

User Studies and its Related Activities Based on Library and Information System



Library Science

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ABSTRACT

'User studies' comprises the study of people's need for, and use of, information. A user study may be defined as a systematic study of information requirements of users in order to facilitate meaningful exchanges between information systems and users. And this paper explores the activities, purpose, objectives and need of user studies in the contemporary world. Moreover this paper would explain the characteristics of Users and the linkage between the User and the Academic Library with details

1. INTRODUCTION

User studies' is a difficult area of knowledge to define. It can include conventional surveys of library borrowers and this may be the main form of activity, which comes to mind when the term 'user studies' is mentioned. The term 'user studies' is preferred than 'library surveys' because studies of information needs or information use behavior focus upon a wider range of information sources and channels rather than simply librarians. In spite of the father of the librarian Dr.S.R. Ranganathan's message, to keep user and use of information in mind while developing library and documentation systems and services, no serious attention was turned to this aspect in India until the beginning of the sixties. The efforts in the past were mainly in the direction of initiation of fresher on the use of large university/special libraries, as a part of reference work. In the last 25 years, there have been some efforts to undertake use/user studies. Here again, the interest has been limited to obtain clues that will help to modulate present resources and services to meet the changing requirements of users.

2. HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT:

Within the field of user studies the investigation of 'information needs' has presented seemingly intractable problems. If we date 'user studies' from 1948, when the Royal Society Scientific Information Conference was held with its several surveys of users' information-seeking behavior then the progress towards some theoretical understanding of the concept of 'information needs' has been slow. This fact is recognized by virtually every commentator on the subject from menzel and paisley through the various authors in the ARTIST volumes to Ford's review of 1977. As well as drawing attention to this fact, the authors have tried to discover why this is so and have generally concluded that the reason lies in inadequate methodology and the failure to do research that is "cumulative". Attention has also been paid to the definitional problem of 'information need' and the difficulty of separating 'needs', 'wants', 'expressed demand', 'satisfied demand', etc. However, while much of this work is very useful, the problem remains generally unresolved.

One of the important landmark in the History of User Studies was the establishment of the center for research on user Studies in 1975 at the university of Sheffield. The centre became fully operational on 1st January 1976. The objectives and activities of the Centre are discussed in the following lines:

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The centre offered advice, education and information as well as undertook its own research in the field of 'User Studies'. This field of research looked at people's needs for information and literature of all kind's, and was concerned with such problems as how people recognized information needs, how they searched for information and literature using both formal and informal sources, and how and in what form they obtained and made use of it. Amongst other things it looked at this publishing industry, at the production and dissemination of information services, and at library system effectiveness in terms of information services, and at library system effectiveness in terms of both the user and the non-user.

3.1 Research

To provide a firm foundation for its other functions and to develop insights into problems in User Studies, the centre undertook its own research, in which it applied and validated methods already use in other disciplines, re-analyzed previous user studies and where necessary, developed new techniques. The staff of the Centre annually evolved a programme of research, which was subject to approval by a management committee. The programme of the research was prepared in consultation with the British Library research and development Department in order to ensure that the centre's activities reflected the interests and priorities of the department. In addition, the centre encouraged senior visiting fellows and students to work at the centre.

3.2 Education and Training

An important function of the centre was the provision of education and training in the field of user studies. This involved providing for disseminating information about new research projects, seconding appropriate specialists to the centre for short periods of time, organizing seminars and discussion groups, and providing formal short courses were geared to the library / information service manager, as well as those interested in research in the field, and the aim was to encourage the application of research and research findings to the development of more effective user services. As well as holding courses and seminars at the centre itself, the staff of the centre held Traveling workshop in any part of the U.K on request. A charge was made for this later service.

3.3 Advice and Consultancy

The centre was a focal point in the U.K for advising on the conduct and analysis of User Studies and such advice was drawn from the experience of the centre or from its contacts within the university and elsewhere. The centre assisted in carrying out studies either on contract or at the direct request of the funding body. In some cases, it looks full responsibility for conducting such studies.

3.4 Information

A comprehensive index to the literature of User Studies was maintained. Literature searches were undertaken on request. A collection of completed studies was developed and research workers deposited their reports as well as used the library for reference purposes. A register of current research was also maintained. The results of previous work were used to create a data bank, which were available for reanalysis and provided a basis for advisory services.

3.5 Publications

Details of publications and information about the activities of the centre were reported in a newsletter. The British library research and development department financed the centre. The centre for research on user studies was a part of consultancy and research unit (CRUS) of university of Sheffield.

4. USER STUDIES AND ITS ACTIVITIES

The activities may be broadly grouped into:

- User studies that include (a) user behavior; (b) use of litera-

ture; (c) bibliometry

- User education and training that include: (a) academic context of education and research; (b) professional context for practitioners in medical and pharmaceutical, engineering and technology fields; (c) industrial R&D context; and (d) developing techniques and methodologies for the preparation of audio-visual kits.
- Use promotion studies that include: (a) interaction with the industry (small and medium); (b) interaction with the professional groups; and (c) some aspects of economics of information.

There has been no systematic and organized effort to take up to programmers for the promotion of use of information and knowledge by potential users, expect perhaps in the context of research. Mention can be made of only two seminars, which interlocked librarians and information scientist and potential and actual users of information in small-scale industries and engineering industries respectively.

The problem of information supply was a matter of common concern of these two interacting groups. The first one was a seminar and exhibition on the theme 'Information for Industry' organized in 1975 at Mangalore, a city with a concentration of industries. The participants from the side of users were entrepreneurs and experienced managers of small industries. The outcome of the seminar was two-fold. It brought to the attention of the user group the need and importance of various categories of industrial information. It also pointed out to the information professionals the type of information support, which the small industries need and hope to get.

INSDOC and the association of Engineering Industries in 1978 organized the other seminar jointly. Engineers, managers, businessmen and information scientists attended this. A number of issues on technology choice, transfer, application, utilization, development, and management came up for discussion. This seminar also served the purpose of drawing attention to the need for promotion of information use among the engineering and managerial groups in industry. Many studies were conducted in different libraries and information centers in India.

5. NEED TO STUDY 'USER'

There is a need to user because:

- (a) Users attitudes are essential considerations in the design of the library services.
- (b) Users have ways of doing things and these should be accommodated in the design of services; and
- (c) Users have ways of doing things that should be changed.

For finding out information attitudes of users, the following type of questions may be asked:

- What do users require from the library, in terms of type, quality and range of services to satisfy their needs?
- What does users do about his/her needs?
- How does the user select available resources?
- How does the user carry out a search for information

6. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF LIBRARY USER STUDIES

Of several methods of evaluating the library, user surveys have gained significance as a well-established measurement technique, although methodologies employed have varied. They are a systematic in-depth attempt to obtain an objective view of a facility and match it against certain standards of efficient service or rate of improvement (Rogers, Rutherford and David Weber, 1971).

George Bonn reports that: "The main advantage of utilizing user opinions to evaluate the collection are that the actual strengths and weakness of the collections as well as levels and kinds of user needs can be identified, questions can be related to specific goals are objectives of the library; trends in research and changes in interests can be determined and serious users, (e.g., faculty, research workers. Professional people) are likely to be experts or at least knowledgeable in the literature of their fields.

6.1 Why User Studies

The reasons for conducting various user studies are:

- To identify the actual strengths and weakness of library resources and services.
- To identify the levels and kinds of user needs.
- To identify faculty and student priorities for library resources and services.
- To identify the limitations or problems which seem to discourage the use of the library;
- To identify the level involvement or participation of faculty and students in the library programme; and
- To improve the organization and planning for library services at both the local and national levels.

Since one of the objectives of a user study should be to predict future information demands and requirements, it is important that studies are not confined to establishing current requirements only. The problem is a familiar one, for a number of reasons; users are often not in a position to state their future information needs or information that would make progress in their discipline. Usage patterns and user-stated requirements are partly a function of existing services and the past experiences of the users. However it may not be the user's fault that information requirements cannot be established by the methods currently in use. A preoccupation with the inadequacies of the user is not the sort of attitude that the information scientist should take as the begins an inquiry about information needs and uses.

6.2 Purpose of a User Studies

The Purpose of a User Study are:

- To examine patterns of library use and identify gaps in use;
- To make book selection systematic;
- To evaluate the resources;
- To introduce / render documentation and information services; and
- To evolve resource sharing with other libraries.

7. USERS OF LIBRARIES AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

While it is rather difficult to identify mutually exclusive categories of users, it is possible to indicate broadly the major categories of users of libraries. In general, the users may constitute the following categories: students, teachers and researchers, scholars, authors and writers, planners and policy makers, business managers and executives, entrepreneurs and industrialists, bureaucrats and the general public. The demand for information by each of the above group may vary according to its specific requirements.

7.1 Characteristics of the User

It is easy to list many characteristics of an individual, which may or may not relate to his information-seeking behavior. Evidence is often conflicting or difficult to interpret. *Age* is one such variable. As so much information exists in printer form, clearly reading ability is an important variable. Differences in *personality* may also be relevant. Factors as motivation, extraversion / introversion and emotional stability have all been postulated as possibly related to information seeking.

7.2 User interface

Library is a storehouse of knowledge. A library professional should make this knowledge accessible to all irrespective of their caste, creed or religion. Everyone coming to the library is a learner, whether he is a renowned intellectual a neo-literature, or a child. All of them should be given equal attention, and everyone should find the library atmosphere congenial and the library science satisfying. The library professional should establish a cordial relation with users; after all, both are seekers of knowledge. Some persons become the readers of the library on their own. But the library professional should try to treat readers by persuasion, by publicizing library activities.

7.3 The User and the Academic Library

Requirements of users of academic libraries are so many and varied that academic library resource and services can rarely be seen as an adequate response to these needs. Even in the past when financial resources were relatively healthy, academic

libraries had difficulty in making adequate provision for the users. But in this present financial climate their resources are tightly stretched to ensure a balance of provision for all user groups. The financial problems of academic libraries are therefore key factors in the attitude and user of services. Sensitive areas like limited periodical and book stock, multiple copies of recommended textbooks, limited loan collections, inter-library loan services, etc., are each considered from the standpoint of the libraries ability to provide them and the users satisfaction with these resources.

Even if financial problems were removed and unlimited stock and services were available, there would still be problems for the users. There is concern amongst the libraries that the librarians are not always certain that they fully appreciate the needs of their users. Research is described in librarian's and others' studies of users' needs and attitudes.

7.4 Impending problems for the user and the academic library

The relationship between the academic library and the user is a constantly changing one. At the present time the most important factor influencing the relationship is possibly financial stringency, but there are other outside factors, which will possibly significantly affect users, library use and academic library management. The factors, which are by and large beyond the control of either the user or the library, are:

- Future restrictions on the photocopying of copyright material;
- A wider range of physical formats for stock that the academic library will find necessary to purchase;
- Extension and development of computerized information services.

One of the interesting points about these developments is that in cases (i) and (ii) they might demand a closer dependence of the user upon the academic library, and case (iii) might reduce the dependence of at least some users on academic libraries.

Academic libraries have changed in recent years as much as if not more than other departments in their institutions. New technologies, new teaching methods, etc., have demanded these changes, and the likelihood is that the changes will continue and even accelerate. But not all of the changes have been a response to the problems of the user; nor have we made all the necessary changes to respond to the problems of the user.

7.5 User Community

A user is a person who visits a library for one or more of the following purposes:

- To browse through a collection of the latest arrivals in the library, current journals and similar others;
- To seek a particular document for consultation or study in the library or borrow the same;
- To obtain current references on a specific topic or bibliography of references over a period;
- To obtain factual information on a topic, event, activity etc., through reference sources;
- To obtain a photocopy of a journal article, a conference paper or a technical report;
- To get an English translation of a research paper from any non-English language.

Individuals and groups of persons visiting a library for any of the above purposes are generally known as the community of users of the library. This community of users may be of diverse groups, comprising different categories of users such as, students, teachers, planners and business executives. The user

community could also be of only type of users such as, research scientists of an institute. General libraries usually serve a composite group of user communities whereas special libraries orient their services to a single category of users.

8. IMPORTANCE OF USER STUDIES

8.1. For evaluating information Systems

Information workers are preoccupied mainly with the description of their systems rather than in the analysis of those systems in the analysis of those systems in relation to larger systems of which they are part. User studies would enable user information workers to know the defects and bottlenecks, which inhibit the flow of information from the information systems. They would also be able to assess difficulties based by the users in obtaining the required information through such studies. Having known the difficulties of users of using the information systems, they can be modified / improved to suit exactly to the user needs.

8.2. To make the Users Perceive Information Related Problems

Users of Information often do not consider their problems as related to information, but as marketing, technical, financial etc. For example, an entrepreneur requiring supplementary finance often considers it as a financial problem. But if information were restructured as to which agencies or financial institutions provide financial assistance to small entrepreneurs, he would then be motivated to seek information. Therefore Users of Information need orientation to perceive problems in this way and express them as information questions. User studies would be helpful in making user perceive their problems as information related.

8.3. Motivate users towards stimulation of demand for information

If the staff of the information centers understand the problems of users and give them relevant information, the users are motivated to seek more and more information. The user studies will enable to understand their problem and the information workers follow it up by supplying factual information, the desired information is permanently instilled. Once students are assured that the information center is aware of their problems and needs, and can supply information tailored to their specific needs, the demand for information will swiftly increase. Therefore the interaction with the users to seek more and more information not only increases the demand for information but also facilities meaningful exchanges between the sources of information and the users.

CONCLUSION

A large number of information user studies have been made at a variety of levels undergraduate, postgraduate, teaching and research-staff and practitioners in industrial and other laborites. Nearly all point to an unsatisfactory state of affairs and widespread ignorance of information reinforced by a lack of interest. Various possible improvements are indicated:

- To excite interest by convincing users of the value of information.
- To involve teachers in instruction, by realizing their role as both source and channel of information.
- To make libraries and information services easier to use.

Have user studies shown up specific ways to improve the situations, e.g., additional services, improved access to user studies? Can one assign priority to the different approaches? Can cost-effectiveness studies be made in this area? Should all user studies include, as an objective bringing out educational implications?

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