Supporting effective communication and workflows in social science research: findings and summary of a group discussion

At the end of 2010, at an event hosted by SAGE and facilitated by the Research Information Network, a group of academic librarians and doctoral researchers came together to discuss the provision of information services for researchers in the social sciences. The event was designed to both explore ways of improving the provision and consumption of information during the research process and to discuss how the value of the content that researchers and librarians choose and supply could be demonstrated. This article summarizes some of the key findings from the event and encourages further discussion with an aim to finding solutions.

BERNIE FOLAN
Head of Journals Marketing
SAGE, London

Introduction

This day-long event brought together a small group of academic librarians and doctoral researchers in the British Library Conference Centre in London to discuss the provision of information services for researchers in the social sciences. SAGE, as well as other publishers, hope to use the findings to develop better support for the needs of researchers and librarians.

This article presents an overview of the discussion under six themed headings and summarizes the key findings of each. The participants[1] hope this will aid further exploration and discussion, by individual institutions and within cross-industry groups.

Real and perceived problems in the discovery, use and creation of research material

The discussion began by identifying widely used routes to discovery of relevant research, which included Google Scholar, TOC alerts, Library Catalogue search, JSTOR, P2P sharing, Twitter, edited conference volumes, real-life network sharing of pre-published peer-reviewed work and conference attendance. One researcher decried a well-known source's anthropology search as 'horrific', and one of the librarians warned that some experienced researchers, who are supervising early careers, have narrowed their discovery methods worryingly, for instance relying on one archive source too heavily. There was a feeling that there is a 'real danger of fossilization'. Researchers do not always fully understand the parameters of what is available to them via different tools and even the newest library discovery tools can be too blunt a tool.

All the participants felt that it is essential to look beyond their discipline, yet researchers need to learn skills for more 'informed browsing' to avoid the off-putting problem of returning 'massive results'. It was noted that there are gaps in search and browse skills at many levels, with a clear need to improve low levels of take-up of training. From their own experience, they made a number of interesting observations, firstly that Google can be superior to Google Scholar for locating relevant material, but without a skilled search, the volume of hits returned is overwhelming. Secondly came a reminder that not everything of value is online, particularly in the case of some primary and secondary sources. Finally, it was noted that once a complicated search to deliver highly-targeted results has been performed, it can be saved as an RSS feed. RSS can also aggregate all searches and other inputs into a 'one-stop shop'.

What became clear was that information discovery is not the only problem. Access also continues to be a problem when institutions cannot afford to expand collections or when they need to cancel titles. For example, at one UK institution, departments have each been asked to draw up a core list of publications, taking into account what they read and where they publish, to create a 'protected journals list'. Initiatives like this, favouring traditional subscriptions, could potentially harm 'big deal' availability and inhibit the growth of open access (OA) funding.

Libraries with devolved budgets can find it 'nightmarish' to purchase cross-disciplinary research, and often do not manage it. For these institutions there is a real fear that, as well as being unable to purchase core material, it will make future OA funding models impossible to implement.

Librarians asked that their branding on publisher platforms be made more prominent as it is more important than ever, with multiple remote entry points to purchased research, for users to understand how the access is made available to them. There are, inevitably, some misperceptions that content is 'free' if it is accessed via Google.

Summary of findings

- There is a need to combat reliance on narrow discovery methods and misunderstanding of search tools by some experienced researchers who are supervising doctoral students.
- Browsing outside discipline is essential, but it is now a predominantly search culture.
- There is a need to improve adoption of search and browse skills training and appoint institutional advocates.
- Greater transparency is needed on service inclusion and overlap between widely-used services and gateways (by both researchers and librarians).
- Library branding needs greater prominence on publisher platforms to highlight library value
- Education on OA funding mechanics is needed at senior level in universities[2].
- Institutions with devolved budgeting need improved systems to purchase cross-disciplinary material as well as fund OA submissions.

What do librarians and researchers need from each other to improve research workflows?

There was a consensus amongst the librarians that they needed to know more about the research they are trying to support. At one institution, subject librarians are invited to academic department meetings to hear researcher needs and concerns. Everyone felt this practice, in some form, should be more widespread. Librarians want to understand the expectations researchers have of how the library can support them and discover how aware researchers are of the range of tools and material available.

Amongst the researchers, there was a wide variance in the level of understanding of how library purchasing operates, and agreement that it is beneficial to improve understanding amongst researchers of how material is made available. Librarians need to find a way to explain the mechanics and challenges of purchasing to researchers who, in turn, need to understand why everything they require cannot be made available to them.

Many budgetary challenges and contradictory statements are conspiring to confuse. For example, as librarians deal with the impact of a VAT increase in moving print to electronic (to widen access), they are being told that, despite cuts, the institution 'must protect researchers at all costs'. One of the biggest challenges to enabling research is felt to be the sometimes 'quick and dirty' ways librarians are forced to justify what to keep or cut to senior managers, i.e the need to respond very quickly to late announcements and short deadlines for 'big deals' from publishers.

Being tied into big deals can make it difficult to have the flexibility to respond to the needs of researchers and this can lead to negative responses to new subscription requests. Additionally, when big deals are broken up, hundreds of titles can become unavailable, so librarians can find themselves spending more time explaining why things are *not* available rather than *helping* researchers access what they need, even where not immediately available on site.

Summary of findings

- There is a need for greater attendance of librarians at departmental subject meetings and other forums to better understand researcher needs and concerns. (Where this is happening, librarians could share good practice.)

- There is a need to explain the mechanics of content purchasing and its challenges to researchers. (Are researcher reps needed on library committees and is this happening successfully in any institution?)
- Better education of senior financial managers on agreed common themes (eg. finer detail of usage analysis) is required to avoid mis-understandings.

How librarians and publishers can work together to demonstrate the value and impact of purchased research material on their institution's strategic goals and results

All of the librarians present agreed that it would be useful to benchmark their use of resources against each other to help contextualize usage. However, there was acknowledgement that there are sensitivities in all quarters in relation to the information on title or company usage existing in the public domain.

There was agreement that more data is needed to provide a complete picture of resource provision and value. Useful 'non-usage' information examples discussed by the participants included:

- publishers supplying institutions with information on number of published authors and mapping of these authors onto purchased material
- publishers relating content purchased or available to courses taught
- article-level metrics tools, for example, a correlation between institutional repository deposit and usage of the final article may encourage greater IR deposit. Google Scholar ranks and returns the publisher version higher than the IR version, so citing is usually of the publisher version regardless of which is used.

The librarians present welcomed the provision of additional information, but were conscious of the pressures on time resulting from processing this extra data. They would value publisher assistance in supplying data that is not currently available to them or would be too time consuming to gather and assess themselves. Publishers could perhaps work together to provide more institutional-level data.

All present at the meeting acknowledged that much usage driven by peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing is hidden – therefore all participants only see part of the bigger picture.

Summary of findings

- Institutions require institutional-level data reporting, beyond usage statistics, to compare like with like, e.g. author numbers, usage patterns of institutionally generated research, and effects of purchased material on research. (Can cross-publisher reports be developed?)
- Institutions can be poor at knowing and valuing what they have, for example PhD numbers.
- It is essential, though challenging, for authors to demonstrate the impact of their research beyond academia[3].
- There is a need for a single robust and universal academic ID and profile site. There are numerous initiatives in existence, but there needs to be one solution that can be tied into academic appraisal and help showcase institutional output.

Resources beyond scholarly articles and chapters for research and output

It was very clear from the comments made by the researchers that interacting with contributors and others in a network outside of peer-reviewed journals, for instance via blogs, can be hugely intellectually stimulating and is a key part of some research processes. Twitter is used to enable public engagement with research. Other sources cited by participants included databases of news articles, LexisNexis, society websites/blogs, listserves, podcasts and videos. However, all participants acknowledged that one of the huge academic challenges is that sources such as video and audio are not peer reviewed. Helpful quality filters are absent. All present agreed that peer review is still a critical process. In some disciplines it was acknowledged that peer review partially happens in public with more and more researchers 'polishing' their work on blogs via the comments.

Researchers also reported using special collections and archives, and data and statistics from government collections. The opening up of resources enables the public to join with researchers so that topics are ‘crowd-sourced’. This is seen as a valuable interaction and there was a feeling that collections, in many cases, need to be promoted more effectively beyond niche research circles. There was a suggestion that libraries could generate revenue from their special collections of primary source material.

Researchers are also reading and contributing to blogs, to which both new and established researchers contribute. Although researchers are seeking new ways to communicate, there is an acknowledgement that new ways are hard to introduce until a critical mass accepts them. There is a delicate balancing act of publishing via the traditional route of books and journals to help build careers, and blogging and contributing more openly and publicly.

The VITAE Digital Researcher initiative[4] helps researchers make the most of new technologies in their research and all institutions represented incorporate helpful information in ‘Getting Published’ sessions that they hold.

Summary of findings

- Researchers are using a wide variety of alternative research resources, from blogs and Twitter to Listserves.
- Libraries could optimize use and generate more revenue from their special collections and archives and market them better beyond niche research circles. (There is a need to understand who is managing this well now.)
- To differing degrees, and dependent on discipline, researchers are contributing beyond journal articles and book chapters. Mostly they are observing a careful balance between openness and traditional publishing. Some librarians now get ALL of their information from blogs and Twitter.

Institutional mechanisms for funding open access in the humanities and social sciences

None of the institutions represented was confident that mechanisms for funding open access publishing were in place, and a range of budgetary and functional problems within universities were discussed at length, including what some participants saw as a lack of understanding of OA funding models at vice-chancellor level. One librarian had encountered misperceptions about OA research whereby ‘open’ was confused with ‘free’. The mistaken perception is that the research must be low quality if it is ‘all free’. Only a small number of researchers understand the mechanics behind funding and payment to enable the opening up of research, and it was felt that it is easy for publishers and librarians to forget this.

The group felt the need to lobby Research Councils to make funding more widely available and access to it more transparent. Currently the mandate to make research accessible can be fulfilled via institutional repositories, so a strong impetus is not felt to exist.

There was concern that publishing in OA (or any less known) journals would simply not happen for the vast majority of early career researchers who need the kudos associated with publishing in the big name journals in order to progress. Only those who have already ‘made their name’ were felt to have the luxury of publishing more widely in different outlets. There was concern that researchers need to be more responsible for educating themselves about journal publishing economics and the threats to research that budget cuts impose. With this knowledge, researchers could then make more informed decisions about how to share their research in a balanced way. Researchers felt that until more ‘big names’ rejected traditional big journals to publish in newer OA outlets, thus endorsing them, the situation is unlikely to change rapidly.

It was felt that open access is a real problem right now for publishers and librarians, especially as the current transitional phase incurs the heaviest costs for institutions. They are still funding subscriptions, while needing to fund OA research, and are busy setting up institutional repositories. When the current economic climate is factored in, OA becomes a hard sell for librarians and a difficult concept for university senior managers who may hold the purse strings but are removed from the detail.

Summary of findings

- Increased lobbying of Research Councils is required to make funding available and access to it transparent.
- Improved education about OA funding is needed at senior levels to ensure facilities are in place.

- Greater education around what OA means and how it works is needed by researchers at all levels – many are unsure and are confusing 'open' with 'free'.
- Greater efforts to persuade 'big names' to publish in newer OA outlets are essential to move things along in favour of OA as a valid concept in the humanities and social sciences.

The library's evolving role in providing teaching material alongside research content

Journal articles have become more prevalent on reading lists, depending on the discipline. This is a growing trend as faculty become aware of the ability to provide deep links into articles on reading lists. Some libraries are marketing to faculty to advise what is available for reading lists. There are online tools for creating reading lists that feed into the VLE which can more easily generate article links. There is a huge variance in how libraries are using these tools, with some libraries exploring and using tools heavily, and others still far off.

Many reading list challenges exist, for instance reading lists being created without the library's knowledge or in some cases courses being introduced and inadequately communicated. Some reading lists have large amounts of out-of-print material as core reading. For some courses, these older books are still key texts. Although often unpopular, it is necessary for libraries to put in place processes and systems to combat some of these problems, and in some institutions they are already working well.

Summary of findings

- Teaching materials should be available within the institutional network not at an outside link.
- E-textbooks and e-books are still too expensive and DRM issues stand in the way of success.
- There is a wide variance in the sophistication of reading list support tools and practices in use.
- Reading list compilation provides many challenges. Good practice needs to be more widespread with systems put in place to combat bad practice. Tools for streamlining processes exist but are not comprehensively used. Can institutions learn from each other?
- Higher education IT departments are often in institutional silos. They could work together to find solutions to challenges with more creation and sharing of open source programming solutions.

Next steps

This discussion has thrown up many interesting issues and areas for greater study. All of the participants would welcome further discussion and suggestions in relation to any of the topics discussed and contact can be made to Bernie Folan at the e-mail address below.

References

1. Full list of meeting participants can be found at http://www.uk.sagepub.com/supporting-social-science-research/ (accessed 31 May 2011).
2. Research Information Network and Universities UK, *Paying for open access publication charges: Guidance for higher education and research institutions, publishers and authors*, 2009, London, Research Information Network. Available online at www.rin.ac.uk/openaccess-payment-fees (accessed 25 May 2011).
3. REF 2014: Decisions on assessing research impact http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/pubs/2011/01_11/ (accessed 09 May 2011).
4. VITAE Digital Researcher: http://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers/315321/Digital-Researcher.html (accessed 09 May 2011).

Bernie Folan
Head of Journals Marketing
SAGE
1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road
London, EC1Y 1SP, UK
Tel: +44 (0)207 324 8614
Email: bernie.folan@sagepub.co.uk
Twitter: @berniefolan

The DOI for this article is 10.1629/24183. Click here to access via DOI:
http://dx.doi.org/10.1629/24183