JCER Report

Usage of Online European Union Information Resources 2008

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Abstract

In recent years there has been an explosion of online European Union information resources available to researchers. However, little research into how researchers are accessing and using these resources has been carried out.. The aim of the research which informs this report was to take the first step to begin to rectify this issue. An online survey was conducted, using University of Bristol's BOS software to which 145 people replied. The survey found that researchers considered themselves proficient at using online services. Surprisingly only 46.4% used them every day though. The Europa website was the most used but also paradoxically the most criticised for problems with search, navigation and transparency. Journals were the next most popular type of resource. Other top services included search engines, news sites and email lists. Web 2.0 has yet to be taken up widely by our sample of researchers, with few individuals having or using blogs or social networking software. The report also highlights that while some researchers are happy with EU online services, many are concerned about poor navigation and the design of websites, bias of information and the increasing abundance of passwords necessary to access multiple information resources.

FOR RESEARCHERS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU) ACCESSING ONLINE RESOURCES IS an increasingly common activity. In recent years there has been an explosion in availability of online EU information resources. To help understand how researchers are reacting to this expansion of electronic material, a short research project was conducted during June and July 2008. This project examined how often researchers accessed EU online materials, if they still used paper resources, and which types of resource were most popular – whether journals, gateways, social-networking software, the official Europa website or others. Their views about current provision were sought, including what they liked about services and what they found problematic. They were also asked how online provision could be improved and what their general views were on EU online materials.

The Internet has become an important part of research across most subjects in academia**.** As such, there is considerable scope for new research on the usage of online resources, both free and subscription-based, to be undertaken. As the amount of information available online increases and, despite efforts by some organisations to present information in more structured ways, it can still be confusing and impossible to identify all information sources. New services are appearing constantly, technology is moving forward and as such it is possible to infer that user behaviour is evolving. An initial literature search across various databases and free services found that little research on online usage of EU resources has been carried out, however, various general surveys (non EU specific) have been undertaken and these are discussed in the 'Literature Review' section of this report.

Methodology

The research for this project was mainly limited to EU researchers *based* in the UK, although this is clearly not such a simple concept nowadays, with increasing mobility of staff. It also specifically focused on EU online services *available* in or from the UK.

First, a brief review of the current provision of EU online services was carried out. Many of the services or resources identified were familiar to the author of this report, thanks to her role as European Studies editor of Intute.[1] This review was supplemented by a literature search which aimed to identify whether any recent research on the usage of online EU materials existed.

Secondly, an online survey was conducted during June and July 2008. A message advertising the survey was sent to several email lists, including those belonging to UACES, WESLINE, the European Information Association and LIS-SOCIALSCIENCE. The potential target audience was over 1,000 people (although it is necessary to recognise that some individuals may subscribe to more than one of these lists).

The survey began with a series of basic questions about the researchers and their favourite websites. It then probed further and examined their website preferences and why. Open questions were asked about problems accessing information or why certain websites were attractive. Participants were also asked how online services could be improved and for any general comments they may have about the provision and trends of online EU information services and resources. To obtain additional qualitative information, a number of email interviews were undertaken.

Current Provision of EU online services

There is a huge range of EU related online services currently available and this is growing fast. As well as official services such as the Europa website and individual government websites, there are many independent services provided by think-tanks, non-governmental organisations and news agencies. Commercial activities from major publishers, such as journals subscription services, are also growing. Another attempt to make access to Internet resources easier are gateways or directories, such as Intute, or the European Information webpage provided by Exeter University.[2]

Web 2.0[3] has seen the growth of social-networking type services, such as blogs, wikis and services such as MySpace, Bebo and Facebook (social software utilities which which allow people with connect online each other). A search on Facebook found over 500 EU related groups and numerous academic European Union groups. The European Information Association[4] also provides current awareness services and a blog to keep information professionals and researchers up to date with official EU publications. There are various serious political blogs which report on European Union policy and news, including Margot Wallström's[5] and some by respected journalists such

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[1] Intute is a free online service providing access to the very best web resources for education and research across numerous disciplines and subject areas, from social science, arts and humanities to life sciences, engineering and technology., . All material is evaluated and selected by a network of subject specialists. See http://www.intute.ac.uk for more details.

[2] See: http://library.exeter.ac.uk/internet/eurostudies.html

[3] Web 2.0 is a term that describes the "changing trends in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design that aims to enhance creativity, secure information sharing, collaboration and functionality of the web. Web 2.0 concepts have led to the development and evolution of web-based communities and its hosted services, such as social-networking sites, video sharing sites, wikis, blogs, and folksonomies" (Wikipedia definition – available at:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0#cite_note-10, last accessed 25 October 2008.

[4] See http://www.eia.org.uk/.

[5] See http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/wallstrom/.

as Mark Mardell at the BBC.[6]   The European Union also provides a video service via YouTube called EUTube which is aimed at the dissemination of information about the EU to the wider public.[7]

Search engines such as Google are increasingly popular, yielding vast numbers of hits for searches such as "European Union" – over 149 million in October 2008; although, of course, one has to sift through the results which can be very mixed in relevance and currency. It should be noted that no systematic research was done on Google performance for this article, but anecdotal evidence from researchers known to the author indicates that some use Google as a possible starting point in their research.

Literature Review

A number of databases and websites were searched for material on EU online materials and usage. However, no recent research, specifically on usage of online EU resources by academics and researchers, was identified. The only research slightly similar to this was Marcella *et al.'s* (1999) article, 'The information needs of United Kingdom Members of the European Parliament (MEPs)'. Of course, since 1999, information usage and the World Wide Web have evolved greatly and today's situation is very different from that of almost ten years ago.   Nevertheless, there were some similarities to be found between 1999 and the current situation: for example, MEPs found the Europa website not very user-friendly (Marcella 1999: 175), a criticism still levelled at it today.   One interesting finding highlighted by Marcella *et al.* (1999: 174-175) was that the MEPs preferred informal networks for finding EU information, rather than official ones.

Various *general* studies of online user behaviour have been published recently. The report, *Information behaviour of the researcher of the future* (UCL 2008) gives a fascinating insight into how the Internet is being used, although it concentrates on the 'Google generation' of younger people (typically 18-25 year olds); while this article looks at all ages but in a specific subject area.

The Research Information Network published the report *Researchers' Use of Academic Libraries and their Services* (RIN 2007). The RIN report was based on a large scale, research project which sampled 2,250 researchers and 300 librarians The emphasis of the research differed from that of this report because 'a significant part of…[the RIN]…study focuses on the roles librarians play in support of the research process' as opposed to that of academic researchers.

Another interesting research development is The Driver project, founded in 2007; this is an international partnership working on 'a project to build a large-scale public infrastructure for research information across Europe'.[8] Currently thirteen international partners are working together on the project (headed by the University of Athens) with the aim to build a knowledge base or depository of European research. However, the project is still in the early stages of its development and it is too early to identify any interesting findings yet.

Findings from the Online survey

145 people responded to the online survey, which ran from 23 June to 21 July 2008. Although this fell considerably short of the 1,000 or so subscribers to the mailing lists contacted, it was still felt that this was a large enough sample to yield some worthwhile initial results indicative of the usage of EU online resources. It was also recognised that

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[6] See http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markmardell/.
[7] See http://www.youtube.com/EUtube.
[8] See http://www.driver-repository.eu/.

these results would go some way towards helping to formulate a more in-depth analysis for future research on this topic. The twelve questions and responses are summarised below:

1. **Do you ever use the Internet/online resources to find information about the European Union?**
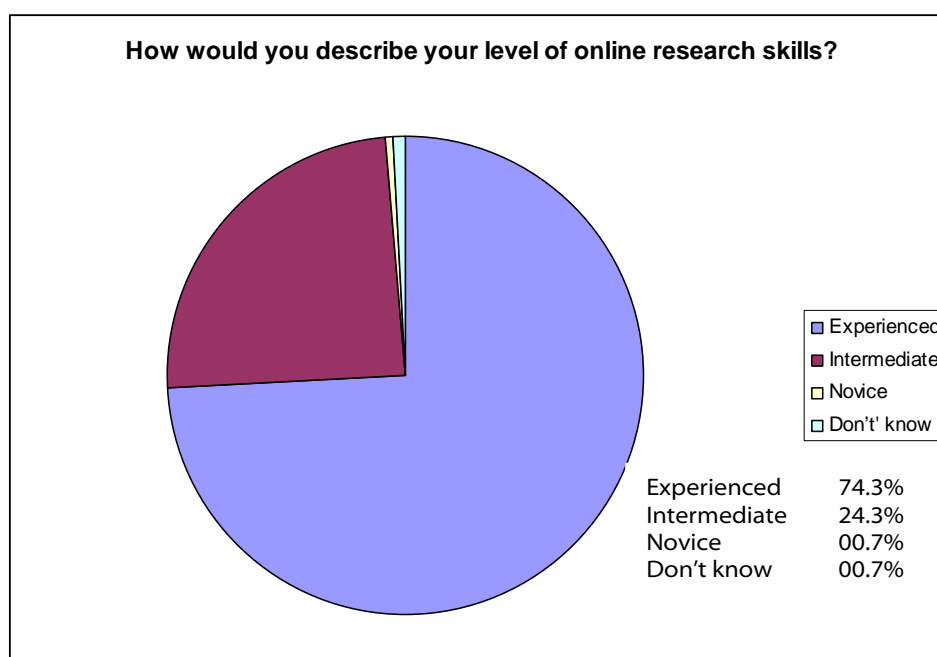
   97% of respondents said 'Yes'.

   Any saying 'No' did not need to continue with the survey.

2. **What is your main academic area of interest? (free text open question)**

   Not surprisingly, there were a wide variety of replies, covering European politics; European law; EU cohesion policy; EU competition policy on state aid; Europe and Africa; gender mainstreaming; citizenship; Russian foreign policy; media; national identity and culture; and science and technological studies. Several librarians and other support staff also replied.

3. **How would you describe your level of online research skills?**

   How would you describe your level of online research skills?

▪ Experienced	
▪ Intermediate	
▫ Novice	
▫ Don't' know	

Experienced	74.3%
Intermediate	24.3%
Novice	00.7%
Don't know	00.7%

   The vast majority - 74.3% - considered themselves 'experienced' 24.3% said they were 'intermediate' and only .7% each were 'novices' or 'don't knows'.

4. **I use online EU information (daily, weekly, monthly or less often)**

   Nearly half (46.4%) used EU online sources every day, but many (36.4%) used them weekly and a substantial number (14.2%) even less often. This was unexpected because it was assumed that most researchers would access online resources on a regular basis. There are specific findings on the usage of paper-based resources in question 11.

5. The online services I use most for finding EU information are:

The main Europa website was by far the most used, with 95% of respondents listing it in their response. Other formal services provided by the EU scored comparably lower usage with only 9% mentioning services such as EurLex, ESDS and the FP7 site as useful places to find information. Journals were the second most popular at 77%. Other top services included search engines (i.e. Google), news sites and email lists. Specific Web 2.0 services such as newsfeeds, blogs and social-networking software showed low usage.

6. My top 5 EU websites are:

Europa was most popular, cited by 40% of respondents as their number one site. EurLex, EUObserver and EurActiv were next in popularity, but there was no clear fifth website that was shared amongst the respondents.

Other well-known websites were listed, e.g. BBC News and FT.com. The UACES website was also mentioned. Less well-known sites, probably reflecting the specialist nature of many European researchers' work, included foreign language newspapers, organisations and think-tanks. .

Reasons for this choice

Users could choose one or more answer. Judging by the comments, most users seemed prepared to persist with any difficulties using sites, in order to get the content they needed. Europa was a typical example of a website where this is the case. Quality was also important to users. Peer pressure from friends or colleagues was least important. Other reasons included the regular update of current information, the opportunity to network, availability of resources not easily found elsewhere and coverage of a good range of overlapping issues such as law, political science and economics.
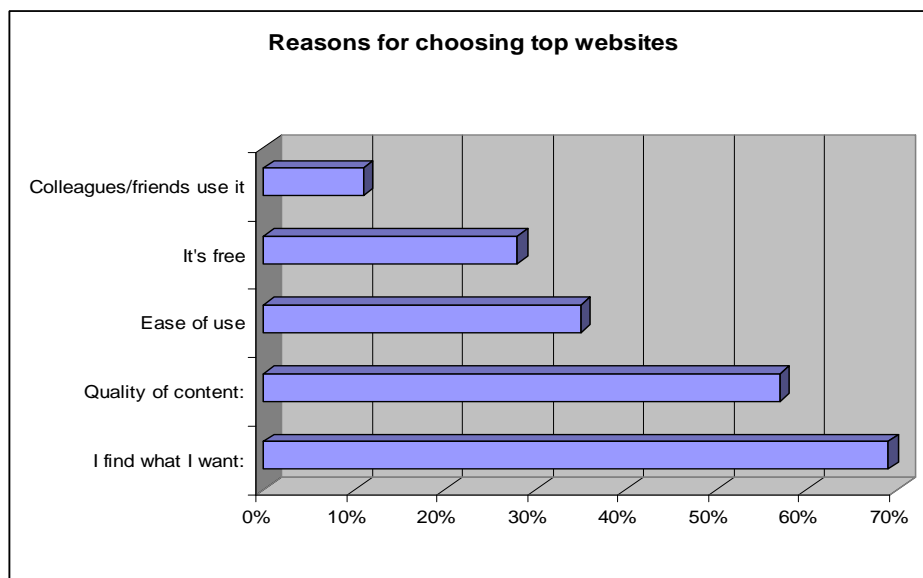
I find what I want: 69%
Quality of content: 57%
Ease of use   35%
It's free: 28%
Colleagues/friends use it   11%

7. **Do you have your own website for work?**

    Just under half answered Yes, although in retrospect the question was too vague and it is not clear whether they meant a departmental website or one they had set up just for themselves.

    Yes   43.1%
    No   56.9%

8. **Do you have your own blog for work?**

    Few respondents had set up their own blogs; the survey did not ask for reasons why.

    Yes   05.8%
    No   94.2%

9. **What are the main issues you have in using services providing EU information online? (free text open question)**

    Only 27of the 145 respondents answered this question.

    48% of respondents found 'no issues' or were generally happy with EU services. Barriers such as a foreign language or lack of IT skills were not a problem for most of the respondents.

    However 55% complained that websites were often complex and hard to navigate. 23% forgot passwords. Others were prevented from using services as their institution did not have a subscription.

    Some interesting comments came up in the 'Other reasons' option: There was much criticism of Europa, especially its search function. It was suggested that information on Europa was 'often fragmented, contradictory or not updated.' On the other hand, some researchers *were* happy with it. The FP7 site was found to be too complicated; one person said that by the time they had worked out how to make a research submission, the deadline had passed.

    Additional remarks made in the 'Other reasons' option included concern that the quality of content on some websites was 'poor' or access to information was found to be unnecessarily lengthy and complex. The problem of information disappearing from the Web was also mentioned (e.g. when sites or webpages are removed or moved to a new address) and the issue of costly individual subscriptions was also touched upon.

10. **How do you think online EU information services could be improved? (open question)**

    103 people replied to this question.

    The most common comment by far was that the search facility on Europa should be improved. Several people said they used Google instead of Europa as an easier way in to search the Europa website content. A few researchers suggested merging databases such as EUR-Lex, Prelex and OEIL but did not say why. Others thought that the actual *structure* and *culture* of the EU ('byzantine' and 'bureaucratic') led to its websites being too complicated and not

transparent enough. In addition, EU terminology, abbreviations and reference numbers were often found unhelpful.

Respondents also wanted better navigation for online services in general. Other improvements for general services included 'increased openness', more simple interfaces and more use of RSS [newsfeed] technology. Furthermore, there was a call for information to be updated more regularly.

11. **Roughly what percentage of your time do you spend using paper-based services, rather than online ones? Why is this? (free text open question)**

125 out 145 replied to this question.

The majority replied that they spent 5% or less using paper based services. Reasons for using online resources included availability and speed of access. Sometimes the choice was beyond researchers' control. One person remarked that they would use books if they had more time, and someone else was at a university without *'a well endowed library'* so they were forced to use Internet resources. Environmental reasons were also mentioned – that online resources were more environmentally friendly. Furthermore, it was suggested that online resources were easier to search and could be accessed remotely.

However, paper-based resources were not completely out of favour, with a surprising 41% of respondents saying that they used them 20% or more of the time. Reasons varied: The fact that computers were harder on the eyes was mentioned. Someone said 'I like old-fashioned books and newspapers.' Portability was also an issue: *'you can read it on the train, bus, while waiting, not only at work in front of a screen.'* Some could not find more historical information online. One said *'20 percent. But I would use them more if I spent more time at the library, which is better organised than any EU-related website.'* Another said *'50% the collection of EU documentation I manage is a hybrid collection - Also the number of books relating to the EU which are being published on a weekly basis is considerable.'*

12. **Do you have any other general comments about how you access and use online EU information? (free text open question)**

79 people replied. 28 made actual comments. 51 had no comment.

This question was purposely made open to get as much feedback as possible, however, some respondents found that this was too vague and would have preferred additional direction.

Comments ranged from the very satisfied, *'Access has never been better,'* to the fairly happy, *'Generally good. More a case of knowing how to navigate than the material not being there',* to the despairing, *'It's a pain.'*

Critical comments mainly concerned difficulties in retrieving information or navigating websites. They also mentioned the tardiness or failure of email helpdesks to reply to questions.

Several people commented on the biased nature of EU information, either from official sources or from journalists. Someone wrote *'there are too few authoritative independent (i.e. not part of the EU institutions) sites.'* Another said *'there should be more info about the problems of the EU, usually it is too idealized.'* *'It is also important to know how much information is NOT put onto the official EU*

websites. Because there is so much, one tends to think that it is all up there, and it isn't.'

Eur-Lex and other law resources were criticised for links not opening and more information on developments in case law was wanted.

Some respondents questioned the concept of 'EU information' used in this survey, saying that *'it is more often about research related to the EU than typical info about the institutions etc'.*

One researcher thought were was a need for a more Web 2.0 approach in presenting EU information, for example more wikis and better use of metadata.

Conclusions

The most striking finding was the high usage of the Europa website, contrasting with negative comments on its usability. This suggests that while Europa is welcomed as an official or authoritative resource, it is not meeting expectations.

The EU researchers surveyed varied in many ways, being involved in quite diverse research areas. Some appeared happy with the provision of EU resources, although the majority did appear to have complaints. Poor search function, bad navigation and confusing websites were all mentioned. The issue of objectivity in EU information was also brought up.

Despite all the publicity, Web 2.0 has so far failed to be adopted *en masse* by researchers; at least not by this survey sample. However, a number of researchers did recommend its exploitation to make services more effective. There is huge scope for Web 2.0 to enhance the researcher's experience of online EU resources. For example, if users could choose which bits of content they wanted to use from huge EU websites, they could then import them as newsfeeds or tagged records. This is something which Intute offers through its Integration service.[9] This would give researchers more control over the information they view. There are other valuable current awareness services such as the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) blog, which for example recently featured information on national identities in Spain (IBSS 2008).

Intute as an organisation is very interested in user behaviour and take-up of new Web 2.0 type technologies, and how this can be applied to make the Internet more accessible for users. The findings of this research may feed back into Intute's work on usability and outreach as well as possible, additional in-depth research on this subject.

Personal Reflections

Writing the article led to some reflections on the actual learning process of conducting some research:

This was the first piece of primary research ever conducted by the author on this subject, and was therefore a learning experience too. One or two exasperated comments received from participants certainly gave useful feedback about survey design (e.g. make all questions optional!). Designing the online survey was challenging. More detailed questions could have been asked, such as those in the RIN report (RIN, 2007) – for example, additional questions about types of resources or how researchers collaborate across disciplines, could have been asked. More information on researchers' own websites and blogs could also have been asked for, or why some researchers do

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[9] See http://www.intute.ac.uk/integration/

not have a blog. However, it was also important to recognise that researchers are busy and they may have been put off by a longer survey. One person the author spoke to, who had done the survey, said he thought the questions were good and '*to the point'* but other email respondents were highly critical about the choice of questions and found the research 'flawed.'

The timing of the research could have been better planned, particularly as the UK higher education 'summer term' was ending and many researchers were not available. So possibly more replies to the survey would have been obtained if it had been done during one of the standard term time periods.

It may be worth repeating some of this research at some point in the near future, using this piece of research as a pilot project. This would allow for a more in-depth analysis, and provide an opportunity to see if there are any differences in user behaviour, e.g. in top websites or if Europa has improved its interface. It would be good to extend the research too, for example looking in more *detail* at types of service used and the nature of access problems.

While it is recognised that this is only a small piece of initial research on EU online information and its users, it nevertheless raises some interesting findings which could be passed on to information providers such as Europa, in order to bring about possible improvements to Europa and other services. This final quote from one researcher sums up the Europa situation nicely: *'My main comments are that it is still quite impenetrable to the ordinary person, and this works to keep alienation of the EU from the people. When I see people using EU information, they try and avoid the Europa website and generally Google search for it first, as Europa is a bit of a maze.'*

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Wiliams, P. and Rowland, I. (2007). Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future: A British Library/JISC Study – The Literature on Young People and their Information Behaviour. Available at: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/reppres/ggworkpackage ii.pdf, last accessed 25 October 2008.

Online resources

BOS (Bristol Online Surveys) available at: http://www.survey.bris.ac.uk/

D-Lib magazine available at: http://www.dlib.org/

DRIVER available at: http://www.driver-repository.eu/
EurActiv available at: http://www.euractiv.com/en/HomePage

Europa website available at: http://europa.eu/

Google Scholar available at: http://scholar.google.co.uk/

IBSS available at http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/IBSS/

Intute:EuroStudies available at : http://www.intute.ac.uk/socialsciences/eurostudies/

Intute Integration service available at: http://www.intute.ac.uk/integration/

Intute Repository Search available at: http://www.intute.ac.uk/irs/

Journal of Contemporary European Research available at:
http://www.jcer.net/ojs/index.php/jcer/index

LISA (Library and information science abstracts) available at:
http://www.cilip.org.uk/publications/lisa

Margot Wallström's blog available at: http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/wallstrom/

SuperBook project available at: http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/research/ciber/superbook/

Wiley InterScience available at: http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/home

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