

Paper #4

User Behavior Trends and Library Collections

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Introduction

For our users, the familiar interface of catalog-and-books-on-shelves is rapidly becoming less important to how they search for information. Our understanding of how faculty and students seek information through this familiar library interface, though based on decades of research, is not perfect, and we understand less about their behavior in the current hybrid print/electronic environment. The increasing heterogeneity of information sources invites the development of new patterns of research and resource use as users rely on a mix of “old” (print library) and “new” (online library and the Web more generally) methods in their work. These new methods allow them to discover and access information in ways for which there is no equivalent in the traditional research model.

How should college libraries respond in their collection building to these developing patterns of information seeking? The research and anecdotal evidence on which this paper relies provide a jumping-off point for discussing the implications for libraries' collection development strategies.

Trends in User Behaviors

Our knowledge of user behavior is necessarily fractured. In terms of library collections, we need to be interested in:

- search behavior at a macro level (what resources do people choose to search?) and the micro level (what search strategies do they use?)
- how users evaluate resources
- reading and materials-use behaviors
- such broad behaviors as interactions with both physical and virtual library spaces and preferences for one format or another.

We also know that we must be careful to distinguish user behaviors by group and that, even then, generalizations are risky. On the whole, though, users prefer online journals for most titles, and faculty across all disciplines are increasingly willing to forgo print journals when a *trusted* online source exists. But faculty and librarians (the former more than the latter) are skeptical about e-books and do not see them as replacing print collections in the next five years. Whether or not faculty and students will use online reference materials beyond basic ready reference sources is not known; extrapolating from print reference source usage is probably not helpful, because print reference is privileged by location in libraries.

Recent studies of faculty by Roger Schonfeld of Ithaka show significant differences among faculty attitudes and behavior and between librarians and faculty. Faculty, on average, view collections and services differently from librarians and students and they employ various strategies depending upon their level of familiarity with their information need. Among faculty, there are differences not only among scientists, social scientists, and humanists, but also among classicists and philosophers. Faculty in Economics are moving from use of print resources to online more rapidly than faculty in Classics. And in some disciplines, like Computer Science, print has all but disappeared.

Underclassman typically come to college with an approach to research that they have found to be successful, an approach that depends, in the first instance at least, on Web search engines. But as they mature and are mentored by faculty, they begin to assume some of their mentors' research behaviors. Students rely upon a range of filtering strategies to select retrieved resources. These filters vary between the novice (not looking beyond the first two or three screens of results) and the more mature researcher. Nevertheless, they can sort through the online "resource pile" much faster than they can with print sources, which means they "eyeball" far more material than they would in the physical library. Students are willing to do multiple searches and iterations of a search. If no material matches their search, rather than assume that nothing exists, they consider the problem to be with the search, not the collection. There is no consensus about the value of metasearch (except Google), and not everyone wants a single search box for all purposes. Usage numbers for online sources far exceed circulation data, but circulation rates for physical materials in our collections are not decreasing rapidly.

Convenience is the most important driver in determining how students seek information and the most important criterion for user satisfaction overall. We also know, however, that convenience doesn't necessarily equate to choosing an online resource. For example, if printing from an online source is difficult, as is the case with monographs, users may prefer a physical copy of the work. Above all, users want portability of sources, preferably a personal copy they can mark up/annotate and consult in class. Again, the ability to print is critical. As one Swarthmore student stated, "if we have that much reading to do, what would you suggest? Reading on the screen is simply not an option: it's less comfortable, you can't highlight it, and you can't flip back and forth."

The catalog is less and less the place where faculty or students start their topical research. Google, Google Scholar, multidisciplinary databases from Proquest or EBSCO, and JSTOR tend to be preferred over our catalogs. Users also prefer to search at the network level if they can sort results by most convenient to least (show me online sources, then what's in my library, then what's in my consortium, etc.).

Questions for Discussion

1. Given trends in user preferences and in technologies for reading and using electronic texts, what should be libraries' commitment to buying print monographs; how do collecting

partnerships work for or against provision of monographs? What are the consequences of collections partnerships for monographs on our materials budgets?

2. What is the place of e-monographs, whether through purchase or digitization, in collections today; what services do they perform and under what circumstances might they replace print monographs?
3. If e-journals have won the format "war," under what circumstances should libraries continue buying journals in print, discontinue the archiving of print journals, or, for that matter, discontinue archiving e-journals locally? To what extent is a collaborative approach to archiving print journals in regional/national collections the one we should take?
4. How aggressive should libraries be in pursuing electronic remote access to all materials; should we assume digital delivery of music and video collections as well as journal and reference collections?
5. In order for users to be comfortable with the distributed, networked library collection, what delivery times should partnerships develop to deliver journal articles and book chapters to the desktop? What about delivery of physical materials?
6. How do we define the roles of mediated and self-serve models for access to and delivery of all collections?
7. Since interface and access mechanisms are more various and fluid in the online library than they were in the analog library, what means should libraries deploy to facilitate discovery/evaluation/guidance in an information world dominated by search and digital text? If, for many users, sources that are not online will not be findable and therefore not exist, and if faculty and librarians value information that is only available in printed form, how can they address the issue of integrating print source discovery with users' preferences for online materials?
8. For reference titles, should we assume that electronic is always preferable to print? Getting users to use the reference collection has always been a challenge, but how do we best choose sources for and guide users to reference collections today?
9. What changes do we need to make to library resource allocations in order to engage in systematic programs to digitize special collections materials?

Bibliography

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