



Linguists as newspaper users: Perceptions and experiences



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 November 2014

Received in revised form 25 September 2015

Accepted 29 April 2016

Available online 20 May 2016

ABSTRACT

To explore humanities scholars' perceptions and uses of newspapers as an information source, a study was conducted with Croatian researchers and academics in history and linguistic departments at universities and research institutes. This paper presents only a portion of the findings: those from respondents in the field of linguistics. The study began with the general assumption that newspapers are a relevant information source for scientific research in the humanities, but their potential is not fully exploited because of limited access to newspaper collections and search options. An additional assumption was that newspapers are especially important in linguistics research because they reflect the evolution of and changes in a language and provide information on the relations between a language and its socio-political context in a certain place and time. The results partially confirmed these assumptions, showing a clear divide between those who perceive newspapers as an important research source and those who do not. In addition, respondents expressed the need for better technological solutions, but they do not always use those already available to them. The results also show perceptions of the value of and actual use of newspapers; information behavior related to newspapers (e.g., type and format of newspapers used, type of information need in newspapers, motivation for newspaper use, employed search strategies, and approaches to managing information from newspapers); and the challenges researchers face in using newspapers. The results contribute to analyzing the information needs and behavior of a specific newspaper user group, and provide data which can aid in the development of innovative services based on newspaper collections.

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1. Introduction

Modern science is an extremely dynamic system that, supported by constant development in technology, produces large amounts of information disseminated not only within the scientific system, but also often outside it to the wider public. In this exchange of information with the scientific community, the social community takes on a proactive role, not merely using the results of scientific research, but also acting as a driving force in the development of science. Science then is inevitably intertwined with culture as understood in its broadest sense, that is, all that human society has created, both physical and abstract. Therefore, the sources of information used in scientific work can, and should, be diverse, especially in the social sciences and humanities. Newspapers serve as an indispensable source of information for certain historical, linguistic, sociological, political, and other scientific researches. It is often impossible to explain the context of a social phenomenon without the information available from newspapers because of the basic role they perform: explaining and informing the public about important current events and recording everyday life in a certain time and place.

A range of issues surrounding newspapers as a source of information presents a challenge for information institutions developing services for users of newspaper collections. First are the specific information needs and behavior of scholars using newspapers as a source of scientific information. Scholars need to take notes, ask questions, seek answers, and create working bibliographies which will later be amended, structured, shared, and compared to others. Secondly, newspaper information has specific characteristics influenced by the structure, format, and quality of the paper or its digital version. When we also consider the challenges arising from digitizing news and building digital newspaper collections, it truly can be said that this topic warrants closer examination and requires a holistic approach to find effective, practical, and feasible solutions.

The results of the survey presented in this paper contribute to analyzing the information needs and behavior of a specific newspaper user group and provide data which can aid in the development of innovative services based on newspaper collections.

2. Problem statement

In the last few decades, great efforts have been invested in the long-term preservation, digitization, and accessibility of newspaper collections, including historical newspapers in libraries, archives, and museums (LAMs) and current newspapers from newspaper houses. In

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order to justify such efforts, it is not enough to say simply that newspapers are an important part of the cultural heritage and that is why they must be preserved. With an endless number of digital documents, there must be a clear reason for choosing something to keep for the long term; usually that reason is “scholarly, scientific, research, administrative and/or personal interest” (Harvey, 2010, p. 8). Newspapers possess all of those values. Today, modern scholarship is changing intensively and rapidly, creating a new paradigm of e-science and cyber-scholarship. Information institutions must respond to such changes by offering material for research purposes, preferably with value-added services. To be able to do that, comprehensive research into scholars' information needs and behaviors is important for shedding light on the subject and providing a basis for developing digital infrastructure and services. This research focuses on a specific group of humanities scholars (linguists) as a context, and explores the following questions:

- What are linguists' perceptions of the value of newspapers and the actual use of newspapers as research sources?
- How do linguists use newspapers for their research?
- What are their information needs and typical information behaviors, especially regarding search strategies and approaches to managing information from newspapers?

3. Literature review

LAMs that hold newspaper collections usually track who their users are and why they use newspapers. However, the literature reveals little research on more complex behaviors of newspaper users, especially those connected to scientific research in the field of humanities and social sciences. Over the years, a significant body of professional literature has been written about scholarly information behavior in general (e.g., scholarship practice, activities within the research process, or the information needs of scholars), especially since the advent of the digital age (Bates, Wilde, & Siegfried, 1995; Borgman, 2000; Borgman, 2007; Palmer, 2005). Early research done in the 1950s and afterwards offers information about scholarly research practices before they were influenced by information and communication technology (ICT) or when ICT influence on scholarly practice was in its beginnings (Egan, 1954; Stone, 1982).

Since then, many authors have identified key activities in the research process for humanities scholarship (Brockman, Neumann, Palmer, & Tidline, 2001; Ellis, 1993; Meho & Tibbo, 2003). Unsworth (2000) introduced the concept of scholarly primitives, which are the basic functions common to scholarly activity across disciplines, such as discovery, annotation, comparison, references, sampling, illustration, and representation. Building on this concept, Palmer, Tefreau, and Pirmann (2009) developed a concept of scholarly information activities and primitives in which the primitive is seen as ‘at the base or beginning of a larger process’ (p. 7). Palmer et al. (2009) identified five core scholarly activities: searching, collecting, reading, writing, and collaborating, with a set of primitives for each activity (e.g., direct searching, chaining, browsing, probing, and accessing) and cross-cutting primitives. These findings concerning scholarly information behavior offered a basis for developing library and information center services for researchers (Palmer et al., 2009). Palmer et al. (2009) concluded that ‘a question facing service developers... is not what services need to be offered digitally, but rather how do we proceed in the long term to move all services to an e-research platform’ (p. 34).

How scholars conduct their work in an online environment has become a widely researched topic in the past decade. Toms and O'Brien (2008) focused on understanding humanities scholars' information and communication technology needs. Among other issues, they investigated the use of primary and secondary sources and found that the existence of primary sources in digital form influenced the type of research conducted. They also found that humanities scholars usually are unaware of existing tools which could aid them in textual analysis

but do express a need for better tools that would enhance their research process. Gardiner, McMenemy, and Chowdhury (2006) studied the information behavior of British university academics in the digital age and specifically compared the information behavior of academics in computer and information sciences, business and management, and English literature. The results relevant to this study showed that newspapers are used frequently, but in digital format; the printed newspapers held by university libraries are used infrequently. Lönnqvist (2007) investigated the information-searching behavior of humanities scholars, including linguists. She found distinct differences among not only research disciplines, but also among scholars within the same discipline. Her findings showed strong relationships among researchers' information-seeking behavior, personal and professional characteristics, and subject of inquiry.

Benardou, Constantopoulos, Dallas, and Gavrilis (2010) explored the scholarly research practices and needs of arts and humanities researchers. Interestingly, they described arts and humanities researchers as curators of scholarly information who transform primary information into secondary facts “through augmenting information objects semantically through annotation and edition, and through transforming them into knowledge objects by means of scholarly writing and publication” (p. 28). Kemman, Kleppe, and Scagliola (2014) focused on the digital research practices of humanities scholars in the Netherlands and Belgium. They showed the dominance of general search systems and of keywords as a search strategy and the rare use of advanced search options, confirming the findings of Toms and O'Brien (2008).

Many authors have analyzed historians' information behavior and needs, research methods, and use of primary sources (Allen & Siczekiewicz, 2010; Anderson, 2004; Duff & Johnson, 2002; Hassan, Wade, & Wilkinson, 2012; Tibbo, 2002), while a much smaller number of works has focused on other disciplines (Krtalić & Hasenay, 2012). Feeney (2014) examined the use of newspapers by scholars in different disciplines through a content analysis of dissertations and theses, showing that scholars in a wide range of disciplines use newspapers as research sources. As expected, large numbers were historians, followed by a range of disciplines, including language and literature. Jones (2009) conducted a comprehensive literature review of issues surrounding newspapers collections, from their significance and meaning to preservation and accessibility. She focused on the use of newspapers in different research disciplines, including linguistics. Discussing how digitized historical newspapers might be used to further linguistics research, Jones pointed to authors who stand as examples of how newspapers can be used as information sources in researching language. These examples include uncovering earlier citations of words and changes in regional language usage (Popik, 2004), understanding changing patterns of standard usage in language (MacQueen, 2004), measuring linguistic evolution and diffusion over time (Erbach, 2004), and using digital newspapers in sociolinguistics research (Schiffrin, 2001). Ezema and Asogwa (2014) analyzed the sources cited in articles published in two linguistics journals and provided data on news publications as cited sources, claiming that news publications have very low citations.

Cheney (2010) researched the use patterns of library news products and sources by students and faculty at a large academic library. She concluded that scholars and students use and perceive the role of news databases differently when teaching, learning, and researching; therefore, she stressed the need for better understanding of users' information-seeking behavior. Freeland and Bailey (2008) investigated the use of print newspapers in academic and research libraries and concluded that it has decreased in the digital age.

Other authors have focused on newspaper use and search options. Bremer-Laamanen (2013) offers deeper insight into the issue, describing the National Library of Finland's article crowdsourcing project, in which participants use crowdsourcing tools to clip and add metadata to newspaper articles, collect articles about their interests, and share these interests with others. These capabilities enhance the user

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