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Exploring the benefits of user surveys

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Introduction

- Why research?
- Existing knowledge
- Methodologies
- Discussion – research questions and the design of a study

Why research European information needs?

- Because we don't know enough about the users of European information – why they need information, how to encourage its use, how they will go about the process of locating information, which systems will be preferred, whether they can use the information when it has been found and how the information enables decision making and if access to it encourages participation and satisfaction

- Research encourages scepticism, questioning and critical reflection

- Underpins practice in the field by providing a better understanding of actual and potential users

- Furthers specialist interests (in particular sectors) by investigating the ways in which users in each sector differ, which approaches may be most appropriate and how subject needs might impact on collection development

- Informs/evaluates policy development/implementation – providing evidence

- Encourages further research by developing theory and hypotheses and the development of a research community

Existing knowledge

- Previous research has been sporadic, idiosyncratic and frequently focused on specific sectors
- Few centres of academic excellence on European information – few dissertations/scholarly papers
- Much of the literature relates to practice – fine but limited in scope and generalisability
- A paucity as a result of theory
- Much of what was done is dated – both in terms of policy evolution and of new approaches supported by ICTs
- Internal statistics generated for the Commission or host organisations may not be publicly available in any usable form, may not be capable of comparative analysis and are likely to lack objectivity and the capacity to draw general conclusions – a need to bring together statistical and in-depth knowledge

Methodologies – quantitative and exploratory

- Surveys across all relays gathering comparable data that will add to our understanding of similarity and difference (of existing known users) – simultaneous

- Surveys of the (existing) users of individual sectors - EDCs, EICs, EPICs etc

- Surveys of the whole population (whether the public as a whole or the population of a particular sector such as law or education) – not just of those that use existing services

- Likely to be questionnaire based – email, postal, telephone or doorstep/street

Methodologies – qualitative and in-depth

- Interviews – the notion of conversations

- Focus groups

- Participation and observation – overt or covert?

- Case studies – of individual services and their users

- Virtual ethnography – looking at visitors to the Europa website - observing, engaging in discussion etc.

- Delphi groups – experts discussing policy and service

Discussion

- What are the most important research questions that we need to answer? What do we want to know about the users of European information?

- Which issues require to be explored – eg apathy, misinformation, freedom of information and the importance of access to public information in ensuring transparency and democratic participation, promotion of services, management of services etc.?

- Which groups should be studied?

Designing a study

- Who?
- Where?
- When?
- What questions should we ask?
- How?

- How could the data resulting be made useful to professionals, to Europe and to the research community?