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Information Needs: Developing Personas of Humanities Scholars

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A B S T R A C T

A persona represents a group of target users that share common behavioural characteristics. The personas method, an approach to systems design, has been receiving significant attention from practitioners. However, only anecdotal evidence currently exists for the effectiveness of personas and there have been criticisms about its validity as a scientific approach to research. This paper attempts to demonstrate how incorporating personas may lead to better understand the information needs of humanities scholars. Humanities scholars in an advanced ICT environment in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan are sampled as a case. Previous studies show that the humanities scholars have a significant negative relation with ICT use; they are using it less than scientists and social scientists, and they demonstrate a significantly higher use of library facilities than other academics. There is also a lack of up-to-date international research on the humanities scholars' information needs that takes into account recent rapid increases in the availability of ICT infrastructure, especially the Internet. As such, the objective of this study is to understand the information needs of humanities scholars and the effect of the electronic environment on their information seeking behaviour using personas. This study is conducted within a conceptual framework based on an integration of existing models of information-seeking behaviour, along with additional new elements representing the information context environment, such as languages, decision to seek and format of information resources. The four personas that were uncovered in this study may be able to effectively communicate the actual information needs of the humanities scholars through the personal narrative, name, and face, which continuously will remind the academic library of what their users really want and need from their services. This study also lays the foundation for future research by identifying variables of interest, and building construct validity through the themes of information needs that emerged.

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INTRODUCTION

The information needs and behaviour of scholars have long provided a fruitful area of inquiry within library and information science (LIS) research. Over decades of investigation, researchers have identified and analysed the information needs characteristics and attributes of scholars, and determined their similarities and differences, if any, in order to plan appropriate library user services. Various analysing methods have been developed in information behaviour studies, however most of these methods involved with a common shortcoming — they fail to make the users seem like "real people in the eyes of making decisions" (Maness, Miaskiewicz, & Sumner, 2008). As such, when target users and their needs are abstract and not life-like, librarians and library decision makers are more likely to use their own assumptions

about the users to drive the design process of library services. In effect, the design process may not reflect the real scholar's information behaviour and the scholar's information needs are not centred.

Before designing a product, service or system, most library institutions routinely gather information about the needs and goals of the target users (i.e., the individuals being designed for) (Pruitt & Adlin, 2006). The proliferation of user-centred design (UCD), an approach to design that attempts to fully understand the needs and desires of the users rather than design aesthetics (Norman, 1988), has facilitated the understanding that users should be a vital part of design processes to lead to developing more usable and satisfying systems (Abras, Maloney-Krichmar, & Preece, 2004). UCD objects optimize the usability of designed products rather than forcing users to change their ways to act to use the product (Kahraman, 2010). However, even though library organizations are aware of the expectations of the target users, many library services still fail to meet the users' needs (Bailetti & Litva, 1995; Pinfield, 2001) and the usability of today's library websites and systems in many cases is still extremely poor (Nielsen & Norman, 2000).

To provide a more vivid representation of target users, Alan Cooper, a notable software developer, proposed the use of personas which is defined as "fictitious, specific, concrete representations of target users"

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(Pruitt & Adlin, 2006). According to Cooper (1999), a persona represents a group of target users that share common behavioural characteristics, needs, and goals, written in the form of a detailed narrative about a specific, fictitious person. These details make the persona seem like a real person in the minds of designers (Cooper, 1999). Accordingly, by using a narrative, picture, and name, a persona provides a human–computer interaction practitioner with a vivid and specific design which fabricates the persona to look like a real person in the minds of designers (Miaskiewicz, Sumner, & Kozar, 2008). The narrative also addresses the goals, needs, and frustrations of the persona which are relevant to the product or system being designed (Maness et al., 2008). Norman (1988) explains that in the context of personas, empathy is needed to allow an "understanding of and identification with the user population, the better to ensure that they will be able to take advantage of the product, to use it readily and easily — not with frustration but with pleasure" (cited in Maness et al., 2008). Empathy for the personas allows the design team to stop talking about the general user when making product design decisions. This profound shift from talking about general users to the understanding of and identification with the needs and goals of the personas allows the designers to more effectively address user needs (Maness et al., 2008).

This study shares the results of an effort to understand the information needs of humanities scholars. Humanities scholars are known to be intellectually able seekers who are not technical in orientation (Buchanan, Cunningham, Blandford, Rimmer, & Warwick, 2005). The acceptance of, and difficulties experienced with, the use of electronic resources by humanities scholars become the dominant issue for many studies. Humanities scholars have been considered as being reluctant users of technology (Stone, 1982); they feel the pressure to use and deal with technology (Massey-Burzio, 1999); they have been confirmed to have low search skills and dissatisfaction with electronic databases (Bates, 1996; Barrett, 2005); and they are late and slow adopters of new technology in comparison with scientists and social scientists (Tahir, Mahmood & Shafique, 2008). Wiberley and Jones (2000) found that the senior humanities scholars adopted new technology at a slow rate compared to their junior counterparts.

However, prior research indicates that human scholars demonstrate a significantly higher use of library facilities than academics from other disciplines (Whitmire, 2002). Current works on the information behaviour of humanities scholars predate the wide availability of the Internet. This study, with the aim of furthering existing works on the information needs of humanities scholars in the Internet age, focuses on humanities scholars in an advanced ICT environment in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, a developing country in the Arab World. Till date, there has been no studies conducted directly with scholars in the Arab world. The results of this study yielded "personas" describing different classes of humanities scholars on a university campus, which can be used to guide librarians in providing sources and services that facilitate increased library use. In the context of library services, personas allow the librarians to ask, "*does this digital resource allow Dr. Mohammad to accomplish his goals?*" and "*would this information source frustrate or help him?*". In the development of the persona, interviews with and/or observations of users are essential, because they uncover the attitudes and behaviours of individuals that might not be evident in other data (Cooper & Reimann, 2003).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Information needs is a general term used synonymously with information requirements to indicate uses, demands and needs stated by the user (Brittan, 1970). According to Rowley and Turner (1978), information need is any piece of information, recorded as well as unrecorded, that a scholar may need (as distinct from want, demand, and use) in connection with his study, teaching and research activities. If the need is urgent, the search may be pursued with diligence until the desire is fulfilled. Information needs is thus a requirement that may drive

scholars into an information-seeking process to meet their information gaps (Norbert & Lwoga, 2013). When a scholar has information needs, he or she is seeking an answer to a question or a solution to problem. The need will be noted by the types of materials that the scholar believes is of particular importance to his or her research (Meho & Tibbo, 2001). However, it is not necessary that information needs translates into information-seeking behaviour as personal and contextual factors may enhance how an individual responds to the need for information (Case et al. 2005).

White (1975) and Hiller (2001) stated that if academic librarians are to realistically serve the scholars, the former must recognize the changing needs and variations in information gathering and provide services that would be most useful. Similarly, King (2005) and Song (2009) emphasized that since the information needs, seeking behaviour and expectations of the scholars are continuously changing in the rapidly changing information scenario, academic libraries should recognize these needs to re-orient their collections, services and facilities to keep pace with these advancements and provide the most useful service to their users. Therefore, a thorough understanding of user information needs and information seeking behaviour is fundamental to the provision of successful information services (Zhang, 1998). According to Devadason and Lingman (1997), it is essential as it helps in the planning, implementation, and operation of an information system, and services in work settings. Lueg (2002) further added that the goal of identifying user's information seeking activities is to find information that satisfies his or her information needs.

Many authors have pointed out that the studies on information-seeking behaviour and needs of social scientists are fewer than those involving the natural sciences, and the studies of humanists' information needs are fewer still and conducted prior to the advent of the Internet (Line, 1969; Hopkins, 1989; Blazek & Aversa, 1994; Challener, 1999; Buchanan et al., 2005). Gorman (1990) surveyed the information needs of theologians at seven theological colleges in Adelaide, Australia. He found that theologians rely heavily on the "invisible college" for exchange of ideas; use libraries but also build their personal collections; function independently of librarians and seek information by themselves; and enjoy browsing shelves and scanning journals. Watson-Boone's (1994) review of the literature on the information behaviour of humanities scholars provides a good overview of the information needs and habits of humanists before the widespread use of the Internet. Drawing on 16 studies published between 1983 and 1992, Watson-Boone identifies the following major characteristics of humanists' information needs: They primarily use monographs in their works, and rarely consult general bibliographic works, indexes, and other secondary services. They track down primary materials by following references in other works and by sometimes consulting colleagues. They often consult archivists and special librarians, but rarely use general reference librarians. Watson-Boone argued that humanists "graze" within texts and their colleagues' minds, rather than "browse" through collections, shelves, or catalogues. Bronstein and Baruchson-Arbib (2008) compared the use of print and electronic information channels by 136 Israeli human scholars and found out that the scholars used more books and journals than electronic resources. The study concludes that the scholars are disinclined to abandon their traditional ways; they still base their research on printed books and journals and find new information by browsing the library stacks and following citations.

In developing countries, a number of studies on humanists' information needs have been carried out which partly indicate the scholars' information behaviour. Zainab and Goi (1997) who studied the citations from Malaysian doctoral theses in the humanities revealed the use of a wider number of journals and book titles which indicate that humanities scholars need to use a greater number of sources for their research information needs. They use a high percentage of documents in the English language even though about 66% of the dissertations were written in the Malay language. The references by and large are of Malaysian or