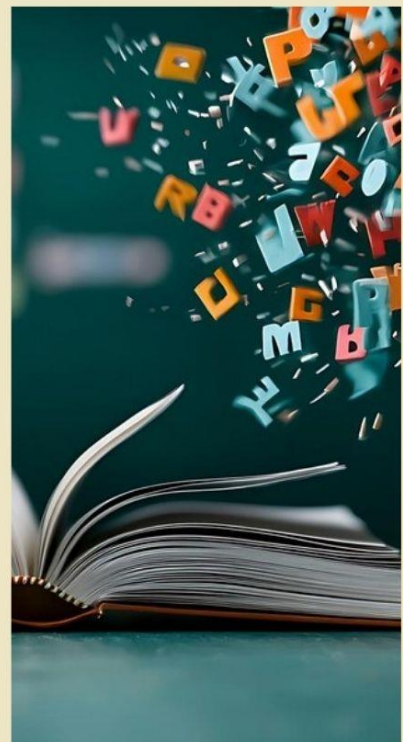


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The English literature researcher in the age of the Internet

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Abstract.

In light of the impending electronic information revolution, this study investigates how academics engaged in English literature research at UK and international institutions have altered their methods of gathering relevant information. It delves into the researchers' feelings towards the web and takes stock of where they stand on the idea of publishing on the web. Researchers' experiences with various electronic information sources for English literature are detailed. Projects for a "virtual library" and researchers' views on electronic publishing round out the study. A list of suggestions for future research on information literacy, web surfing, and other online topic access tools is included in the article's conclusion.

Keywords: electronic information sources; English literature; humanities researchers; information seeking; Internet

1. Introduction

Since Sue Stone portrayed the information needs and habits of humanities scholars in the early 1980s [1], studies of this subject have been scarce [2-7]. Even the introduction of new information and communication technologies has not, as yet, encouraged much discussion on this matter, although this now may slowly be changing [8-14]. This is against a background of rapid technological change in the possibilities for scholarly communication. A Canadian report, *The Changing World of Scholarly Communication. Challenges and Choices for Canada* [15], written for the Canadian Association of Research Libraries, considered that due to advances in information technology, libraries are becoming access points in which materials are not always in a printed form or even physically present in the library and that the information revolution has influenced scholarly communication enormously with the Internet, in particular, becoming firmly established as a facilitator for discussion within scholarly communities.

However, the report found that although electronic publications are more dynamic than traditional printed journals there is still a great degree of prestige attached to publications which appear in long established print editions. Elizabeth Langston, a librarian from Santa

Barbara Library, University of California in her article *Scholarly communication and electronic publications: implications for research* [11], writing from a USA perspective concurs with the findings of the report, while Rob Kling and Lisa Covi in their article *Electronic journals and legitimate media in the systems of scholarly communication* [10] predicted that electronic journals will exist, at least for the time being, in conjunction with traditional printed journals rather than as an alternative.

In 1982 Stone [1] had concluded that, in relation to computers and information technology, humanities

scholars were 'rather inadequate individuals unable to face up to technological change', explaining that this might be a result of the humanistic anti-machine tradition, and that humanities academics with computer skills were 'viewed with suspicion and apprehension by their colleagues.' The objective of the present study was to determine to what extent the availability of electronic information sources in the humanities had had any impact on the information seeking behaviour and attitudes of humanities researchers, specifically English literature researchers in 'old', pre-1992, UK universities and whether there had been changes in their perception, attitude toward, and use of information technology.

Information for the study was collected through the means of an electronic questionnaire mailed to academics from Departments of English from a selection of UK universities chosen to represent a sample of ancient, civic, red brick and pre-1992 'new' universities. The following universities were targeted: Sheffield, Manchester, Nottingham, Oxford, Exeter, Leeds, Kent at Canterbury, University of London - Birkbeck and Queen Mary Colleges, Belfast, Leicester, Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Dundee. The post-1992 'new' universities were not included because they only rarely have Departments of English (one out of 10 sampled) so a comparison with older universities would not be possible. Randomly selected universities overseas were also contacted for a comparison of information seeking habits outside the UK. In total there were 60 responses, 46 from the UK and 14 from overseas [16].

Electronic messages with the questionnaire, with a brief explanation of the subject of the project, were sent to all members of the selected departments who had access to the electronic facilities regardless of their seniority. The responses were analysed employing the inductive analytic approach based on the grounded theory model of Glaser and Strauss [17] and along similar lines to that employed by Ellis in relation to science and social science researchers [18]. The questions were aimed at determining the main research interests, whether the research interest was long standing or newly acquired, the use of information sources in general and which were the most important. Similar questions were asked by K. Smith in 1988 [4] and provided an opportunity to see whether the information seeking behaviour of academics in the field of English Literature had changed significantly in the last decade.

2. Electronic information resources for English literature

Since the launch of JANET in the UK, academics there have had access to a plethora of online journals, news groups, and instant messaging services, allowing them to keep in touch privately with their colleagues and share material publicly via discussion lists and newsgroups. Since Roberto Busa started working on his Index Thomisticus in 1949, electronic texts have been used for academic study in the humanities for the last forty years or more. Libraries have just recently started collecting and making available electronic texts in the humanities, and this shift in focus has occurred in the past three to four years, especially with the rise of the Internet. page 677, reference 9. Loss In an effort to provide English and American literary academics with a complete inventory of internet resources, Pequeno Glazier [19] sought to do just that. He contended that literary studies was the only academic field where the impact of the Internet was as fascinating, complex, and theoretically significant. Electronic texts in all their forms have become literary research topics, thus the Internet has far-reaching implications for literary studies beyond just facilitating discussions about the discipline, making texts available, and providing a medium for the publication of writing research results. . . As actors of literature, electronic technologies have made possible the development of novel approaches to literary analysis. [19] Usenet, the first section of the Internet, was created in 1979 in North America by students with similar interests and who were using the Unix system. Usenet evolved into a platform for group chats where everyone could join in on the conversation. Members of a news group may communicate with one another in a similar way to mailing lists by posting messages, responding to other members' contributions, and perusing the ever-expanding collection of articles pertaining to the group's topic. Since many news groups are administered by academics, they function similarly to a loosely organised conference. However, opinions on their quality differ. Researchers have shown interest in participating in newsgroup discussions but have been unable to do so due to a lack of knowledge. As a result of the norm, one researcher was only "listening in" rather than actively engaging.

was too low. It seems evident that because the provenance of newsgroup participants is unknown and that they are often not engaged in academia means that researchers shy away from this medium because they want to converse with like-minded professionals. Those who do not feel this way find that their meagre IT proficiency prevents their participation in this burgeoning modern Internet phenomenon.

Scholarly publishing should be viewed as one part of the scholarly communication system that connects authors and readers. In the extremes, world-class scholars (and national class scholars) are eager to have their works read (and appreciated) by their peers, and also by some larger disciplinary or cross-disciplinary audiences that usually number in the range of hundreds to thousands. In contrast, there are other scholars who are simply happy to publish periodically, or at least publish before receiving tenure or other professional promotions. Scholars are very sensitive to the legitimacy and status of the journals (or publishing houses) that publish their work, but they vary in their insistence in publishing in the journals that their peers regard most highly. [10]

Every major traditional field, English literature being no exception, has a few high standard and high status journals which are scrupulously edited and their circulation is extremely high among scholars. Other journals, not as highly regarded within the research community, are used by the research community as a publishing outlet but are not as widely read and their status is lower. In the financially stringent environment of the Higher Education system, electronic journals have the potential to become a medium which is cheaper than the traditional printed journal and which can be circulated to all researchers via the research network. The drawback of the traditional printed journal is also the long period between submitting the article and its actual publication which can be as long as two years. Electronic journals are easy to compile and easy to distribute and therefore the period between writing the article and having it published and reviewed by peers is considerably diminished. However, electronic journals have not yet always become legitimate publication outlets.

As with paper publications, articles that are submitted to journals may be lightly edited or tightly reviewed by an editorial board with strong researcher standards. Today, many scholars are confused about the formats and intellectual quality of e-journals. In extreme cases, they feel that e-journals must be of lower intellectual quality than p-journals, because they sense something insubstantial and potentially transient – ghostly, superficial, unreal, and thus untrustworthy – in electronic media. In practice, some

refereed e-journals publish high quality articles, but they are not well known by their existential critics. [10]

When the respondents were asked whether they preferred the immediacy of publishing electronically to the lengthy procedure of publishing a printed article in a traditional well established journal, the response was mainly negative. It was obvious from the responses that the majority of researchers use electronic media for a quick exchange of ideas or exchange of bibliographic details and for informal contacts with their colleagues rather than publishing their work.

I use electronic media in informal contact with my colleagues and with negotiating submission of articles or deadlines but not actually publishing electronically.

Printed journals were still the preferred publication outlet for most of the respondents.

Though I discuss professional projects with colleagues a lot through e-mail, I do not use electronic journals as a mode of publication.

I prefer it for exchange of small and routine items of information and for informal discussion but for considered work I prefer publishing in a journal.

There are several possible explanations for this occurrence; the high regard for a printed journal is one of them:

To some extent though, institutionally, electronic media do not have the same prestige as major printed journals.

Electronic publishing has informality and immediacy but publishing involves careful work, redrafting, assessment by others and finally, the production of a lasting record. Electronic texts don't last (unless you print it out and turn it into printed text).

The quality of electronic journals and the procedure of selecting articles for them makes some researchers avoid them:

I sometimes publish (online) but the un-monitored nature of the medium allows a lot of useless material on the net.

Plagiarism, copyright issues and the uncertain ownership of documents available over the Internet were also mentioned amongst the reasons for not publishing electronically:

... recent experience makes me wary of disseminating any of my work before it's in print unless I am discussing it with someone I work with on a joint project.

For the research community, the Internet offers a number of services such as the electronic mail access to remote databases and library catalogues, access to

online journals or the opportunity to have one's own "web site" publish one's own work. Unfortunately, the Internet will never be able to satisfy every researcher's information demands due to its unregulated nature. Regardless, it's a huge improvement over the old information resource repertoire. Half or more of the researchers said they used the Internet or the World Wide Web to get their study materials. They primarily included researchers interested in modernism, "war and metaphors of war," "Irish cultural studies," "post-1940 American poetry," "20th-century women writers," and "Philip Larkin," as well as those whose work encompassed interdisciplinary areas. But there was also a sizeable contingent interested in more archaic subjects like "romanticism and violence," "17th-century English verse," or "renaissance drama." A shift from "holdings to access" and electronic storage of most materials was recommended by the Follett report for research libraries. Funds were distributed to several pilot initiatives, including eLib, by the authors of the Follett Report, which suggested that research libraries should transform into "virtual" or "electronic" libraries. Electronic journals and other online article sources, digital images of historical, medical, and artistic materials, pre-print and grey literature, and better access to bibliographic records, research library materials, and research data are all part of the Electronic Libraries Programme's (eLib) evaluation of potential useful electronic information for researchers. The writers foresaw electronic document distribution, online catalogues, digital journals, and in the future, the digitisation of library catalogues: An electronic version of the printed materials and the infrastructure to support their delivery are prerequisites to the development of the "virtual library," which aims to give researchers and students access to a wealth of information from the convenience of a single terminal. 20. Paragraph 7. In their "Five Year Strategy 1996-2001," the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) examined the financial and operational aspects of the idea put forward by the Follett Report. While not ideal for every use case, they did conclude that: improving electronic information supply and expanding electronic

library, could provide better results at a lower cost than the majority of traditional library services. [21, paragraph 17] Electronic information providing is expected to be less expensive than more conventional library services, although researchers were cognisant of the fact that there are drawbacks. The majority of English literature scholars worried that using an electronic library would eliminate their ability to casually peruse materials in search of relevant articles. While many researchers were against entirely replacing conventional materials with electronic ones, they did believe that combining the two would improve their research: Libraries will always be a need for them. When compared to the boundless creative potential of library browsing, electronic resources are limited to helping with certain types of information retrieval. The scholar studying print culture must recognise that books in print are and always have been physical commodities. Access to original electronic materials from any geographical location would be the key benefit of digitising research libraries, as several scholars pointed out. Researchers from other universities sometimes have a long distance to go only to see certain institutions that have important and rare collections. Universities on the country's periphery, including Dundee, Aberdeen, and Belfast, have researchers who were hoping that digital resources would make it easier for them to access materials without the hassle of travel or interlibrary loans. The scholars' general attitude towards the "virtual library" initiatives was one of scepticism. The fact that researchers would need to use computers for both information retrieval and text processing was a common and recurring criticism. Some academics were of the opinion that using an electronic library would be very taxing for those who aren't tech savvy, and that an information environment lacking in computing ability would be particularly intimidating for researchers. In addition, although some scholars have argued that electronic texts can be helpful for preliminary work, others have argued that physical access to manuscripts is essential for literature reviews. While most respondents said they couldn't use a library that existed only online, a small number voiced their support for digitising certain collections to make them more accessible. Most notably, there are concerns over the absence of

of portability of an electronic text, the financial costs simplified, the inability to browse and the lack of confidence in using information technology. Most were, however, cognizant of the fact that electronic formats will inevitably enter the traditional library and co-exist alongside their traditional counterparts.

The same questionnaire used for researchers in the UK was sent electronically to selected English literature researchers in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia with the aim of finding out whether or not the attitudes towards electronic information resources vary. The sample was randomly selected from the Universities of Berkeley, USA; British Columbia, Canada; Sydney, Australia and The University of Waikato, New Zealand. The research interests of the participating researchers stretch across a wide range of topics. Some respondents were engaged in research directed towards historical literature and were carrying out studies about topics such as 'Middle English Prose with particular reference to translation, devotional writing and writing for and by women', as well as 'medieval drama, origins of the novel and development of satire.' Others were engaged in 19th century drama and fiction or in post-colonial drama and fiction. Only one of the respondents was carrying out an investigation of a current topic – 'American pop-culture with its political and social meanings'.

In terms of information sources, the overseas researchers reported using both traditional and on-line bibliographies such as MLA, specialized subject bibliographies, on-line catalogues available from the Internet, various on-line databases such as 'Periodicals Index' and 'UNCOVER' catalogue. Amongst other sources they named conferences, exchange of bibliographies via e-mail and personal networking. Unlike their British counterparts, an overwhelming majority of them were using electronic journals, as well as traditional ones. A small number of researchers also reported using electronic discussion groups as a way of widening their scope of secondary materials. An overwhelming majority of the overseas respondents reported that their local equivalent of JANET and SuperJANET changed their information seeking habits remarkably. In particular, they named on-line catalogues as the most significant factor in the change. One American researcher commented:

I guess MELVYL is our version of JANET. It's changed information searching dramatically, and made researching far more pleasurable and easy. I can remember trying to do research in high school using the Periodical Index, and the card catalogue, and it was simply stultifying. Now, I can search our catalogue from several different angles, and

using keyword searches I can find information I never would have had access to before.

The majority of the overseas researchers welcomed the prospects brought by the Internet. Almost all report using electronic mail to communicate with their colleagues and they indicated that they do so frequently. With one exception, all respondents were using electronic mailing lists at least once a month to disseminate information both to their colleagues within their institution and outside it and to their students. Only one researcher from New Zealand was not familiar with the concept of an electronic mailing list and was not using the technique. More than a half of the overseas researchers reported participating in newsgroup discussions. However, in spite of the high usage of newsgroup discussions, many researchers complained about the standards of them. They found that too many newsgroups included the immature statements of undergraduates and the groups lacked moderation and standard. The overseas researchers were, like their British counterparts, not very enthusiastic about electronic publishing. Many of them indicated that publishing in an electronic journal has a lower status than publishing in a traditional one and that on-line journals are, essentially, of lower quality because of a lack of peer review. An American researcher, incidentally an editor of an on-line journal, stated:

I like both. Since 'hard copies' are still considered the norm, especially in the humanities, it's hard to do all one's publishing on-line and get taken seriously. This is annoying, since I'm the director of an on-line journal, but hopefully it will change over the next few years.

An overwhelming majority of the overseas respondents were using the Internet for finding information for their research projects and to supplement their teaching materials. The opinions about the standard of information on the Internet, however, varied. The researchers expressed an overall satisfaction with on-line catalogues available from the Internet but indicated that the standard of documents was variable. And some found the Internet too amateur to be considered for their purposes:

On the whole, it is not a level useful in a university context. Perhaps it is a good secondary school resource. Useful for first hit.

In terms of the advantages of material available over the Internet, the researchers mainly reported that they are easily accessible and were mainly up-to-date because they are easier to update than their printed

counterparts. The fact that Internet documents can be downloaded and either converted into more suitable forms or printed out was also noted by many as an advantage. The disadvantages that were cited most often were usually connected with the edit in of the documents which was considered less scrupulous than editing in traditional printed publication outlets. Another point that was often made was that the origin of certain documents is uncertain and that it is hard to evaluate the document in terms of its research potential. Internet sites with documents that often change addresses, or that are no longer there, was yet another complaint as well as the fact that many search engines are not powerful and precise enough to search the network comprehensively.

Only a small proportion of the overseas researchers had their own web page alongside the general departmental one. Those who had one found it useful in terms of establishing new contacts and as an advertising point. Those who did not have a personal web page devoted to their interests reported that they do not intend to create one in the near future. One of the reasons that was regularly quoted was a lack of time.

A large group of respondents were using on-line abstract services, databases and CD-ROMs and a large proportion of those preferred electronic resources unreservedly to the traditional printed ones. They mainly appreciated the fact that electronic sources can be searched and that the end result can be modified according to the immediate needs of the researcher. Those who did not prefer electronic resources unreservedly, differentiated between the purposes the two media serve. One researcher indicated that electronic bibliographies were far better to look through than printed ones. Others found printed bibliographies and other resources more user friendly but concluded that their electronic counterparts had their advantages too. Those who were not using electronic databases, bibliographies or CD-ROMs gave different reasons; either because a lack of computing skills was preventing them from using these, or because they were too modern and impersonal.

All the overseas researchers had had an on-line search of major databases done for them or had done so themselves. The respondents were mainly positive about the outcomes of such searches and found them useful. They mainly appreciated the speed of these searches and the fact that they tended to be very comprehensive. Some also noted, however, that on-line searches usually bring out more up-to-date material than traditional browsing and that such searches were more focused. Some, however, thought that thorough

on-line searches prevent them from discovering sources through serendipity which they considered an integral part of their research. Even though the overall response to mediated on-line searches was positive, some researchers were aware of the limitations of these:

It's quick to find it; but the results are only as good as the combination of the search engine and the sophistication of the user.

Some also complained that on-line searches bring out a lot of obvious or useless material which has to be removed before any serious follow-ups. The other objection that was raised in connection with on-line searches was the fact that the output depends on the keywords that are used and therefore the result can not always be comprehensive:

You can only find what you are looking for, and what you begin with as categorical notions. You cannot discover what you did not think was there and what you create as you move along to many levels at once.

In the light of the presumption that equivalents of the Follett Report recommendations might exist abroad, the overseas researchers were also asked about their opinion of the 'virtual library'. The response was mainly negative. Some responses were extremely negative, demonstrating that contact with actual books and other materials is essential to the literature researcher:

This is burning the Library of Alexandria, philistinism, and vandalism at its extreme. I cannot see any qualitative difference between this and Nazi thugs burning books in the street or the Inquisition burning copies of the Talmud in the squares of Europe in the 12th century.

Libraries are of themselves good places to be, and are available in ways that electronic forms are not—they do different things, and the sense of working in say, the British Museum or the Newberry in Chicago means one also has access to the wealth of expertise found among library staff, fellow researchers, etc. Electronic libraries would lead to something of a failure in testing ideas as face to face with others.

Some researchers reported that they would like to see a combination of both approaches in research libraries because each approach serves a different purpose. Some appreciated that electronic libraries would ease access to holdings, save time and financial resources and would solve problems connected with a lack of space in research libraries, on the other hand they were aware of the disadvantages that would occur such as 'eyestrain, 'digital obsolescence'—the necessity to

upgrade the hardware constantly – and a certain degree of de-humanization. Some, however, envisaged an environment where electronic and traditional resources are combined, but served different functions:

Serious useful research findings need to appear in a book or journal which can be easily read and owned by individuals or stored in a library. Electronic information is more of a tool to assist in conducting research, a way of scanning a lot of material quickly. So you really need both.

3. Conclusion

The academics reported many characteristics similar to those outlined by Smith [4] more than a decade ago and similar in general, and in detail, to other recent studies of English literature and humanities researchers' use of electronic information sources [3, 7, 13]. Even though the range of electronic information resources has expanded immensely. With the introduction of the Internet, the possibilities for collegiate world-wide communication have also expanded; almost all the academics used electronic mail to communicate with their colleagues and publishers. Electronic mail also assisted in the development of academic projects such as co-authoring of books and articles with researchers overseas which would, hitherto, have been very difficult, time consuming and expensive. Other facilities of the Internet, such as electronic mailing lists or Usenet newsgroups, did not generally appeal to English literature academics, though some were using them.

The Internet introduced a form of democracy, so some might consider anarchy, into academic communication. But this has made some Internet services non-academic or more student-oriented rather than research-oriented. Electronic mailing lists, according to the results of the study, are mainly used to distribute conference details or bibliographies to a selected group of researchers, to exchange quick ideas or to communicate with post-graduate students. Some reported taking part in Usenet newsgroup discussions but their presence is rather passive as they 'listen in' rather than actively contribute. The general standard of the discussions is considered low and non-academic and as a result not many academics take up the opportunity to participate or to consider this medium seriously. They mainly appreciated being able to track down colleagues similarly inclined in research terms and the access provided to a wider range of resources, such as bibliographies, journals or the catalogues of other universities.

Electronic journals and other publication facilities on the Internet offer alternative publishing possibilities

to the traditional book or journal. The study showed, however, that the overwhelming majority of the academics were reluctant to publish in an electronic journal. This has been confirmed recently by Shaw [3]. The reason for this is the fact that long-running traditional printed journals, as well as publishing in the form of a book, offer the author a high academic status, the possibility of peer review and undisputed authorship. Many academics pointed out that the overall standard of electronic journals is good but they lack peer review, are not carefully edited, have loose editorial practices and are open to plagiarism.

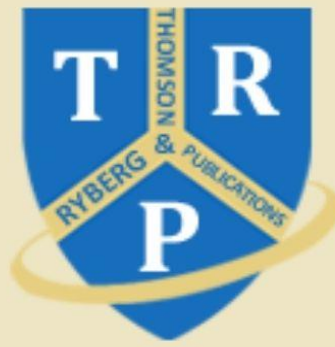
The Follett Committee outlined plans for an 'electronic library' based on access rather than holdings, where the majority of resources would be available in digitized form. The academics in this study expressed their scepticism and dislike of such plans. A large number of them pointed out that a digitized library would undermine their ability to browse and to discover new things through serendipity. Many also stressed the necessity to feel the real object of their academic activities – the printed book, usually in all its editions. Some academics, however, mainly from universities which lie further from the main urban areas, indicated that such plans would enable them to use collections in centrally located libraries, without the burden and expense of travel. They also appreciated the fact that some rare holdings would be more democratically available.

In conclusion, the English literature academics demonstrated that electronic media are making an impact on their research. Some media were adopted almost immediately, such as CD-ROMs and online catalogues, while others are still waiting to be utilized by the academics to their fullest extent. This is in part due to technical and training limitations, but also in part due to a lack of 'fit' between the electronic forms of communication and traditional scholarly or academic norms for recognition, and, in particular, promotion. Finally, the study reveals, in general, a far more confident and active interaction with computer-based information sources by English literature researchers than that reported by Stone [1] or Smith [4] in the 1980s. The study did not attempt to assess the information literacy level of those replying to the questionnaire and so could not address the question of whether there was any correlation between information literacy levels and the use of, and attitude towards, electronic information sources. This question and the question of how the acceptability of browsers might be improved for academics would make interesting avenues for further research particularly in relation to the body of

work that has been undertaken in relation to browsing and other facilities for subject access to Internet resources [22].

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