What about databases on animal health?

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In the original planning for this conference we were asked to present a paper on databases covering veterinary medicine and animal health. To accomplish this we prepared a questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed during three months to everyone who made any searches either from their departments, or in the library, with the help of the librarian. The Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of Bologna has a local area network (LAN), which can be used by everybody to share resources.

The format of the questionnaire was prepared by experts in Sociology, and was also used with another group of readers in the Social Science Area, where it gave better results. For our project we made some modifications adaptations to it to adapt it to the scientific subject area. It needed to satisfy the users of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of Bologna, who are particularly distrustful of new technology, especially professors and researchers.

The Ercolani Library was founded in 1992, with the centralisation and amalgamation of the existing thirteen smaller libraries which at that time made up the library service. As yet, not all the journal holdings are located in the Ercolani Library. There are a small number of professors who frequent the library. They are used to having someone find the information for them, and are reluctant to use the databases. They do not attend the course on using the LAN and they do not experiment with the new resources available on the net.

However there are users who carry out searches, although we do not think they do them properly. For this reason we wanted to verify what the users of the library LAN think about the resources which are available for use. For example, we wanted to know which databases are preferred and which, from their point of view, are no longer useful. This approach is the opposite of that taken by the paper that was presented last year at Coimbra (1). In that paper the starting point was the work of members of the Faculty as it appeared on the various databases.

From that study the conclusion could be reached that the levels of activity of researchers from the University of Bologna, as represented in the databases. This is a result of the difference in language, the wrong choice of journal to publish in, the tendency to present work at congresses rather than publishing it in journals, and so on.

Now we wanted to look at the system from a different viewpoint. The starting point was not to be the production of scientific works but the utilisation of the database, and the survey of opinions on them and how they could be improved. Before the research was started, the questionnaire was constructed so as to include information on age and position, type of
research, and databases utilised. Users were asked on the basis of the results obtained, to indicate the quality of the works found and their relevance to the research pursued. Finally there were some questions on the means of searching (use of free terms, use of manuals, use of keywords, whether the user worked alone or had help). Of the 140 questionnaires distributed in the space of three months, only eight were returned completed, four of which were in fact completed in front of my eyes.

Facing such a negative response, I asked myself what was wrong with my research: was it the means (the questionnaire), or the aim of the project (to evaluate the opinions of users) or even perhaps the subject matter itself? I personally think that my users do not understand the real value of bibliographic databases.

If we start by analysing the first element, the questionnaire, it could be concluded that it is a research tool, which is over-used these days. Perhaps you do not know that in Italy we have recently been asked to give our opinion on about 7 social issues in a public referendum, and that for the first time since the second world war the referendum result was invalid because of the low turnout of voters. It has been said that the reason for this was the irrelevance of the issues to many people, and the over-use of referenda during the last 10 years. As a further proof of this point, try typing the word questionnaire into a search engine on the Internet, and you will obtain such a large result that it will make you suspect that nowadays everyone wants to measure, to evaluate, to gather information.

To return to our problem, maybe the questionnaire, which was short and anonymous, did not excite the interest of users, who were bored with yet another request for personal opinions, which they did not want to give. So both the research method and the purpose of the research, which was to evaluate users' opinions of databases, failed to interest them. I don't think that there's in my users the curiosity to know if there are other resources to explore, whatever they may be. In my opinion their attitude toward the library is a passive one: it's very uncommon for somebody ask the librarian to subscribe to a new database service. Contrary to what might be imagined, it is the librarian who suggests what is the right site to look at. This would seem to be the dream of every librarian, but in fact is not. It's like working alone, without any suggestions or requests on which one's efforts might be based. On the other hand, it's very common for readers to use the available databases without being aware of how they are constructed and with a feeling of distrust towards the librarian, who seems to be creating difficulties over something which is easy to use.

The enthusiastic response of libraries to the growth of technology is not adequately reflected amongst users, who have not reached the same level of awareness. A lot of library resources are still invisible to library users, and the role of the library must be to bring the existing physical library closer to the virtual library, step by step. The growth of technology must be analysed closely, and the librarian must take time to examine the impact of new resources on users.

Another factor to consider is the composition of different user groups. Students are different from professors, and strategies to educate each group will also be different. If the same questionnaire was given to students, it can be assumed that the response would be greater: because nowadays they are much more involved in using Internet and they are accustomed to personal computers. However we weren't interested in knowing their opinions on this subject.
because they use library databases only for their final thesis. Prior to this, they do not need to use them, because it is not a necessary part of their course, so they are unable to make comparisons between different searches.

For my project, professors and researchers were the suitable group to gather the information from via the questionnaire, because they were the potential users of the resource. Unfortunately they usually try to delegate the searching to someone else. It is therefore not possible to investigate that very important synergy between researcher and librarian, which obtains the best search results. So my mistake was to ask somebody who was not interested. However if I do not try something like this, they will never change.

Another hypothesis is that they do not think it is the librarian's job to make enquiries of this kind, that the library is considered to be a space to use, without any need to measure the quality of the resource. In my opinion, included in the tasks of the Faculty Library is the encouragement of the use of more sophisticated bibliographic resources, and every means has to be used to do this, including my unfortunate questionnaire!

References