User Expectations and University Library Actions in Romania. A Recent Overview

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Abstract

University libraries are constantly trying to keep up with the changes within the information and academic environment and to provide the best responses possible through collections and services tailored to the needs of their users. Starting from the results of a recent study, this article provides an overview of the changes that the directors of the Romanian university libraries have found in recent years regarding the needs and expectations of users, but also the actions of university libraries in response.

Keywords: *library users, user expectations, information needs, information behaviour, university libraries, changes, Romania*

Introduction

User study has been one of the main research areas in library and information studies (LIS) in recent decades. Aspect easy to understand taking into account the spectacular changes in areas such as information transfer, scientific communication, where libraries are also involved as key actors.

Professionals in the LIS field aim to meet user perspectives through user studies. The focus of user studies has expanded lately, according to Rubinić, even if initially it was aimed mainly at "discovering guidelines for the improvement of library practice". (1)

But as Malliari and Kyriaki-Manessi note, "Exploring users' behavior, measuring users' satisfaction, meeting users' needs, even before they are expressed, has become an art and a science in a library's quality services". (2)

Starting from these aspects, libraries are expected to know their users and their informational behavior very well, to know what their needs and expectations are, so that the services they provide can best meet these needs.

When discussing the design of future services by libraries, it is said that "... it is all about the user" (3), but as van Bentum and Braaksma note, changes in libraries appear to be triggered by technology rather than user needs (4), regardless of being acknowledged by the library or not, however, they are simply not considered essential in the development of new services, and most of the time, studies provide us with information about the use of library resources by users and not about the real needs and expectations of users (5) in the context of a library institution and of the process of information search and retrieval.

A national committee has been established in Denmark, aiming between 2008-2011, among other things, to facilitate an innovation culture in university libraries, focusing on users' needs and the way libraries respond to them. In collaboration with a consulting firm, the committee carried out a project to get to know library users better. (6) Harbo and Vibjerg Hansen discuss about the concept of "user logic" and recommend "a shift of focus from library logic to user logic" when developing and innovating library services, commenting on the fact that what makes sense for libraries doesn't always make sense for users. (6)

Also, in the area of university libraries, in order to address the users' needs and behaviors, it is necessary first to have a good knowledge and understanding of the scientific communication process, as van Bentum and Braaksma argue (4) because these institutions have a role not only in accessing and providing information but also in solving the problems that occur during the learning and research activities of users.

A better communication between the library and users is a key issue nowadays. Specialists have found that many times users do not know that much about the library and its services, the library being the last place users think about when they need information and assistance in retrieving information (5; 3), but Connaway and Faniel see this as an opportunity for libraries to promote and open new ways of communicating and linking with users so as to become better acquainted with them. (3)

Much of the future success of libraries seems to depend on the integration of libraries and the resources and services thereof into the users' professional life and activity, on the conveyance of the library to the environments that users are attending and where they also work and about an infiltration of librarians into work groups of users (5), or as Connaway and Faniel say, "... it is important for the library to become embedded in the lifestyles of their users and potential users". (3)

Traditional users of university libraries are currently more and more independent and have a direct relationship with scientific information that is no longer liaised exclusively by librarians (4), but they still require support in the search and retrieval of information as well as facilities in accessing information. This implies the necessity of an ongoing monitoring of user behavior and needs so that libraries can respond with tailored information services and support.

Context of the study

In Romania, info-documentary structures have gradually adapted to changes in information transfer and are increasingly attentive to the needs and preferences of users, trying to adapt the service offer to the current requirements of the public served. And a number of researches at the level of library users have been carried out in recent years. If the assessment of user needs and behavior in the information process has been carried out in Romania to date through researches based on the results of surveys conducted at the very level of users, in the present study, which is part of a larger research initiated in 2013 at the level of university libraries in Romania, we attempt a different perspective on user behavior and its changes over the past few years, namely through the eyes of library directors. This study aimed not only at the changes in user behavior, but also at the response of libraries to these changes, a response reflected in actions taken to better meet the needs of users.

Methods and objectives

15 directors and heads of academic library branches from various university centers in Romania were invited to participate in this study. 11 directors responded positively to the invitation and answered the questions in the interviews conducted by e-mail using a structured and open-ended questionnaire.

The main objectives were:
- to identify recent changes in user behavior and
- to identify the actions of university libraries to better satisfy the user needs.

Results and Discussions

Changes in user behavior

The latest period has proven to be a challenge for the libraries whose directors participated in our study. This perception of the participants over the past few years is based on a number of elements, such as the increase in the number of users, the need to provide users with more and more publications in foreign languages such as English and French, because many Romanian universities now offer educational programs in these languages, the increase of the student requirements for providing mobile access to electronic information resources. These and other issues have forced the change of policies in terms of the acquisition of publications and access to databases, but also in terms of the improvement of the technological infrastructure and the adaptation to the new requirements.

Participants' responses show that for all university libraries represented in this study the changes in the information needs and user behavior are based on the ever changing information environment. This has led to a greater orientation of users towards electronic resources and, more generally, towards the online environment.

Under these circumstances, although an increase in user information needs could be noted, the frequency of library visits has decreased. Other changes in user behavior

refer to the fact that they want to get the information as quickly as possible, even find the books in the catalogues as quickly as possible, and are generally more in a hurry and "more superficial", as a respondent notes.

Users want mobile access to the library's electronic resources and, as a result, are dissatisfied and do not understand why access to electronic information resources is only available to them at the library or university space and not at home or anywhere else. Only few libraries provide now mobile access for students to the electronic resources.

Library directors emphasize that users have adapted very well to the computerized work environment and are well-versed in new information and communications technologies. With an ever increasing focus on electronic resources, an increase in the user need for assistance and guidance in the information process was observed.

Regarding traditional library collections, the main finding is that student users are often dissatisfied with the insufficient number of copies of some publications.

Participants note that user behavior is closely linked to that of the librarian, but most users are correct and use the library adequately, substantiating a behavior that is appropriate to the academic environment. Users are happy with the communication relationship with the librarian, but also with the study facilities offered by the library.

Another finding regarding user behavior is that they have become more aware of what they want and aside from the increased interest in electronic documents, their demands on the required materials have also increased: they want cutting-edge publications in the teaching languages of the study programs where they are registered. They pay more attention to primary and significantly less attention to secondary documents.

A change in the information needs is found by a participant in terms of the alignment thereof with the curricular requirements, while other participants note that most of them have been limited in recent years to only consulting the mandatory bibliography indicated by the teaching staff and less the optional one. However, users are more focused on analysis and research, and are also increasingly involved in the trainings provided by libraries in connection with the use of databases.

The answer and actions of the Romanian university libraries to changes in user behavior

By assessing the answers received in the study, it appears that concerning the problems reported by the users, libraries have so far been trying to respond by constantly focusing on the completion of collections in the underdeveloped areas, but also in terms of the subjects pursued at the university, to the continuity of collections, both traditional and digital. Other libraries organize campaigns to promote their services or try to respond by arranging the space so that it meets the highest demands, but also by organizing and providing various services requested by users.

Romanian university libraries seem to have a proactive attitude and are carrying out actions that aim to keep and attract users to the services they offer. Although they are not spectacular or very innovative compared to what is happening abroad and some even fall within absolutely normal and expected activities within an academic library at the beginning of the 21st century, these actions demonstrate that users and their information

needs actually represent their main objective. Most participants mentioned that the library they manage focuses on users, attending meetings at various university faculties, organizing information literacy sessions at faculty level.

The setting up of new reading rooms, rooms with direct access to publications, wireless Internet, the development and diversification of the information offer, meaning the retroactive completing of collections, new acquisitions of traditional and electronic documents in foreign languages, updating of collections of courses and guides for practical works, are mentioned by the participants.

The assistance provided by librarians to users in the process of information and retrieval of documents, electronic references, the improvement of communication with users with regards to access to library services, the provision of flexible opening hours for reading rooms represent other actions whereby Romanian university libraries try to attract users to services provided.

But university libraries are also involved in other types of activities, namely organizing special events such as literary cafes, open doors days and evenings, competitions, creative workshops, exhibitions, book launches, reading rooms meetings in order to try to attract users. And some university libraries regularly send e-mail messages to users for information purposes.

In brief, Romanian university libraries are trying to attract users through additional content, access to electronic resources, a pleasant environment, wireless Internet access, cultural actions, better assistance and better communication with users.

Asked if the libraries they manage have developed innovative user services in recent years, four participants provided a negative response. However, the other participants provided examples of such innovative services such as self-check, wireless Internet access, e-mail communication with users, the implementation of the RFID system, access to e-books, the implementation of the Liberty 3 integrated library software, access from home for users to online databases via a VPN server, the creation of new working tools for open access to scientific information, the ARTHRA digital repository, open access journals organized on topics, online training of users by creating tutorials of information literacy, the *Ask the librarian* service via Yahoo Messenger and online chat, the advancement of the library using Web 2.0 technologies (Facebook, Slideshare), the online management of references by using free shareware software.

Traditional library services or services provided in other libraries for a very long time have also been mentioned, but in some cases, as may be observed, such are perceived as innovative services for users: training and user orientation services in library spaces in the sense of efficient use of information tools by users (electronic catalogue) and quick retrieval of information, open access to the shelf, bibliographic information service, modern information services in the library, free Internet access.

User satisfaction

With the exception of one respondent, who didn't answer, all the other ten academic library directors and library branch heads stated that they pay special attention to user satisfaction.

In most cases, an annual assessment of user satisfaction is carried through a questionnaires based survey. Based on the results of these surveys, libraries look for solutions to solve the identified problems. Starting from this monitoring process, libraries adapt their services to the needs and expectations of users. However, lately, certain libraries have also received feedback from users on their Facebook page. This may also be due to the fact that some libraries have tried to respond to users' needs by improving the infrastructure for information access and also through more flexibility, a program tailored to users' needs and a fair attitude towards users.

Library directors were asked if they knew the community's perception of library services. Most participants responded that the surveys conducted periodically among library users reveal a favorable perception regarding the library services. But there were also library directors who admitted that there is also much dissatisfaction among users with regards to the technological infrastructure (library equipment), the insufficient number of computers, the insufficient number of copies of some publications, and also users believe that the information services are insufficiently promoted by the library at the level of the academic and research community.

Even if users attend the library preponderantly during the pre-exam periods, they are still interested in using the reading rooms, they are happy with the atmosphere they find in the library, they come to work both individually and also in groups for various projects and they prefer to learn in the library and not at home. However, many want the library to have a prolonged schedule.

Some participants pointed out that users support the library with suggestions and personal opinions regarding the improvement of the activity and the information services provided.

Users are also aware of the fact that high-quality education cannot be achieved without information, and the facilitation of access to information provided by the librarian is highly appreciated. Given that the number of users has increased in recent years, users still consider that the library manages to respond well to their information needs and have a generally good and very good perception of services, which some consider to be advanced.

Conclusions

The digital environment underlies the most important changes in the behavior of academic library users in Romania, namely the increased orientation towards electronic information resources and the desire to access information as quickly as possible.

Romanian university libraries pay more attention to the needs and expectations of users and try to have an interaction, a communication and even better collaboration with them in order to provide quality information services.

Libraries are trying to attract users not through spectacular actions, but through diverse and current information resources, tailored services to their needs, provided in a comfortable environment for them, and through assistance in retrieving information.

Libraries are concerned about the level of user satisfaction and the results obtained from their annual surveys allow them to look for solutions that are as close as possible to user needs and preferences. There are obviously a number of dissatisfactions, but overall users appreciate positively the services provided by libraries and the assistance provided by Romanian academic librarians.

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