The Jewish Studies Scholar as Information User: Channels of Information and Information-Seeking Behavior/ Jenny Bronstein

Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the information seeking behavior of Jewish studies scholars. The research questions were designed to provide a comprehensive view of the issue, therefore they examine several elements in the information seeking behavior of these scholars. The first research question aims to identify which of the information-seeking strategies proposed by Elli's behavioral model of information behavior are used by the Jewish studies scholars in their academic work. In addition, the study wanted to identify if there is a relation between the information strategy used by the researcher and the stage of the research. The second research question examines several elements in the basic information behavior of Jewish studies scholars. Firstly, the study wanted to identify which are the main channels of information used by Jewish studies scholars. Secondly, in what ways does the information seeking behavior of the Jewish studies scholar emulate the information behavior other Humanities scholars. Thirdly, what obstacles researchers encounter in their routine information activities and how do these obstacles influence the users' choice of channel.

This study was performed in two phases, the first phase consisted of a quantitative study administered by a structured questionnaire and the second phase consisted of a qualitative study that included a series of semi-structured interviews. In the quantitative section of this study the structured questionnaire was sent to 305 faculty members from four universities in Israel and from departments that are classified as "Jewish Studies": Bible studies, Talmud, Jewish philosophy, Land of Israel studies, Hebrew language and Hebrew literature. Of the 305 faculty members that received the questionnaire 136 responded in total, 59 answered the questionnaire through the Internet web site and 77 responded to the printed vesion sent to them by regular mail; that represents a 44.6% response. The

qualitative section of this study consisted of 25 semi-structured interviews of researchers from different academic departments from lecturer status upwards.

The quantitative phase of the study examined the use patterns of information channels by participants as well as the obstacles researchers encounter during the information seeking process and the impact these obstacles may have in the scholars' use of information channels. Findings show that paricipants' information behavior matches the humanists' traditional information behavior and their preference for printed channels over their electronic equivalents. The most frequently used information channels were books (M=4.7 in a scale of 1 to 5) and articles (M=4.64 in a scale of 1 to 5), and in third place was the informal communication with colleagues through electronic mail (M=3.84 in a scale of 1 to 5). In contrast, the information channels that were infrequently used by participants were electronic journals (M=2.36 in a scale of 1 to 5) and discussion groups (M=1.72 in a scale of 1 to 5).

A significant finding is the frequency of use of informal information channels, such as the informal communication with colleagues. Results from both phases of the study showed that participants have a network of colleagues that represent a major source of information particularly for current awareness purposes. These findings challenge the view of humanists as "isolationists" widely accepted in the literature that claims humanists tend to work alone and they are only marginally involved in informal communication networks.

In order to understand the underlying principle behind scholars' choice of information channels participants were asked about the obstacles they face when searching for information. Four obstacles were stipulated in the structured questionnaire: (1) cost, (2) distance, when the item can only be found at a distant location; (3) unfriendly interface, (4) time that takes to get hold of a copy of the desired item. A negative correlation was found between a reported difficulty in using a particular information channel and the reported frequency of use of that channel. In other words, the difficulty that a scholar might encounter in using an information channel will not influence the scholar's choice and use of that particular channel. At the interviews participants complained mainly about technical difficulties in using information technologies and getting access to information resources.

The analysis of the data collected from the interviews in the second phase of the study rendered a revision of Ellis's behavioral model of information behavior. This revision proposes two main innovations to the original model. The first innovation consists of the positioning of each of Ellis's information strategies within a time frame or relating them to a specific type of scholarly activity. The proposed rivision gives a comprehensive view of the information seeking process through the information strategies used at each research phase. Although all the information strategies in Ellis's model are present in the participants' information behavior, they are not used randomly as Ellis had suggested. Findings point to a strong relationship between the information strategies used and the stage of the research or purpose of the search. On the one hand, there are information strategies that are used during a single research phase, such as extracting, that is used only at the beginning of the research when the scholar is searching for information on an unfamiliar subject. On the other hand, there are strategies that are used in both the initial phase and the current awareness phase, such as browsing or citation tracking, but they are used differently in each phase. The proposed model divides the research process into three phases: the initial phase, the current awareness phase and the final phase.

The second innovation proposed by the study consists of the incorporation of elements of the information environment and of the basic information behavior of the scholars into Ellis's behavioral model. For example, obstacles that researchers encounter were classified as part of their information environment and scholars' attitudes towards the library, towards new information technologies or their reluctance to delegate searches were classified as elements of basic information behavior.

In addition to applying Ellis's model to the participants' information seeking behavior, the study compared their information behavior of other humanitists'. Findings show that the information seeking behavior of Jewish studies scholars is similar to the information behavior of humanists in several ways. For example, both groups of researchers view the library as a supplier of already identified information and are reluctant to delegate searches they come in contact with materials they did not know existed.

Despite the accepted notion that humanists are "anti-machine" or no technologically driven, the present study found that the attitude of the Jewish

studies scholars towards the use of electronic channels and the adoption of new information technologies was a positive one, and if they were skeptical about the use of an information technology or of an information channels it was mainly due to the inadequacy of that particular channel or technology and not because of a lack of knowledge or capability of the scholar. Participants were willing to adopt only those information technologies that can further their research.

In conclusion, the findings of the study show a unique picture of the Jewish studies scholars as information users. Although scholars write their papers alone, they communicate on a constant basis with a wide network of colleagues via electronic mail. This network of colleagues represents a significant information channel for current awareness purposes. They use traditional information strategies such as browsing and citation tracking and prefer printed channels over their electronic equivalents. Despite all this, participants showed a positive attitude towards new information technologies the can further their research. The present research has investigated the information seeking behavior of Jewish studies scholars extensibly and therefore it provides the reader with a wide-ranging image of the Jewish studies scholar as an information user. This image can serve as basis for the development of information services that could provide appropriate answers to the information needs of these scholars.

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