

The Types of Publications Read by Finnish Scholars Vary with Their Purposes for Reading

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Evidence Summary

The Types of Publications Read by Finnish Scholars Vary with Their Purposes for Reading

A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To closely examine the role of reading in scholarly work, with particular attention to the relationships between reading practices and characteristics of the scholars, the types of publications they read, and the context of reading.

Design – Survey.

Setting – Universities in Finland.

Subjects – 528 academics (research directors/managers, professors, post doctoral

researchers, doctoral students, lecturers, and researchers).

Methods – An online survey was distributed in Finland, October-December 2016. The first part of the survey asked about scholars' general reading practices; the second part asked about their most recent reading of two particular publications, one a journal article and the other a different publication type. In relation to these two readings, the scholars provided information about the documents read, the reading process and context, how the document was identified and obtained, and the effect of the reading on their work.

Main Results – On average, the scholars read 59 publications per month: 20 journal articles, 3 books, 5 conference proceedings or research reports, 17 newspaper articles, 9 magazine articles, 4 blogs, and 2 non-fiction/fiction books. There was no statistically significant difference in the number of journal articles read across disciplines, but the number of books read was highest in the humanities and social sciences and lowest in the sciences and medical sciences. Frequency of reading of particular publication types also varied by work focus (research vs. teaching/administrative) and by the nature of the scholar's research (basic vs. applied).

The scholars were also asked about the importance of reading different publication types. Overall, scholarly journals and article compilations were rated as most important for scholarly reading. Differences in these ratings were found across disciplines, work focus, nature of the research, and scholar rank/status.

Part 2 of the survey focused on the most recent items read by the scholars. Their reading of journal articles, scholarly books, and conference proceedings/research reports was mainly for the purpose of research and writing. Their reading of newspaper articles, magazine articles, and blogs was mainly for current awareness and continuing education. Their reading of non-fiction/fiction books was mainly for their personal interest or pleasure. None of these publication types was specifically focused on supporting the scholars' teaching.

Over 70 percent of the recent readings were new, rather than re-readings. Across all publication types, the scholars read at least parts of the item "with great care". Almost half of the journal articles recently read have been or will be cited in the future; this proportion was also high for scholarly books and conference proceedings/research reports, but not for the other publication types.

The most recently read journal articles were brought to the scholar's attention primarily through searching; they became aware of scholarly books and conference

proceedings/research reports through both searching and because another person told them about the item. Scholars mainly obtained journal articles and scholarly books from their libraries, but they also obtained articles on the Internet and scholarly books from another person.

Forty percent of the scholars read journal articles by printing a downloaded copy, but over half read them on a computer, mobile phone, or e-reader. Over half of the scholarly books were read from published/printed copy, but 18% read the book in an electronic version. Most reading occurred in the scholar's office or lab.

Over half the journal articles and conference proceedings/research reports read were published within the last year; just under half the scholarly books read were published within the last year. While these scholars worked in Finland, 91% of the journal articles and 73% of the scholarly books they read were published in English.

Conclusion – The results from this study confirmed and extended findings from previous studies (e.g., Tenopir et al., 2010, 2015). They demonstrated that scholars read a variety of types of publications for a variety of purposes. However, journal articles still dominated the reading and the perceptions of importance among the various publication types, particularly for the purposes of research and writing. This paper provides a first look at scholars' uses of the other publication types and the influence of work tasks on reading practices; further research is needed to understand these relationships more fully. In general, the disciplinary differences in reading practices found in this study mirror the different publishing practices of the disciplines and so may be affected by future evolution toward open access and social media use for scholarly communication.

Commentary

First, it should be noted that this paper presents many more findings on the reading practices of Finnish scholars than have been

included in this summary. In the original paper, the results are presented in 21 tables. For those who are particularly interested in the information behaviors of scholars, a close reading of the original paper is certainly warranted.

This survey was methodologically strong (Boynnton & Greenhalgh, 2004) and conducted by an experienced team of researchers; however, there are a few limitations that should be mentioned here. The most obvious is that the sample was drawn from a population of scholars in Finland—a single country that is ranked 35th in the world in the number of scientific articles published (National Science Board, 2018, Table 5-22). The authors thoughtfully address this limitation in their discussion, noting that scholars in Finland read and publish in both Finnish and other languages, especially English. In addition, the results from Part 1 of the survey are consistent with findings from past studies. Finally, a direct comparison of Finland with Australia and the U.S. found only small country-based differences (Tenopir et al., 2010). Based on this evidence, it is reasonable to consider the results of this study in terms of their implications for scholars in other countries and the libraries that serve them.

One key aspect of the study methods should be taken into account when interpreting the findings: in Part 2 of the survey, each respondent/scholar was asked to provide detailed information about their most recent reading of a scholarly journal article and their most recent reading of some other type of publication. Thus, while there is a significant amount of data supporting the findings about journal article reading, there is much less data about the reading of the other types of publications. For example, the ratings of the importance of reading scholarly books was based on only 93 responses, while the ratings of article importance were based on 454 responses. Thus, the Part 2 findings related to the reading of scholarly books, conference proceedings and research reports, newspapers, magazine articles, blogs, and non-fiction/fiction books should be interpreted with caution.

Third, the results were tested for their statistical significance, and these findings are reported. However, the authors do not report effect sizes for their findings, making it difficult to evaluate which of the differences in reading practices are most important to consider in terms of libraries' support of those practices.

A final methodological question concerns the total number of readings undertaken by a typical scholar (i.e., the mean number of readings during the past month). The total reported by the authors is 59 readings per month, which is the sum of the means for the various types of publications. However, it's not clear that any given scholar reads all type of publications; in other words, it's not clear that the unit of analysis is the scholar, rather than the particular publication type. For instance, 37% of the respondents read no scholarly books and 24% read no conference proceedings or research reports. Thus, it is possible that the total of 59 readings per month is an overestimate of scholarly reading.

In spite of these methodological concerns, the authors have provided a strong basis for librarians' consideration of their collections and the way those collections support scholars' reading practices, as well as service development and outreach programs. There are three findings that are particularly pertinent to practitioners.

First, these results can be used to understand the broad range of materials that scholars find useful in their work. While the reading of journal articles was dominant, scholars are also relying on both scholarly books and conference proceedings/research reports for their research and writing, and newspaper and magazine articles and blogs for current awareness and continuing education. They also use magazine articles and other fiction/non-fiction pieces to augment their use of journal articles for teaching purposes. As academic libraries consider both their collections and their services they provide, this wide variety of publication types and their variation with the scholars' purposes should be taken into account.

Second, these results show that scholars are strongly dependent on their libraries to support their scholarly reading needs. Scholars become aware of relevant articles through searching both web search engines (47%) and databases provided by the library, such as Academic Search Premier or Web of Science (37%). Almost half of the scholars reported obtaining the journal articles from the library collection; an additional 15% obtained the articles from an institutional or subject repository. Almost 20% of the scholars obtained the articles from the Internet, but it is likely that many of these were obtained through online subscriptions maintained by the library. Only about 2% of the scholars obtained their articles from their own personal subscriptions. Thus, academic librarians should be vigilant in maintaining collections that will support the research work of the scholars at their institutions. Without the library collections, research would be severely hobbled.

Other considerations should come into play when developing e-book collections. This study took a close look at the format in which the publications were read. While journal articles were most often downloaded and printed on paper prior to reading (40%), over half of the readings were on a computer, mobile phone, or e-reader. The reading of scholarly books followed a different pattern. Some were downloaded and printed prior to reading (18%) and some were read in electronic form (25%), but 56% of the readings were from a printed/published copy. Most of these printed copies were obtained from the library's collection (44%) or borrowed from another person (26%). From these findings, we can conclude that librarians should continue to develop their printed book collections in the core research areas of the scholars they support.

In summary, the results from this two-part survey provide us with a detailed look at scholars' reading practices and have important implications for academic library collection development. Journal articles and scholarly books continue to play important roles in scholars' work, and scholars rely on their

libraries for support in discovering and obtaining these publications.

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