

“I Don’t Have to Know, I Go to One Spot:” Convenience as a Critical Factor in Recent User Studies of Information Behavior

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Introduction

Anecdotal evidence abounds that in today’s fast-paced world, information tends to inundate people, and users of information systems want to find information quickly and conveniently. Thus the field of user studies has become even more central to library and information science. The present research stems from a JISC-sponsored synthesis of the findings from twelve major studies within the UK and the USA from the last five years looking at the changing information needs of academic library users. These twelve selected studies were supported by non-profit organizations and government agencies; therefore, they have little dependence upon the outcomes of the studies. A more focused examination of the aggregate data for evidence of convenience informs the present study.

Convenience was a constant theme in the different information-seeking behaviors identified in many of these studies. The empirical evidence for convenience as a factor was first explored by Prabha, Connaway, Olszewski, and Jenkins. It then was explored by Connaway, Radford, & Dickey (2008) and Connaway et al. (2008b), both of which highlighted Millennial-generation users’ preference for Google and human sources for quick information searches. Convenience is used as a situational criterion in people’s choices and actions during the information-seeking process. The concept can include their choice of an information source, their satisfaction with the source and its ease of use, and their time horizon in information-seeking. The theoretical framework for this understanding is founded in the concepts of bounded rationality and rational choice theory, with Savolainen’s (2006) concept of time as a context in information seeking, and gratification theory, informing the emphasis on the seekers’ time horizons.

Theoretical Framework

Rational choice theory developed in economics (Green, 2002); it posits that social behavior may be viewed in terms of elementary individual actions. Individuals are seen as acting in their own self-interest in these individual actions. The theory has been applied to a number of disciplines in the social sciences, and recently emerged in information science (Prabha, Connaway, Olszewski, & Jenkins, 2007). Similarly, gratification theory developed elsewhere in the social sciences, specifically in sociological research about poor people. Applying it to information-seeking behavior, Chatman (1991) used the “prevailing finding ... that poor people seek immediate gratification because of behavioral characteristics not found in other classes.” Finally, Savolainen’s work in the area of everyday-life information seeking (1995) emphasizes the importance of time as a contextual factor: “Limited time horizons in everyday life tend to restrict information seeking” (Savolainen, 2006, p.114). “Availability and accessibility of information”

and situational/contextual factors such as “lack of time” can affect the choice of information sources (Savolainen, 2008, p.90-91), and “Ease and speed of use” and “Quick to contact/access/convenient” were identified as major factors in similar studies (Julien & Michels, 2004; Fischer et al., 2006).

Thus, aspects of convenience including choice of source, ease of access and use, and time factors can be central contextual limiters in information seeking. Its centrality is borne out by data from the studies analyzed in the JISC report, and have not changed much over time. The data for the first study were collected in 2003 and are supported by data up to 2009. The importance of convenience as a situational factor is relatively constant across demographic boundaries, as well, though it often emerges as more important to the younger generations of library users. These studies show that convenience is a factor in all situations, both academic information seeking and everyday-life information seeking (though it plays different roles in different situations). Most importantly, the data on convenience are consistent across the longitudinal period under study.

Findings

Convenience emerges from the data around several particular foci. Ease of access to resources is one measure of convenience when making rational choices in information seeking. The most convenient sources of information might be e-journals, Internet search engines (including using Google to locate e-journal content), electronic databases, virtual reference, or online e-reserves and e-books. But in addition to electronic resources which carry the convenience of desktop or home access, data emerged about the convenience of human resources as information sources, as well as the convenience of having a personal library on hand. Convenience also plays into the data regarding choices to use (or not to use) the brick-and-mortar library, or how to access library resources after hours or on the weekend. In many cases, the data highlight the importance for library systems to support the entire discovery-to-delivery process. The results from the studies indicate that access to full-text online resources is more critical than the discovery of these resources.

Different contexts and situations for information needs do not detract from the centrality of convenience in making choices, though the convenience factor may act differently depending on context. Students faced with lengthy imposed academic tasks, and professional scholars, value the most convenient access to the library’s great store of resources, but acknowledge that their longer academic tasks would be more involved. In one study, in fact, convenience emerged as even more important to the subjects’ discussion of academic tasks than to their discussion of everyday-life information needs. But convenience – in this case more often associated with speed of electronic search engines or the like – remains important in the more immediate everyday-life situations. Convenience was a leading feature every time VRS users in one study were asked to evaluate reasons for choosing the service, or for recommending it to others.

Finally, much of the data in both studies explored time as an important situational factor in convenience choices. The time-span of longer academic tasks featured in some academic users’ behaviors, either in “satisficing” behavior (reaching a “good enough” state), or in hoping not to spend a lot of time locating resources. Time horizon helps to influence new searcher behaviors such as “power browsing.” The temporal context of an information need might also relate to

library hours – experiencing an information need late at night, or on weekends, or a “desperate need for immediate answers.” Such highly time-oriented information needs were most often expressed by younger subjects, but featured in all demographic categories.

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