Use of information sources by social science scholars: implication for library service

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the information seeking activities of the social science scholars in the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. The study adopted the survey method and data was collected through a questionnaire.The responses revealed that social science scholars used various sources of information for acquiring required information and that books and journals were the most preferred sources used for teaching and research. Most of the respondents indicated that browsing through book shelves is the main method used for acquiring current information in their subject disciplines. The study also revealed that most respondents preferred both print and electronic formats while English was the most preferred language of reading. With regard to IT based services most of the respondents use internet to access electronic journals, for email communication and to search OPAC and most of them use these services frequently. The results further revealed that most of the respondents use internet for educational purposes and they access the internet from home. Outdated reading materials, unavailability of foreign journals and required materials on their respective discipline in the library were mentioned as main problems faced when seeking information in the library. Based on the findings recommendations were made.

Key words: Information resources; Social science scholars; Library use; Library use; Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Information is a very essential commodity for today's information driven society. According to Wilson (2000) information seeking is a term describing the ways individuals seek, evaluate, select, and use information. In the course of seeking new information, the individual may interact with different people, information sources and computer-based information systems. Information seeking is a process in which humans engage in order to advance and potentially alter their state of knowledge. It is also an important cognitive function related to learning and problem solving, sometimes known as a "higher cognitive process" (Marchioni, 1995)

Studying of information seeking activities of users is of paramount importance to libraries because libraries have a role to play in helping members meet their information needs. Therefore librarians are obliged to provide an effective information service for

the users to satisfy their needs. In order to achieve this goal, librarians must carry out studies on library use and information seeking patterns to assess current library practices to determine the future direction for library development (Tahir, 2008). Since information-seeking activities differ among user groups, academic librarians must understand the different information needs of different user categories in order to address their needs. Therefore understanding of information needs and information seeking pattern of various professional groups is essential as it helps in the planning, implementation and operation of information system and services in work setting (Devadason & Lingam, 1997)

Within library and information science research, a substantial body of literature exists on information seeking activities of social scientists. But no study could be found on use of information sources and seeking activities of academic social scientists in Sri Lanka. There was one study however which focused on information needs and use of resources by social science academics in the Open University, Sri Lanka (Gunasekera, 2008) which reported different information needs of the academics in the distance mode. Therefore, there is a pressing need for research in information needs and information seeking activities among academic social scientists in Sri Lanka. This study addresses the questions of how social science scholars at the University of Peradeniya locate and use relevant information, particularly through electronic resources and other technologies for their specific research and teaching needs. Various sources of information utilized by social science scholars in the university as well as the perceived problems when seeking information are identified.

For the purpose of the current study, the following definition was used for the term social science scholars. Social science scholars are defined as any scholar who considers him or herself a member in one or a combination of two or more of the following academic disciplines: psychology, sociology, political science, geography, history, economics, education, law, and management. (Meho , 2001)

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study was intended to ascertain the information seeking activities of social science scholars in Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. The specific objectives of the study were as follows:
1. To find out information sources and methods used by social science scholars for teaching and research
2. To study the purpose of their information seeking
3. To study their library use and information gathering activities
4. To study the use of information technology
5. To reveal language used in reading material
6. To find out problems faced by social science scholars while seeking information.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the 1960s and even before, there has been an increasing volume of literature on user studies, information needs and information seeking activities (Nandozie, 2008). Many studies have been conducted to investigate the information needs of library users based on their subject interests, occupation, information environment and geological location. Information needs and information seeking patterns of academics have been a popular area of research for information scientists for decades (Majid and Kasim, 2000).

In 1990, Sethi (1990) conducted a study on information-seeking activities of 256 Social Science faculty members in Indian universities. It was found that the respondents preferred journals, books, government documents, and reference sources for meeting their information needs. Folster (1995) conducted another study to review social scientist's information-seeking patterns and found that faculty members preferred journals instead of other sources to follow citations instead of using indexes or abstracts to find articles. They also did not view librarians as important sources of information.

In 2000 a longitudinal study of information use by 124 humanists and social scientists of a university in Argentina was conducted by De Tiratel (2000). The study found that a majority of the social scientists (77%) do not use bibliographies. They first consult colleagues, prefer books (47 %) than journals (30%), and have a preference for Spanish materials (73%). These social scientists made less use of the library. Shokeen and Kushik (2002) studied information seeking patterns of social scientists working in the universities in Haryana. They reported that most of the social scientists visit the library daily and that browsing was the most preferred method to locate the required materials followed by searching through indexing and abstracting periodicals and citations in articles respectively. The study further reported that social scientists use current journals followed by books.

SuriyaNambi (2004) also carried out a research project on information seeking pattern of faculty members from Government Arts Colleges in Cuddalore District, India. The purpose of their study was to investigate how faculty members seek information from the library. It was revealed that most of the respondents (38 %) visited the library several times a week to meet their information needs. Francis (2005) investigated the information-seeking behavior of a social science faculty of a university in the West Indies. The study found that the respondents used textbooks (85%), journals (54%), monographs (42%), and conference proceedings (27)% for teaching purposes; while they used journals (84%), conference proceedings (58%), conferences (54%), and newsletters/bulletins (39 %) for conducting research. The study further revealed that they mostly depended on citations from journals (85 %), books (81%) and indexing and abstracting tools (42%) for identifying retrospective materials and that they preferred to access journals in electronic format.

Al-Suqri (2007), investigated the information-seeking behavior of the Social Science faculty at the Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. He found that the most frequently types of information resources used were journals and books. They still prefer print rather than electronic resources indicating that the availability of information resources in that format in the Arabic language was very limited. The respondents made fewer

visits to the library to check out materials. The use of online information resources was increasing and changing the way they seek information for their research and teaching purposes. Another study was carried out by Shen (2007) to investigate social scientist information needs and activities and perceptions in relation to today's information systems and services in the Sociology Faculty, University of Wisconsin-Madison. The study found that the social scientists use variety of information sources and channels, primarily electronic information systems and services in seeking information. These findings refine the understanding of the dynamic relationship between information systems and services and their users within social scientific research practice and provide implications for scholarly information- system development.

Later Marouf and Anwar (2010), investigated the information behavior of social science faculty at Kuwait University and they found that the faculty members heavily depend on books and journals for teaching and research purposes. Recently, Kumar and others (2011), conducted a study to investigate the use of information sources by social scientist in the Mizoram University. They found that social scientist heavily depend on print sources (books and journals) than electronic sources and more than 80% of them use seminars, workshops and conferences for seeking information.

METHODOLOGY

The study used the questionnaire-based survey method to investigate the information seeking activities of academic social science scholars at the University of Peradeniya Sri Lanka. The sample for the study was 108 staff members who work in the Departments of Sociology, Psychology, Geography, Political Science, Economics, Education, Law, History and Management, in the Faculty of Arts. The faculty handbook was used to obtain this information.

Survey Questionnaire

After comprehensive literature search, a questionnaire was prepared which included both open ended and closed ended questions. The questionnaire was based on a questionnaire used in a previous study (Patitugkho & Deshpande, 2005) with some modifications. The questionnaire comprised four parts; background information, types of resources used for research as well as teaching, methods used for seeking information and usage of information technology. These questions attempted to quantify social science scholars' library use and how this affects different aspects of information seeking activities of them. The questionnaires were personally administered among the staff members in the above departments between the months of January to March, 2014. A total of 61 completed questionnaires were received, showing an overall response rate of 56 %. The number of questionnaires distributed among the departments and the received questionnaires are given in the Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Questionnaires among the Departments

	Department	No.of questionnaires distributed	No.of questionnaires received	Response rate (%)
1	Sociology	17	12	71
2	Psychology	10	03	30
3	Geography	16	07	44
4	Political science	13	04	31
5	Economics	20	14	70
6	Education	08	04	50
7	History	10	06	60
8	Law	02	01	50
9	Management	12	10	83
	Total	108	61	56

As shown in Table1, the Department of Management accounted for the highest response rate (83%) and the second highest rate by the Department of Sociology (71%) followed by the Department of Economics (70%) of response rate.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data gained from the responses were analyzed to understand social science scholars' information-seeking activities and the analysis was based on the questionnaire survey of the research. The data collected from the survey were analyzed using simple percentage technique.

Demographic characteristics of the sample

The results obtained from the questionnaire on demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 2 where the respondents represented 36 (60 %) males and 25 (40%) females. The age of participants ranged from 23 years to 63 years and more than half of them were within the age group of 21 to 40 years. In terms of academic rank, most of the respondents (62%) were senior lecturers, 31% lecturers, and 7% professors. With reference to their qualifications, the majority of the participants had postgraduate degrees.

Purpose of information seeking

The purpose of seeking information has high validity in doing research on information seeking activities. The purpose is a guiding tool to select different types of information. The participants of the survey were asked to indicate the purpose of information seeking according to their choice in the list of purposes given in the questionnaire. The

results revealed that 59% of the respondents seek information to prepare lecture notes and 52% seek information to update their knowledge (Table 3). The gathering

information for writing and presenting scientific papers has been the next in line with 46% of participants. Of the respondents, 38% have indicated that they seek information for research purposes while 34% of them seek information for guiding researchers.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Responden**ts**

	Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	36	60
	Female	25	40
Age	21 to 30 years	17	28
	31 to 40 years	16	26
	41to 50 years	07	11
	51 to 60 years	12	20
	> 60 years	09	15
Academic Rank	Lecturer	19	31
	Senior Lecturer	38	62
	Professor	04	07
Highest Qualification	Bachelors	18	29
	Masters	34	56
	PhD	09	15

Table 3: Purpose of Information Seeking

Purposes	Frequency	Percentage
Preparing lecture notes	36	59
Update their knowledge	32	52
Writing and presenting papers	28	46
Research purposes	23	38
Guiding researchers	21	34
Entertainment	06	10
For Master's and PhD research	04	06

Information sources used for research and teaching purposes

Types of information sources used by any user category are a valid indication of the preference and the availability of information sources in different disciplines. The respondents of the present study were asked to indicate information sources such as books, journals, conference papers that they very often prefer to use to meet the information needs of teaching and research purposes. Table 4 presents the data obtained.

As revealed in the Table 4, books are the main information sources used by the social science scholars at the University of Peradeniya for teaching (69%) and research (51%). Seventy percent (70%) of participants used journals for research while 36 % used journals for teaching. This finding confirmed the results of other studies (Shokeen & Kushik, 2002; Francis, 2005). Web resources have been identified as the third major

information source used by social science scholars, for teaching (26%) and for research (39%). Theses and dissertations, conference / seminar papers and government publications accounted for a low percentage when compared with books, journals and web resources.

Table 4: Information Sources Used for Teaching and Research Purposes

Source	Teaching purpose		Research purpose	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Books	42	69	31	51
Journals	22	36	43	70
Web resources	16	26	24	39
Theses and dissertations	12	20	17	28
Conference/seminar papers	09	14	11	18
Government publications	09	14	14	23
Indexes/abstracts	04	6	09	15
Bibliographies	04	6	08	13

Preferred information formats

Respondents were asked to indicate the information format preferred by them for meeting their information needs.

Table 5: Preferred Information Formats (Multiple Responses)

Channels of information	Frequency	Percentage
Printed and electronic	46	75
Printed only	09	15
Electronic only	07	11

As revealed in Table 5, the social science scholars prefer to use printed and electronic information sources for their academic work. Of the respondents, 15% indicated that they prefer to use printed materials whereas 11% of preferred to use electronic materials only for their academic work. Several previous studies support the findings of this study and indicated that there may have been an increase in the use of technology in information seeking by social scientists, but they still prefer to use print resources. (Meho & Hass, 2001 and Francis, 2005)

Preferred language for reading

The social science scholars were asked to indicate the most preferred language to seek information. In Sri Lanka, there are three major languages used for speaking and writing; Sinhala, Tamil and English. In general, academic staff in the universities is competent in using English language in addition to their mother language. The reason of high use of

English may be that major texts books and other materials are mainly written in English language.

The data revealed that the most preferred language for social science scholars is English with 95% of respondents (Table 6). Twenty three percent of respondents indicated that they preferred Sinhala followed by 7% indicating Tamil as the preferred language for their reading.

Table 6: Language Use (Multiple Responses)

	Language	Frequency	Percentage
1	English	58	95
2	Sinhalese	14	23
3	Tamil	04	07

Information seeking methods

Participants were asked to indicate the methods employed by them to obtain current information in their field of study. The data revealed that fifty one (51%) of the respondents browsed information by through looking book shelves. Thirty nine percent of the respondents consulted a subject specialist in the field followed by 29% of respondents using abstracting and indexing journals. Several research studies provide some evidence supporting this finding. (Line, 1999; De Tiratel & Romanos, 2000; Francis, 2005) Twenty one percent of the respondents have indicated that they use library indexes and 20% use publishers' catalogs for seeking current knowledge in their field.

Table 7: Information Seeking Methods (Multiple Responses)

Methods	Frequency	Percentage
Browsing through book shelves	31	51
Consult a subject specialist and expert in the field	24	39
Abstracting and indexing journals	18	29
Library indexes	13	21
Publishers catalogs	12	20
Internet	07	11
Consult colleagues	04	06
Discussion with librarian or reference librarian of the library	03	04
Mass media	02	03

Library visits

The use of the library can be measured in various ways. One such way is the frequency of user visits to the library. Frequency of use is an important indicator of its relative importance.

Table 8: Library Visits

	Library visit	Frequency	Percentage
1	Daily	09	15
2	Once a week	19	31
3	Once or twice a week	21	34
4	Once a month	05	08
5	When necessary	07	12
	Total	61	100

The findings revealed that 15% of the respondents visited the library daily, while 34% visited once or twice a week and 31% visited once a week. It is surprising to note that 12% of the respondents visited the library only when it was necessary. This finding is in contrast with the Indian study (Shokeen & Kushik, 2002) which found that the majority of the social scientists visit library daily.

Use of IT- based sources and facilities

It is believed that information and communication technology (ICT) play a significant role in supporting and enhancing academic and research activities of the teaching staff in universities. ICT has provided the library with many avenues to improve their services and resources for the user community. E- Resources are becoming a useful information source for academic and research work in universities. University students and teachers prefer to use e-resources for the convenience and currency of the sources. One of the objectives of this study was to examine the use of information technology by the social science scholars at the University of Peradeniya and a question was asked requiring the respondents to indicate the different electronic facilities which are available in the internet. The data revealed (Table 9) that 92% of respondents use internet facility for academic and research work.

Table 9: Use of Electronic Resources and Services (Multiple Responses)

Electronic services / resources	Frequency	Percentage
Internet Facility	56	92
Electronic Journals	51	84
Electronic Mail facility(E-Mail)	46	75
Online Public Access catalog (OPAC)	34	56
Library web pages	12	20

As shown in Table 9, 84% of respondents use the internet to access electronic journals. Seventy five percent (75%) of respondents indicated that they use internet for e-mail communications. Online Public Access catalog (OPAC) is being used by 56% of social science scholars while 20% of respondents use library web pages to gain information. Some library web pages carry full text documents and it is a single access point to gather information for teaching and research. The data of the present study shows a low usage of the library web pages by the respondents. It can be attributed to the fact that the

library web pages are not properly publicized for the academic community. The respondents who used e-resources were also asked to mention the frequency of use.

Table 10: Frequency of Using E-Resources

Electronic services/ resources	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely
Internet Facility	51(91%)	04(7%)	01(2%)
Electronic Mail facility(E-Mail)	40(87%)	06(13%)	0
Electronic Journals	32(63%)	16(31%)	03(6%)
Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC)	21 (62%)	09(26%)	04(12%)
Library Web Pages	05(42%)	06 (50%)	01(8%)

It is evident from Table 10 that 91% of the respondents used internet and 87% of the respondents used e-mail facility frequently. At least 63 % of them used electronic journals and 62% of them used OPAC frequently. Only 42 % of the respondents used library web pages frequently.

Use of internet

The internet plays a vital role in the teaching, research and learning process in the present academic environment. Various internet services such as email, World Wide Web, online journals and databases have had major impact on the information environment, within which social science researchers operate particularly in Sri Lanka which has limited resources locally available in the form of research materials and information databases. A question was asked to identify the various purposes for which internet is used by social scholars and the results are presented in Table 11.

Table 11: Purpose of Internet Use (Multiple Responses)

Purpose	Frequency	Frequency
Education	52	93
News	34	61
Entertainment	12	21
Obtain health information	11	20
Other (Online shopping)	05	09

A total of 93% of the respondents use the internet for education purposes. This finding confirmed the results of earlier findings that reported that a majority (52%) of the faculty staff used internet for education purposes (Patitugkho & Deshpande, 2005). Sixty one percent (61%) of the respondents use the internet for obtaining current news while 21% of the respondents use the internet to obtain health information and 20% use the internet for entertainment. (Table 11)

Since most of the respondents (93%) mentioned that they used the internet for educational purposes, they were further asked to indicate the frequency of use of the Internet. Eighty eight percent of the respondents use the Internet daily whereas 9% of

the respondents use at least a once a week and 3% use the internet once a month. (Table 12).

Table   12: Frequency of Internet Use

Frequency of use	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	49	88
At least once a week	05	09
Once a month	02	03

The respondents were also asked to mention the place/s where they access the internet.

Table 13: Locations Used to Access Internet (Multiple Responses)

Place	Frequency	Percentage
Home	38	68
Department	29	52
Library	14	25
Internet café	03	09

In terms of where they access the internet, nearly 68% of the respondents indicated that they accessed the internet from home while 52% access the internet from their departments. Of the respondents, only 25 % of them access the internet from the library and 9% of them access the internet from the internet café (Table 13).

Internet search engines

In order to obtain further information on internet use, respondents were asked to mention the internet search engines used by them.

Table 14: Search Engines

Search Engine	Frequency	Percentage
Google	47	84
Yahoo	07	12
Other	02	04

The data revealed that most of the respondents (84%) use Google and 21% of the respondents use Yahoo to access the internet (Table 14).

Problems faced while seeking needed information

The study looked at problems faced by social science scholars while seeking information. Only twenty nine participants (48%) responded to this question. Table 15 reveals the problems and difficulties in detail which provide useful information for library management. Most of them pointed out that they face the problems such as outdated reading materials (66%), non availability of foreign journals in the library (48%), non

availability of required materials (41%) and lack of current periodicals in the library .(41%) .

Table 15: Difficulties and Problems

	Difficulties and problems	Frequency	percentage
1	Outdated reading materials	19	66
2	Unavailability of foreign journals in the library	14	48
3	Required material is not available	12	41
4	Lack of current periodicals	12	41
5	Material is not available on the shelf	10	34
6	Insufficient computer terminals available in the library to access internet	10	34
7	Information sources are scattered everywhere	7	24
8	Inadequate opening hours	5	17
9	Lack of knowledge about library use	5	17

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In general, social science scholars seek information for preparing lecture notes, updating their knowledge, writing and presenting papers and research purposes. With regard to the information sources, a majority of the respondents used books and journals for research as well as for teaching purposes. It was found that all the respondents preferred to use print and electronic formats for meeting their information needs. Browsing through book shelves was the most common method to locate new knowledge of their respective field. It was found that most of the respondents used internet for academic and research purposes and most of them used the internet to access electronic journals and for email communication. The main obstacles the respondents faced while seeking information are; outdated reading materials, non availability of foreign journals in the library, non availability of required materials on their respective field of study and lack of current periodicals. On the basis of findings received, the following recommendations are made for the improvement of the library.

1. As the respondents depend heavily on print resources (books and journals), the library needs to promote awareness and use of electronic resources by conducting user education programs. Training on information literacy skills with hands on practice sessions should be conducted for the faculty staff to improve their searching skills.
2. The library should have a detailed collection development policy that should make provision to input faculty recommendations and use them for library acquisitions.
3. The library should subscribe to scholarly journals (print as well as electronic) and acquire current materials to update the collection. At the same time, the library should provide more IT based resources and services to update current knowledge.
4. The library should conduct information needs studies with academic departments at regular intervals in order to involve the user community in the

development of the library collections and to develop effective user-centered library and information services.

5. Library should develop strategies to disseminate information to faculty staff on new resources and services available in the library effectively.
6. The library has to identify strategies to develop collaboration between faculty and library that will help understanding the needs of the faculty.
7. There is also a need to conduct further research on certain aspects related to this study. Information-seeking activities of other academic groups consisting of closely related disciplines should also be conducted.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that social science scholars used a variety of resources, formats and information channels to fulfill their information needs. Several previous studies support the conclusion of this study that social science scholars utilize a wide variety of sources in their information seeking. (Stoan, 1991; Meho, 2001; Case, 2002; Shen, 2007) The study revealed that the respondents used IT-based library resources and services less frequently compared with printed sources. This might be due to lack of awareness about their availability, improper selection of materials or unfamiliarity with these products. Similarly, it is also noted that email is the most popular internet application, whereas other internet-based services and applications are only used by a limited number of respondents. This is a matter of concern, as presently, electronic information sources and the internet are considered extremely important tools for effective teaching and research. Therefore, the library should review its electronic information resources while at the same time conduct extensive user awareness and user education programs. This type of study on information seeking activities and library use will enable the library to evaluate and align the library resources and services according to users' requirements. The results of the study provide valuable information on current information needs of the social science scholars which should be used to make important management decision about collection, services, electronic information sources and necessary infrastructure that needs to be used them effectively.

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