
INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF THE USERS : METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

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1.1 Introduction

Information generated from various sources is recorded and made available for dissemination to the users in different forms such as : books and journals, research papers, technical reports, conference papers, dissertations, patents, standards, etc. Users are expected to refer to any one or more of these sources for obtaining a piece of information. The enormous growth of information (information explosion) in all spheres of activity in an organised form facilitates easy access and identification on the part of the users in a Library and Information Centre. Scattering of information causes problems to the users in identifying their needs.

The scope of the paper depicts the various types of users for various types of libraries and information centres, their nature of information needs or expectations or behaviour, deficiencies in satisfying their needs, studies to be made to overcome these problems and finally different methods or techniques in identifying users needs. All these analysis necessitates to design a suitable "Information System" for an organisation.

1.2 Users Vs. Needs

Any information organisation dealing with users which is otherwise known as customers is expected to give special attention in collecting, organising and disseminating original information according to the needs of the users. Different user categories have different needs for information depending upon their duties and responsibilities as well as socio-economic, political, cultural and educational requirements. A general kind of select categories of information users and type of documents they usually need is shown in table given below:

User Categories	Types of Documents Usually Needed
(1)	(2)
1. Students	Text books, Reference books, General books. Primary literature: Journals, Conference proceedings etc.
2. Writers and Scholars	Journals and Conference proceedings, Reference books, Government documents, Fiction, Biographies, Bibliographical tools.
3. Researchers in Science and Technology	Monographs and Treatises, Primary literature, Reference books, Bibliographical tools, Government documents etc.
4. Researchers in Social Sciences	Monographs and treatises, Primary literature, Reference books, Bibliographical tools, Government documents, General books.
5. Field Engineers and Medical Specialists	Management information, Patents, Standards, Specifications, Manual and Special handbooks.
6. Business Managers and Executives	Government Documents, Management Information, Trade Literatures including Market Information.
7. Industrial Entrepreneurs	Primary Literature, Reference Books, Bibliographical Tools, Government Documents, Patents and Standards, Manuals and special Handbooks, Trade Literatures, General Books.
8. Bureaucrats	Government Documents, Management Information, General Books.
9. Librarians and Inf. Specialists	Primary Literature, Reference Books, Bibliographical Tools, Government Documents, Patents and Standards, Manuals and Hand books, Trade Literature, General Books.
10. General Readers	Primary Literature, Reference Books, General Books, Fiction, Travelogues, Biographies Etc.

However, the pattern of information need of the users varies in particular cases for a particular person at a particular point of time, but there is a general pattern of information requirement amongst the various kinds of users other than managers, decision makers etc. In general, there are four kinds of sources, which the users need as per their requirements are as follows:

- i) Current Information
- ii) Exhaustive Information
- iii) Everyday Information
- iv) Catching-up Information

i) Current Information Need

In order to keep the users up-to-date in their respective fields of development, the necessity of current information is intended to make available right information in the right format of the seeker at the earliest possible. Fastness and timeliness are the two characteristics of making the information sources available to the users. This need becomes more and more in the fields of R&D institutions, where developments take place in many areas such as new activity, new services rendered, new products and processes, new methods and techniques etc. with the help of modern information and communication technologies. Therefore demand for current or instant information is much required for the users.

ii) Exhaustive Information Need

This necessitates when a particular information user needs a particular information exhaustively. Detailed information on a particular field helps the users to draw a suitable conclusion for the purpose. Unless exhaustive coverage of information sources is done so as to study a total picture of that particular area or activity, the users become helpless to arrive at a suitable conclusion.

iii) Everyday Information Need

Day-to-day activities vary from one user to another user. Since different kinds of users need different kinds of information at different points of time, there are some users who need information on a particular activity every day. This goes on changing from one day to another. Therefore everyday information is expected to be fast, reliable and up-to-date. This is one of the important information needs of the Users.

iv) Catching-up Information Need

A brief and precise information are the characteristics of this kind

of need of the users. The information should be as simple and to the point so that it can easily be caught by the users. This is an easy approach or access to information by the users in a particular field of activity which gives the complete picture of that area in a precise form.

1.3 Library User Studies

This is a method or technique for identifying and assessing the areas of Users need. In general the kinds of use in a Library by the users are

- (i) Reading and Circulation
- (ii) Reference
- (iii) Browsing
- (iv) Support for design making
- (v) Intensive Research and
- (vi) Using computer facilities for being made accessible through the ON-LINE PUBLIC ACCESS CATALOGUE (OPAC).

The areas of user studies are mainly concentrated to the assessment of the needs of the users of Education and R&D Institutions (Science and Technology, Communication etc.). But library user studies are designed to identify and analyse how various persons or groups use libraries. Robert Taylor wrote : " The librarian must become a modern generalist, concerned and knowledgeable about print, sound and image, about automation and computer technology, and about formal and informal communication systems."

Therefore user studies are often instigated to understand, justify and explain or expand the library use for interest of the users. In many of these studies, qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the users are always compared with the degree of Library use. These are:

- a) Necessity and effectiveness of library service
- b) Various reading habits or tastes of the library clientele
- c) User's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the library resources, services and personnel
- d) Nature of borrowing books
- e) Use or non-use of Libraries by various individuals or groups
- f) Use of information and communication technology in the libraries
- g) Do library use patterns differ such as : urban, suburban and rural

1.4 Methods or Techniques for Assessing the Users Needs

A library or information centre is intended to meet the demands of its users for its effective functioning. It is necessary to assess the user's satisfaction so far as its available resources and services are concerned. Whether the objectives of the library are fully satisfying the user's needs, in order to assess the satisfaction or dissatisfaction and potential needs of the users, some methods or techniques are applied like (i) Direct Methods (ii) Indirect Methods (iii) Survey Techniques.

1.4.1 Direct Methods

This is a method which is again divided into broad areas given below for obtaining relevant information from the users directly. All these methods supplement the indirect methods.

- (i) **Information gathering habit :** Studies reveal that a particular user collects information from various sources such as referring books and journals in the libraries, references made in the research papers, latest developments taking place around the world through current bulletins and news letters, indexes and abstracts of the periodicals, personal contact or interview with the specialists of that particular field, corresponding with the specialised organisation for his/her related activity.
- (ii) **Reading habits :** The reading habits of a particular user counts much to achieve his goal. The number of hours and library material making use of by user is another method of user studies. The data so obtained help the authorities of the library/information centre to render effective service to documents to be procured and necessary services to be rendered.
- (iii) **Service Preference :** It is necessary to find out the nature of service required to cater the needs of the users of a library. Besides day to day service, the users also need current awareness service (CAS), Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) service, Reprography and Micrography service, On-line Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) service etc. So a practice to ascertain the kinds of service preferred by the users should be introduced in the library and documentation centres.
- (iv) **Information flow:** Sharing Information between individuals and groups, attending conferences, seminars, workshop of national and international repute, publication in current journals are some of the mediums through which information from the responsibility

of different groups of disseminators such as researcher, editor, publisher, printer, documentalist, information specialist etc. These groups organise their information to ensure its smooth flow to its users.

1.4.2 Indirect Methods

Since direct methods involve interface of investigators with the users, indirect methods analyse and show the use of library from its official records, statistics and annual report. These are:

- (i) **Library Records** : This is an authentic source of reference to get data on library services rendered to its users such as lending inter-library loan, reference services, use of general and reference collection, documentation service etc. This method also gives scope to the authorities to provide efficient library service to its users.
- (ii) **Bibliographical References cited** : In each and every chapter or article of a book or journal a number of bibliographical references and further reading are cited for the readers. A book or a particular article or journal frequently cited shows the demand of that particular document which help the librarian to procure that for the interest of its users. By this means, institutions of excellence, individuals and experts are easily identified.

1.4.3 Survey Techniques

To explore information needs of the users, various techniques are applied to get feed back from the users. These are practical oriented in nature and some as primary source of information. Some of these techniques are :

- (i) Questionnaire
- (ii) Interview
- (iii) Diary
- (iv) Observation.

Questionnaire method raises some direct and indirect questions to the users to get data on resources and services of a library or documentation centre, is up to the satisfaction of the user or not.

Where as through Interview method, personal contact with the user is required to collect data about the library. Some times the interviewer takes questionnaire with him to personally collect information from the user of the library.

Diary method presupposes the maintenance of a diary by the user of the library for a specified period of time. After using the library the

user leaves the diary with the investigator for analysis. The diary contents information like reading material available in the library, services rendered, suggestions for improving library collection and standard of service, modern techniques to be applied or improved in the library to give better service.

Observation method through direct or indirect ways collects data as a participant or non-participant. It is called participant observation when observer directly participates with the activities of the group/individual under study. If it is from a close distance, it is known as non-participant observation. Through this method the behaviour of the users, their tastes and fashions are observed and noted. Finally data collected from these two sources are analysed.

1.5 Conclusion

The Future scenario indicates very clearly the importance of information as a vital resource for all human material progress. If the present day information society wants to become more responsive to the needs of the potential users, the libraries, information and documentation centres must offer a higher level of information service taking into consideration the information seeking preferences of the users rather than adjusting with the existing system. A time has come which needs to study the techniques of information to be created, used and communicated so as to render fast and efficient service required by the users. The ability to retrieve, analyse, compare and combine, process and manipulate and communicate is a promise that is far more important than the mere access to information for the potential users.

1.6 References

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