to digital archives initially.'

'[Times, DNB, ECCO] Allow me to undertake research in ways impossible with printed resources.'

'[BHOL, ODNB, EEBO] Of value because of their completeness – not just one or two sources, but a long run of resources, at least in the case of EEBO and BHOL.'

'It's like having a resource that moves around with me.'

Question 7 – Where a resource is available in a variety of formats (e.g. Oxford DNB), which do you tend to use more?

401 responses received

Hard copy	63 (15.7%)
CD-ROM	15 (3.8%)
Online version	323 (80.5%)

Question 8 – Can you specify features you have found unsatisfactory in digital resources you have used? Please give examples if possible.

This question was designed to elicit thoughtful and discursive responses, and consequently the data cannot be analysed in the same way as the earlier 'tick box' questions. Responses were concerned with two main issues: first, and most important, was gaining access to the content; second was the nature and reliability of that content.

422 responses received

i Technical problems

Poor printing facilities (12 respondents): 'Evidently formatted for viewing on screen, not for printing [BHOL]'; 'Printing and saving – this is often crude, sometimes non-existent'; 'Print features in a database such as Dyabola⁷ where the feature to export references is not straightforward, printing is clumsy and produces many blank sheets.'

⁶ National Archeological Database <<http://web.cast.uark.edu/other/nps/nadb/>> [25 September 2006].

⁷ Projekt Dyabola <<http://www.dyabola.de>> [28 September 2006].

Images not high enough quality/poor resolution (8 respondents): 'Digitised books and tracts available from EEBO are sometimes not very legible and reproductions on my computer printers are sometimes scarcely readable.'

Issues with scanning (7 respondents): use of poor-quality microfilm; reliance on scanned page images.

Issues with format (6 respondents): inability to cut and paste material; database formats not suitable for the general public; unusable/untransferable format.

Problems downloading (4 respondents): 'Download time on home computer is a problem.'

Poor citation exporting (3 respondents).

ii Problems with (contextual/descriptive) information provided by the resource

Nature/scope of content unclear (8 responses): 'Occasionally it is unclear what is available on a particular site – you have to spend quite a lot of time navigating only to work out that something is unavailable'; 'The basis for selection or inclusion is not always made clear, where it is plain that an amount of such qualitative choice has gone on'; lack of information about maintenance status; complicated use/purchase instructions.

iii Presentation problems

Problems with interface/usability (8 responses): clunky; mechanical, complicated interface; poorly structured; 'Clunky interfaces – and the need to learn one's way around an interface for every new resource. Some standardisation of approach is needed'; 'I dislike having to spend too much time working out how to extract the information I need.'

Problems with layout/presentation (6 responses).

iv Maintenance/stability problems

Maintenance problems (7 responses): lack of maintenance; need for regular updating.

Broken links (6 responses): 'There is not always a consistent policy of updating key links incorporated into online sources (e.g. bibliographical sites).'

Unstable URLs (6 responses).

Concerns about stability of content (3 responses): instability of resource content or fear of instability: 'There is always an underlying fear that online resources will disappear (e.g. institution ceases subscription or publisher is bought/changes direction.'

v Accessibility problems

Cost and charging (13 responses): 'Sometimes the great expense of online resources limits their availability to the wealthiest institutions. I appreciate the great

amount of work that goes into the creation of these resources, but perhaps there will be a way in the future to defray the cost for smaller research centres and universities to access these collections.'

Speed of access (11 responses): 'Too slow responses leading to time out'; 'Greatest problem is speed of access. Even with a fast connection many of these sources take a long time to download.'

Availability problems (8 responses): poor availability (inability to access, patchy availability); site maintenance downtime.

General accessibility (13 responses): 'Very difficult to read extended pieces. Online is fine for abstracts and quick checks but no good for deep reading. I generally work from a number of sources at the same time so paper is easier. Paper is very portable. I can use it anywhere, any time.'

Browser incompatibility (technical issue) (5 responses): 'Use of technology-specific plug-ins that work problematically on some web browsers, e.g. specific version of Java.'

vi Problems with content

Problems with coverage (13 responses): mistaken impression of completeness; not comprehensive; no links to original documents; abstracts or extracts rather than full texts; 'There is a tendency to give an impression of completeness. Oxford DNB for example still misses many prominent figures; RHS Bibliography doesn't seem to cover all books'; 'Some resources (like BIAB) give an impression of completeness going back (in its case) to 1660. This is misleading, and BIAB is only reliable to a greater degree back to the 50s. Even then, only a fraction of contemporary published material is available'; 'MUSE⁸ is annoying because you find the abstract for the perfect article then it is unable to give you access'; 'Only samples or extracts put online rather than the complete document or a complete series.'

Problems of accuracy (11 responses): 'Inaccuracy in some records – although at a level well below 1% inaccuracies in Canmore/Pastmap can be frustrating'; 'Quick if not wiki-like correction needed.'

Problems with academic/scholarly quality (7 responses): lack of scholarly checking/rigour; abbreviated reference systems; lack of editing/copy-editing; poor citations; 'Some history gateways are nothing but ramshackle collections of mediocre webpages put up by private enthusiasts.'

vii Problems with searching and navigation

Searchability issues (50 responses): lack of full-text search; poor OCR leading to poor searching; inability to save results/search strategy; 'Huge variation in efficacy of search engines – e.g. A2A⁹ is very poor, allowing you to only search on one term'; 'Loss of search results after visiting content pages and then attempting to return'; 'Misleading or incomplete results'; 'Searching by keyword can often be frustrating, as the search engine is inflexible or works are categorised too narrowly. For instance, searching for personal names on A2A can be very hit and miss, as names are never

⁸ Project MUSE <<http://muse.jhu.edu>> [26 September 2006].

⁹ Access to Archives <<http://www.a2a.org.uk>> [26 September 2006].

modernised, or even standardised within a single reference. Perhaps searching could be aided, and editorial integrity maintained, by citing both contemporary spellings and a modern, standardised version of names and other variables for each reference. Searchable bibliographies sometimes need a wider choice of keywords/categories to be attributed to particular books, to ensure as wide as possible a set of results for a keyword search'; 'Resources such as the History of Parliament CD-ROM¹⁰ edition preclude searches that encompass common prepositions and conjunctions'; 'Search-within-search is becoming vital since otherwise large datasets produce too many hits'; 'Search mechanisms which don't allow wildcards or Boolean operators, sometimes neither'; 'Complex searches often require too complex a set of questions'; 'A searchable full-text is a key requirement, and so EEBO, while an excellent resource by virtue of its making page images more accessible, is still limited'; 'In full-text resources using page images of periodicals, etc., the underlying, uncorrected text is hidden from the user. Scholars *must* have access to that text to be able to evaluate loopholes in searching accuracy.'

Navigation issues (17 responses): 'Complex hierarchies between search and output which are slow to navigate'; lack of browseability 'Militates against serendipitous discovery'.

Problems with indexing/cataloguing (9 responses): 'For instance the In Principio database:¹¹ it mainly consists of several card indexes, which are rather old. When digitising the material, no effort was made to edit it. So it frequently happens that the same entry appears twice or even more often, sometimes with contradictory details, because it was scanned from different sources.'

viii Problems with authority/audience (4 responses): intended for non-academic audience; lack of authority.

viii General issues

Problems with using several resources together for research (7 responses): lack of comparability between resources; inability to query resources together; inconsistent formats between resources; hard to cross-reference; fragmentation.

Limited scope of digital provision as a whole (4 responses)

General comments: 'Where a resource has been designed on the model of a printed work, rather than employing the full functionality made possible by electronic – e.g. just giving a PDF version of the printed page, rather than a searchable database (the best example is the Barrington Atlas of the Classical World,¹² which has a gazetteer on CD-ROM with non-searchable text entries)'; 'It is difficult for the writers of instructions to cater for different levels of computer literacy'; 'Repetitive (copied from each other ad nauseam), low-quality, unchecked, aimed only at non-scholarly audiences, promise far more than they deliver – whether the resource is not available in extenso, or because the final product is limited/poorly designed/based on legacy technology'; 'PASE¹³ has plans for linkage with other databases, but these are not yet in place: links are highly desirable'; 'Some sort of peer review might be helpful. This was a matter discussed informally and more formally at the joint Royal Musical

¹⁰ *The History of Parliament* (Cambridge, 1998).

¹¹ *In Principio: incipit index of Latin texts* (3rd edn., Turnhout, 1996).

¹² *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World* (Princeton, 2000).

¹³ Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England <<http://www.pase.ac.uk>> [26 September 2006].

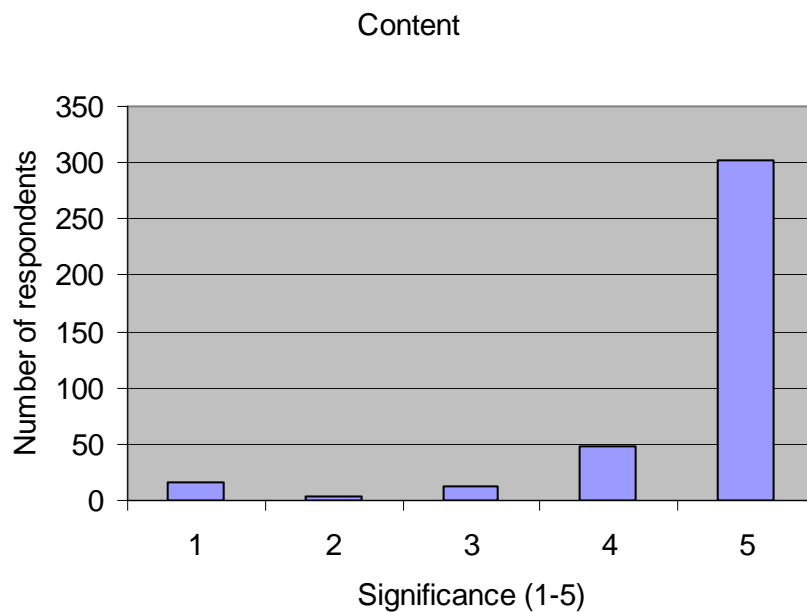
Association/International Association of Music Librarians meeting at Manchester earlier this month. There was support for exploration of a subject-area scheme that might have some connection with the Grove Dictionary website (OUP)'; 'Some of the resources are "worked", so I have not the original text but the presentation made by someone'; 'The type of digital resource I find less useful than others is image files of manuscripts which have not been tagged for searches. Clearly they are also useful, and better than having to go to the archive, but search functions would be of enormous help.'

Question 9 – What is important to you in determining the value of a particular digital resource for your own research?

(rated each on the scale 1–5, where 1=unimportant and 5=extremely important).

Please note that the scales vary between charts. Number values and percentage figures are given below each chart.

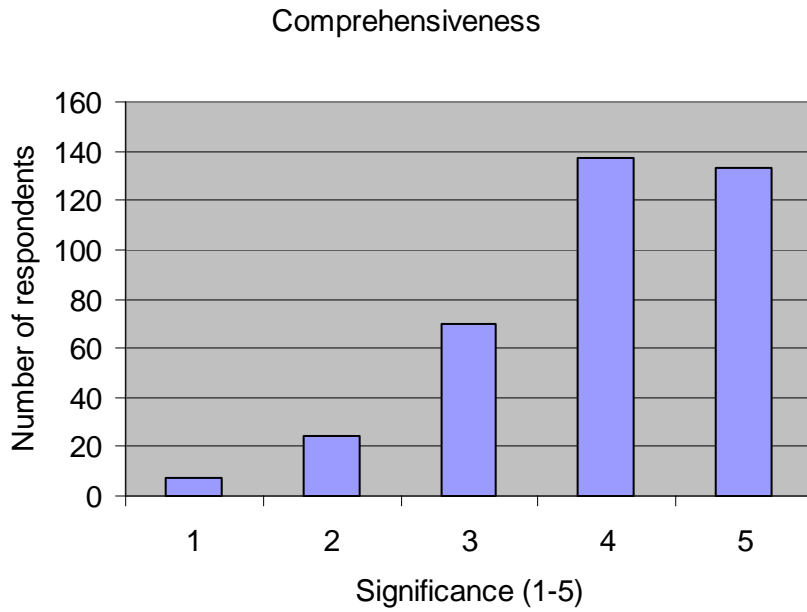
Figure 2



382 responses received

5	302 (79.1%)
4	48 (12.6%)
3	13 (3.4%)
2	3 (0.8%)
1	16 (4.2%)

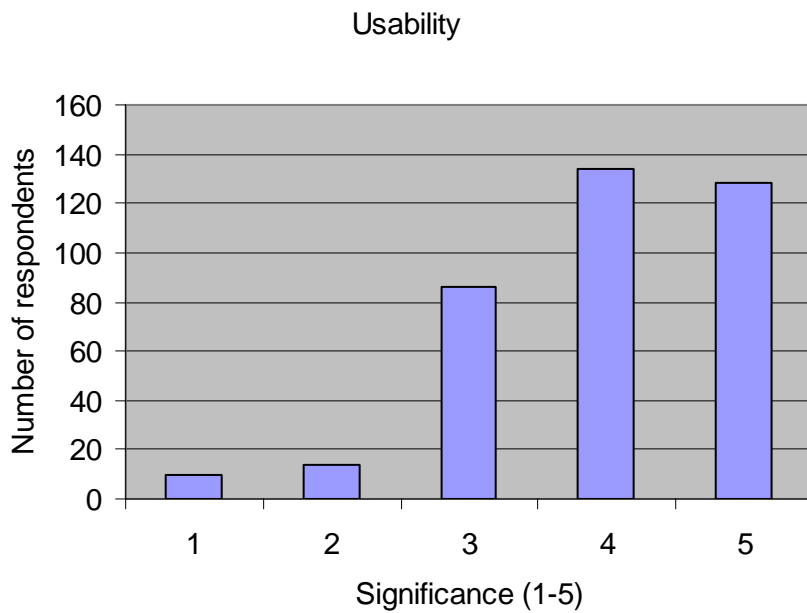
Figure 3



371 responses received

5	133 (35.8%)
4	137 (36.9%)
3	70 (18.9%)
2	24 (6.5%)
1	7 (1.9%)

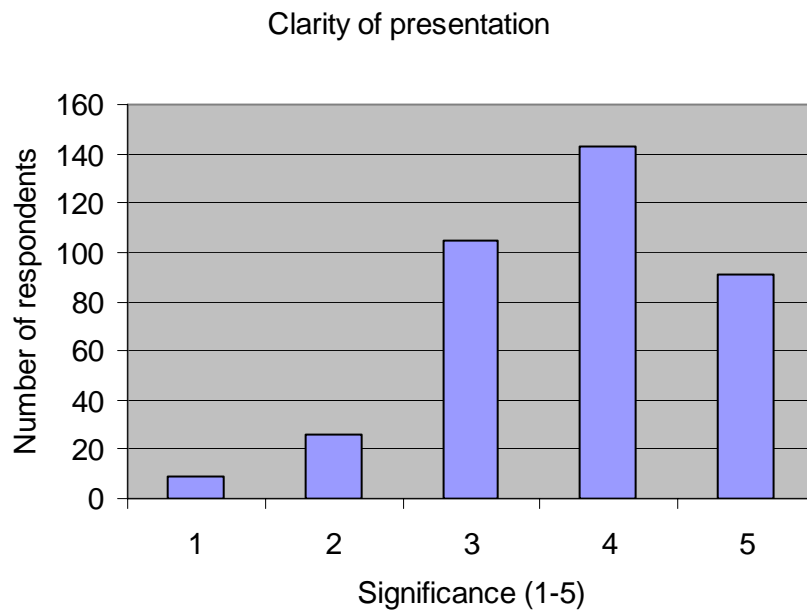
Figure 4



372 responses

5	128 (34.4%)
4	134 (36.0%)
3	86 (23.1%)
2	14 (3.8%)
1	10 (2.7%)

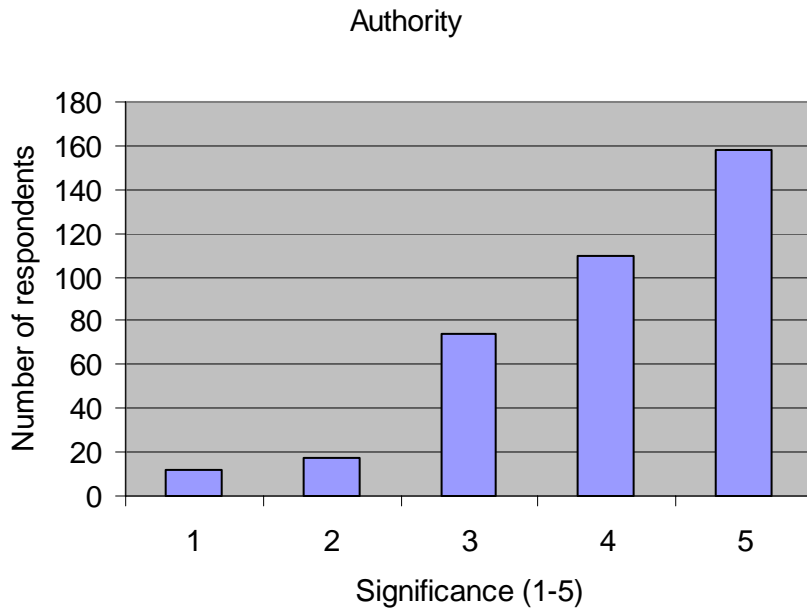
Figure 5



374 responses received

5	91 (24.3%)
4	143 (38.2%)
3	105 (28.1%)
2	26 (7.0%)
1	9 (2.4%)

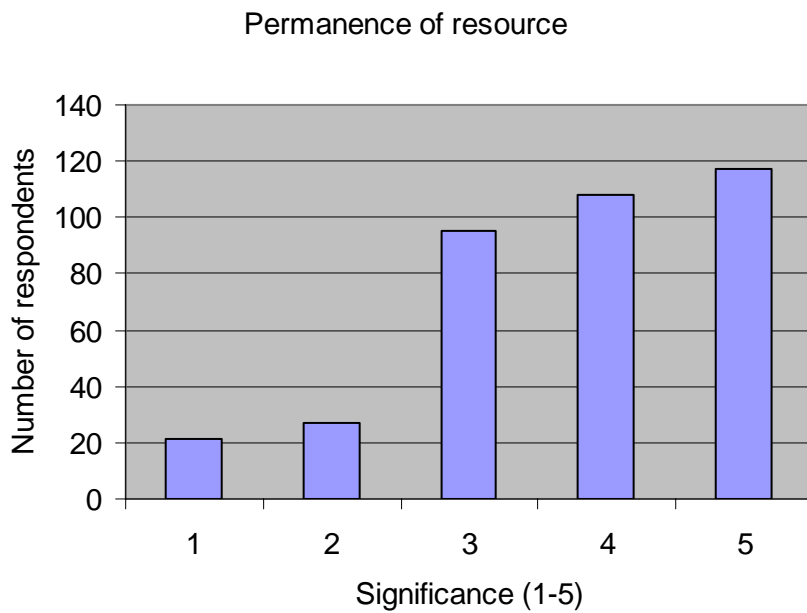
Figure 6



371 responses received

5	158 (42.6%)
4	110 (29.6%)
3	74 (19.9%)
2	17 (4.6%)
1	12 (3.2%)

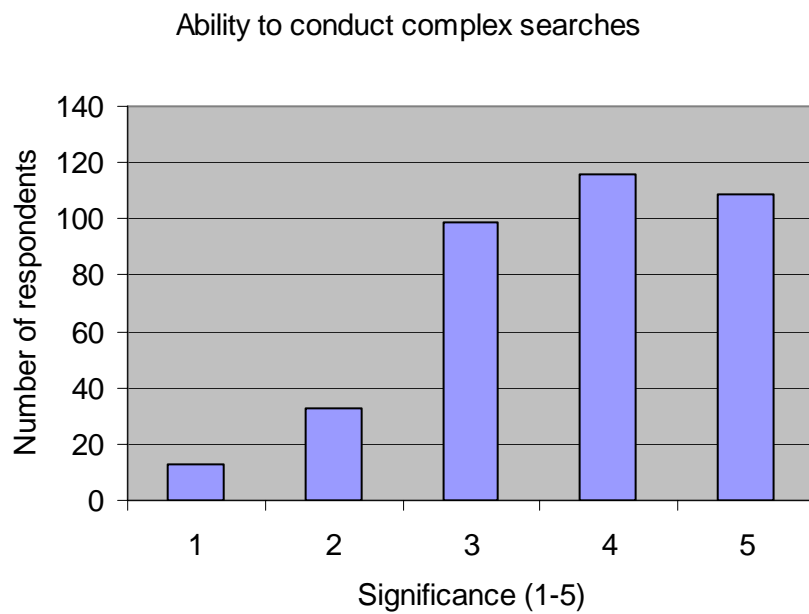
Figure 7



368 responses received

5	117 (31.8%)
4	108 (29.3%)
3	95 (25.8%)
2	27 (7.3%)
1	21 (5.7%)

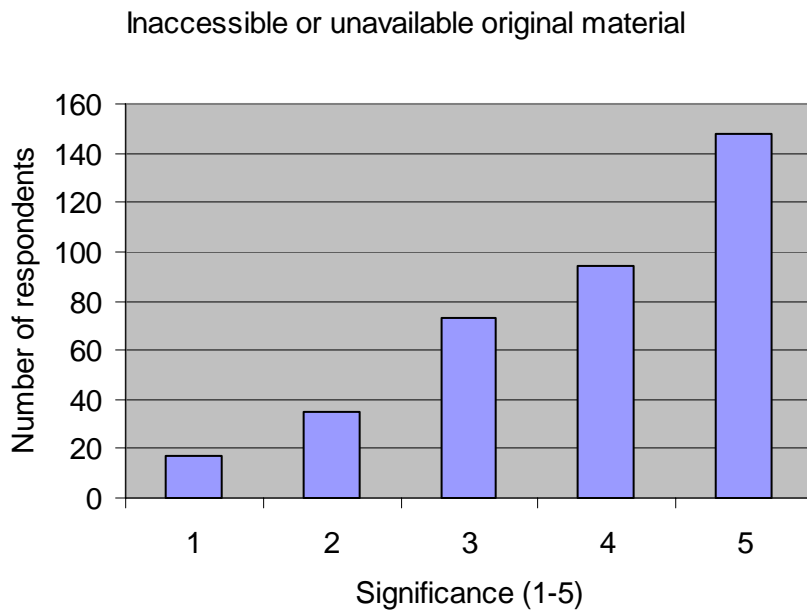
Figure 8



370 responses

5	109 (29.5%)
4	116 (31.4%)
3	99 (26.8%)
2	33 (8.9%)
1	13 (3.5%)

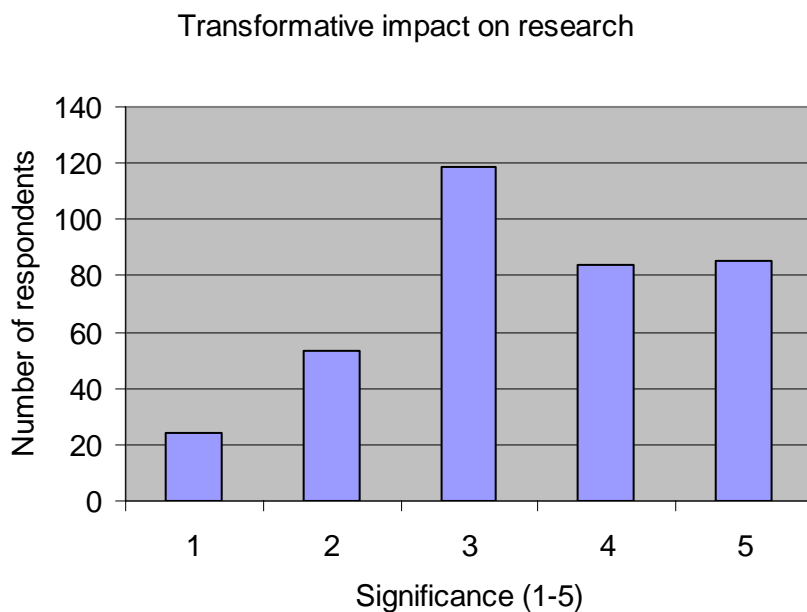
Figure 9



367 responses received

5	148 (40.3%)
4	94 (25.6%)
3	73 (19.9%)
2	35 (9.5%)
1	17 (4.6%)

Figure 10



365 responses received

5	85 (23.3%)
4	84 (23.0%)
3	119 (32.6%)
2	53 (14.5%)
1	24 (6.6%)

Question 10 – What would help you to evaluate the usefulness of a digital resource for your own research?

This question was designed to elicit thoughtful and discursive responses, and consequently the data cannot be analysed in the same way as the earlier ‘tick box’ questions.

The largest numbers of responses dealt with three broad issues: provision of peer review or similar mechanisms; personal trial and evaluation of a resource; and information provided about a resource (assisting in personal evaluation). Only those elements mentioned by a number of respondents have been picked out, below.

398 responses received

Authoritative (peer) reviews (27 responses). There were also calls for: websites providing assessments (9 responses); user feedback/surveys (6 responses); rating systems (6 responses); and a kitemarking scheme (4 responses).

Sample comments

‘Open peer review. If you could have an open forum on digital resources with signed commentary, that would be an ideal, original format that would go miles in our understandings. In other words, Author A posts a paper, and Researchers B, C, and D write in commentaries about it, adding signed opinion to the original paper, whether contradictory or supporting.’

‘More attention paid to electronic resources in review journals.’

‘A review or reviews by experts in my broad fields of study/interest who know the interesting questions to ask, and are able to articulate whether the resource was flexible enough to allow them to do that, or it came up with problems that someone who didn’t know the glitches wouldn’t recognise were there. A bit like reviews in computer and games magazines, it’s about process and performance in a variety of ways, so it might be everyday value like DNB for just looking up people, but then some exciting ways of searching and tips and tricks as well. For example, everyone goes on about visual images and history but I would like some examples of how using digital resources doesn’t just allow you to look at more pictures/stuff but actually leads to some insights about the historical past.’

‘A proper peer review mechanism, with recommendations made according to a specified and easily available set of criteria. Otherwise the only way to evaluate such a resource is to explore it thoroughly oneself.’

'Ensuring digital resources included within the standard review processes, before and after publication. Perhaps even developing a community-led virtual publisher which evaluates online resources after publication (HUMBUL,¹⁴ if it could be more research focused?).'

'A new guide to digital resources for historians would be especially useful, especially if it were online and regularly updated.'

'Perhaps an independent accreditation, rating the resource on aspects like ease of use, accuracy of content etc.'

'Some sort of independent rating? Digital resources get reviewed so infrequently, and yet they need to be reviewed no less than scholarly books and journals.'

'Some "stamp of approval" or indication of quality given by an external review panel.'

Own judgement/trial (26 responses): 'Rely on my own judgment, especially as I deal with more qualitative resources'; 'Recommendations by peers might bring resources to my attention, but only using them will influence whether or not I value them.'

Clear statement of coverage/scope/methodology (58 responses): 'Clearer contextualisation, available as part of the online source, of its remit, and the reasonings for choices made where content is not comprehensive. That need not be problematic so long as it is explained what is missing and what is not and why. Otherwise one ends up trying to go to the original source to fill in the gaps and obviating the usefulness of the digital source to a large extent'; 'An indication of the authority or peer review mechanism used in its production'; 'Knowledge of who created it; a statement of the resource and the methodology used to create it; a statement of the reliability and comprehensiveness of the evidence presented. One of the things I should have said in response to a previous question about what I find wrong with existing resources is a failure to indicate just how comprehensive it is.'

Good searchability (mentioned separately, but clearly a subset of 'own evaluation') (16 responses): 'A really good search mechanism is essential for me to determine whether a digital resource is going to be of any use.'

Peer recommendations/citation (24 responses): 'It's not so much that you need help in evaluating it ... but you need to find it first, and if a colleague recommends it, it is usable (and therefore already evaluated) and you only have to check whether it contains something relevant to your research'; 'I ... suspect that many digital resources are never properly cited in monographs and articles (perhaps used as a surrogate for print versions).'

Authority of source of funding/institutional support/authorship etc. (31 responses): 'For specialised resources: the identity of the creators; association with a credible institution: university, press, record society; clear indication of ownership of a website. Old Bailey Online does this well. Evidence of peer review or other forms of editorial control would be useful'; 'Is the original information written by a recognised authority, or does it come from someone within a respected university context? The digital "bit" of the equation is merely how that information is delivered.'

¹⁴ Now Intute: Arts and Humanities <<http://www.intute.ac.uk/artsandhumanities/>> [26 September 2006].

Reliability/ease of access (10 responses)

General comments

'The resources available in my field vary hugely in quality, depending on whether they are simply digitised versions of older printed material or recently compiled data sets. Criteria of usefulness vary accordingly and are directly related to knowledge of the underlying material that has gone into the digital resource.'

'I do not believe that "peer review" by others necessarily helps, though many of the resources I use are interdisciplinary and it might be helpful to know others' opinions of the resources.'

'For a source such as EEBO, one already has a good idea of the usefulness of the content, and one can make a judgement on the usability of it by using it. Transparency in relation to how the electronic text has been prepared is crucial, as it allows one to make a judgement on the accuracy of the base text. For a "new" resource (i.e. not a digitisation of an existing printed resource), some sense of the academic credentials of the creators would be useful, as would the technical information ... and information on the structure of a database, how comprehensive its content is, editorial conventions and so on.'

'Of course I would need full access for a substantial period of time to truly evaluate a resource. Failing that (or in addition), a full written evaluation of features and searching strategies and pitfalls, with examples, would be very helpful. This would have to be by a scholar or scholars, however, not something written by the vendor, and it would need to be much longer than the usual "book review" format to be of real use. A hands-on workshop, for instance at a conference, could also be a great help in evaluating such a resource providing that it was even-handedly informative and not merely promotional.'

'To evaluate a resource one needs to know who wrote it, who published it and who else was involved in the research. But even for pieces written by academic archaeologists, some will be light, written for (e.g.) the local tourist newspaper, while others will be rigorously written for peer-reviewed journals. It is important to know which is which.'

11. What do you regard as the key assessment criteria for digital resources (e.g. nature of content, adherence to technical standards, usability)?

This question was designed to elicit thoughtful and discursive responses, and consequently the data cannot be analysed in the same way as the earlier 'tick box' questions.

These responses indicate that users value content most highly, followed by usability (which probably encompasses other issues such as navigation and searchability that were also mentioned separately). Only those elements mentioned by a number of respondents have been picked out, below.

392 responses received

Content/nature of content (131 responses): quality of content; reliability of content; relevance of content; provenance of content; 'Nature of content is vital, but more a

matter of classification than assessment (is it a bibliography, a dictionary, a set of primary sources?); 'Content is all-important – its accuracy, accessibility, longevity, acceptance of the resource by peers'; 'If the content is useful enough, I can look past usability problems. On the other hand, I can see why institutional subscribers would value the other two criteria highly'; 'Needs to be fully contextualised so that it translates to the referencing standards of published work'; 'If the content is rubbish then the whole resource is, even if it looks nice'; 'The reliability of the content. This is a problem with the TLG, for instance, because you are only given one version of the text (usually the Teubner text) which then appears to be canonical. You really need an apparatus criticus as well'; 'Authority of content and explicit relation to the source material expressed through appropriate documentation.'

Usability (80 responses): 'Obviously quality/nature of content is the first concern, but the site's functionality is also very important. The site may have excellent information but if it is extremely slow or difficult to access then it will rapidly become a resource that is ignored.'

Accessibility (26 responses): 'Presentation in a widely accessible format, with a view towards standardisation'; 'Accessible format (both in terms of technical standards and SENDA¹⁵).'

Searchability (20 responses).

Comprehensiveness (18 responses): 'preferably an open quality which means that e.g. everything has been digitised and included in whatever it comes from, rather than the people making it imposing strict categories, e.g. for medical historians the most interesting stuff from diaries and letters edited years ago is not what the editors at the time thought was interesting, but as long as they didn't leave it out then it has future potential'; 'I would prefer more complete coverage of a smaller area than sparse coverage of a wider area.'

Authority (18 responses).

Accuracy (17 responses): 'If I detected an error, I probably would not use the resource again.'

High technical standards (14 responses): 'High technical standards is key, making it easier to assess the content efficiently'; 'Technical standards are like the engine in a car – I want to drive the thing, not tinker with the engine'; 'Adherence to data standards to ensure a consistent quality and structure of information and cross-resource compatibility'; 'Adherence to such technical standards as permit portability to future systems and permanence of content. Open standards are preferable, and will promote usability too in the long run. Good content can be wasted if it is not portable'; 'For older material, nature of content hardly matters, since a seasoned scholar will have some idea of reliability and value before he/she starts using it. Adherence to technical standards is paramount for all web-based resources. Without it, users are going to become confused and the quality of their work possibly affected and damaged.'

Permanence/stability (9 responses)

¹⁵ Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) (2001).

Adherence to academic standards (8 responses): 'Adherence to normal publishing standards (such as correct spelling, no excessive reluctance to use foreign languages, acknowledging sources)'; 'Ability to evaluate its scholarly worth according to conventional criteria of authenticity.'

Clarity of presentation (6 responses)

General comments

'Content (and types of indexing and searching) are critical. In terms of presentation, one would hope that resources would be devised with standards and usability built in as a matter of course, although I would say that if there was vital content it should be assessed high even if it had a non-standard and poorly-designed interface.'

'Nature and provenance of content; a clear account of what I am looking at and the academic standards to which it was created (think hardcopy editions and the criteria for assessing those). The rest are bonus options.'

'1) the resource is a key source that will be enhanced by making it possible to search by free text/date/subject (whichever is appropriate to the source under consideration). 2) it is not available electronically elsewhere, or if it is the existing version is too expensive, too poorly conceived to be enhanced/useable by the research community. 3) the digitisation will conform to current best practice and there will be built in safeguards to guarantee migrateability to other platforms in the future. 4) current best practice will be taken to include the production of a user friendly interface, including user customisation. 5) the end result will be made available as widely and as cheaply as possible, preferably free. If the end result is a charged service it should be charged at a rate that allows independent scholars and lifelong learners to benefit.'

'Accessibility; comprehensiveness; accuracy; usability. (1) Accessibility. Free or affordable by as many users as possible. Remote access via high-speed line. (2) Comprehensiveness. As many of the items – documents, data sources, titles, etc. – within the defined field of the collection as possible. Most importantly, clear definition of that field and clear explanation of what is NOT included. (3) Accuracy. Searches must be accurate in themselves – i.e., the result is really there, where the resource says it is (e.g., Palmer's Index to *The Times*,¹⁶ e-version and online, is notorious for getting page numbers wrong). Where errors are spotted, there must be a way to point them out and have them corrected ... But most importantly, the likely degree of accuracy must be made clear, especially with full-text resources. By hiding the uncorrected text, uncoded resources like the Times Digital Archive, EEBO, and many others conceal from users the extent to which searches (even "fuzzy" searches) overlook search items. This is why these kinds of lapses must be explained clearly in accompanying material, and strategies for dealing with them outlined. It is also why scholars must insist that vendors make that uncorrected text accessible to them. That text has important scholarly uses, and scholars could themselves help to correct and improve it in future versions of the resource. (4) Usability. Clear interface, speed (very important – some resources are maddeningly slow), flexibility (e.g., Boolean and proximity searching), easy refining of searches. Most important here is portability of search results. They should be easily printable in readable ways, e.g., a long newspaper column broken into pieces and printed across a page or pages in a readable font size. And one should be able to import bibliographical information and

¹⁶ *Palmer's Index to The Times* <<http://historyonline.chadwyck.co.uk>> [26 September 2006].

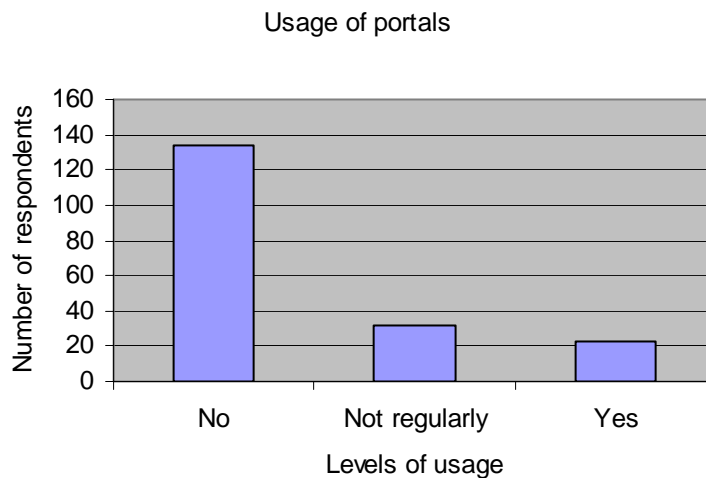
text into other documents – e.g., to cut and paste a paragraph from a periodical or pamphlet one has searched into a word-processing document one is writing. (This is another reason for access to the text one has actually searched and not merely to snapshots of the page).’

Question 12 – Do you regularly use portals to identify and quality assure digital resources (e.g. HUMBUL, British Academy portal¹⁷)? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these portals?

This question was designed to elicit thoughtful and discursive responses, and consequently the data cannot be analysed in the same way as the earlier ‘tick box’ questions.

The numbers on usage only reflect those who stated outright how often, if at all, they used portals to locate digital resources (some respondents discussed the issues surrounding portals without indicating their own level of usage). There seemed to be some confusion over what a portal actually is; some respondents may have been thinking of library or institutional portals rather than web-based ones, or indeed of something quite different altogether.

Figure 11



390 responses received (of which 189 indicated usage levels)

No	134 (70.9%)
Not regularly	32 (16.9%)
Yes	23 (12.2%)

Strengths of portals

Immediate reference; integrity of information; offer large numbers of grouped links; can alert user to unconsidered resources; user-friendly; quality assurance; pre-assessed resources; easily available; can be searched quickly; ‘Portals are useful where they aggregate multiple sources, and allow users to access primary records

¹⁷ British Academy portal <<http://www.britac.ac.uk/portal/>> [26 September 2006].

within databases in the “deep web”. Gateways of lists of surface web links are not useful to me.’

Weaknesses of portals

Search can be basic/variable; large numbers of results; extra time in navigating them; user-unfriendly; not easy to navigate; lack of ability to comment; not very comprehensive; outdated links; can be too general; introduce undesirable element of control (‘portals have keepers’); do not identify useful or valid resources; incomplete coverage; authority issues; criteria for inclusion not clear; confusing; direct to poor-quality resources; cumbersome; not regularly updated; quality assurance not transparent; not up to date; ‘I don’t know why I need to go to another website to get this search tool – why aren’t they capable of feeding stuff into my own departmental/library pages?’; ‘If coverage is not complete then there is a risk that something may be missed because the portal may imply completeness and stop the researcher searching by other means.’

Portals as evaluation tools

Prefer to assess quality myself; know the best sources and can access them directly; not aware that most portals evaluate; rely on them as one indicator of quality; resources come from reputable bodies and are tested during development; read reviews of resources; not useful for quality assurance; find new resources through other means; ‘They are useful to ascertain the value of a resource, before making substantial use of it, although it seems like a cumbersome detour if one seeks merely to answer a simple question.’

Sites mentioned (not all of them portals)

HUMBUL (Intute: Arts and Humanities) (26 responses); Google (4 responses); Access to Archives (2 responses); Institute of Historical Research (2 responses); British Academy (2 responses); CervantesVirtual, Council for British Archaeology, ADS, Jack Lynch eighteenth-century pages, Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE), Earlymodernweb, Heirport, Archon, BHOL, JSTOR (1 response each).¹⁸

13 – Other comments

‘Image v. text for manuscript material? Image every time: I like to make my own mistakes not copy other people’s! Searchable text v image for printed material? Searchable text every time – you have no idea how much JSTOR [angers me] in this regard.’

¹⁸ Google <<http://www.google.co.uk>> [26 September 2006]; Institute of Historical Research <<http://www.history.ac.uk>> [26 September 2006]; Cervantes Virtual Library <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com>> [26 September 2006]; Council for British Archaeology <<http://www.britarch.ac.uk>> [26 September 2006]; Eighteenth-Century Resources <<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/18th/index.html>> [26 September 2006]; Biblioteca Nacional de España <<http://www.bne.es>> [26 September 2006]; Early Modern Resources <<http://www.earlymodernweb.org.uk/emr/>> [26 September 2006]; Heirport <<http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/cfm/heirport2/index.html>> [26 September 2006]; JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/>> [26 September 2006].

'On-line resources are essential; the replication of unadulterated primary resources on stable platforms is the essential key to building an effective and sound future. Derivative work will prove temporary, unsatisfactory and more likely to be unmaintained in the medium to longer term.'

'Online information is great, but I hope it does not lead to the demise of libraries and archives. Getting your hands on the real original material offers another aspect that online material does not have.'

'It would be most helpful to have an online space where scholars could "review" specific resources and leave comments and questions about them. The usefulness of most focus groups on digital resources are compromised by the marketing aims of the vendors of commercial databases, who are more interested in persuading key library personnel than in directly addressing the research and teaching needs of actual scholars. And, frankly, too many librarians consider themselves the essential go-betweens, so that it is rare for a scholar to be able to speak directly with the people who actually designed and implemented a resource, and to compare notes with other scholars about it in the presence of those people and with the program itself up and running. This is why conferences and workshops like the one held in 2005 at Bath about EEBO are so important to the future. Otherwise we'll indefinitely continue to see a situation in which millions are being spent on creating and refining and acquiring whiz-bang digital products that few scholars and students are actually using very much, or very wisely.'

'It is difficult to see how best diverse rational historical/archaeological interpretations can be reached and promoted to the interested public. It is particularly difficult in an age of such spin and dumbing down. All too often one gets the impression professional scholars (academics at least) no longer care about the quality of material the public is served. Anything that can be done to help redress these difficulties would be most welcome.'

'It would be helpful if there were more training available to enable users to be critical and evaluate digital sources more easily.'

'I think serious refereeing of digital publication is extremely important. I think the digital resource is vital, but as someone who works on the fringe of this field I find it frustrating that the powers-that-be do not always take it seriously.'

'I conduct my research entirely within many different, successive, short-running and overlapping archaeological projects, begun for commercial clients. Consequently there's little time for training or self-improvement, except haphazardly and on the job. There is an element of teamwork with colleagues in all this, but it's not exactly peer-review within the meaning of Question 7.'

'After filling out the survey, I would reiterate that peer review and provenance are key for me – I can get non-peer reviewed material anytime through Google and evaluate its usefulness myself. It is no substitute for the academic resources, though it is a supplement.'