

Information use by economists: A study

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Discusses the information use pattern of Indian economists in the present Internet era. Highlights the use of various types of resources, including institutional resources and role of NASSDOC in providing various services to social scientists

Introduction

Information is a vital resource which is essential for survival in today's competitive and wired world. The information itself and the way it is accessed have undergone changes owing to the developments in information and communication technology. It is a vital ingredient for the socio-economic and cultural development of any nation or individual. According to Kemp, 'information is considered as the fifth need of man ranking after air, water, food and shelter'¹. Information collection, transfer and use are all pervasive and universal activities in all walks of life. Information becomes more meaningful and effective when it is transferred and communicated. The purpose of transfer and communication of information is its use. Libraries collect various information sources for the purpose of use by their clientele. However, effective use and development of need based collection is dependent on users. This necessitates undertaking users' studies. There are good number of such studies in the field of sciences, social sciences and humanities. However, the literature review yielded very few such studies in the area of economics.

The review revealed a study on the communications behaviour of academic economists in research phases by White². The survey indicated that information gathering behaviour of economists varied as they progressed through research projects. While analyzing reading interest and use habits of development scientists

of Centre for Development Studies [CDS], Trivandrum, Devarajan³ found out that book readers constituted the single largest group followed by periodicals. Similarly, Eric's⁴ study on information seeking behaviour of economists and analysts in a professional context revealed that use of information sources and practices varied from their activities, and that they used new technological tools to meet the information needs under different situations and stages and also traditional information, depending upon the type of study undertaken.

The present study attempts to find out the use of information by Indian economists in the present Internet era.

Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To identify the types of information resources used by economists in seeking information;
2. To determine the different approaches and methods used by economists for retrieving information and references from print, electronic and Internet information sources; and
3. To find out the use of institutional sources of information by economists.

Methodology

To meet the objectives, a structured questionnaire with both closed and open questions was designed and

Table 1 — Sources of information: Formal / Documentary sources

Sources	0	1	2	3	4	*
Books	4 (2.1)	6 (3.1)	37 (19.1)	99 (51.0)	48 (24.7)	-
Handbooks/Ref Books	3 (1.5)	9 (4.6)	72 (37.1)	94 (48.5)	16 (8.2)	-
Research Reports	2 (1.0)	12 (6.2)	52 (26.8)	104 (53.6)	24 (12.4)	-
Conference Proceedings/Papers	3 (1.5)	27 (13.9)	87 (44.8)	64 (33.0)	13 (6.7)	-
Thesis/Dissertations	15 (7.7)	73 (37.6)	92 (47.4)	12 (6.2)	1 (.5)	1 (5)
Journals	-	2 (1.0)	12 (6.2)	94 (48.5)	86 (44.3)	-
Magazines/Newspapers	8 (4.1)	28 (14.4)	46 (23.7)	45 (23.2)	67 (34.5)	-
Govt/Statistical publications	7 (3.6)	5 (2.6)	46 (23.7)	105 (54.1)	31 (16.0)	-
Reprints/Preprints from fellow professionals	13 (6.7)	27 (13.9)	80 (41.2)	61 (31.4)	11 (5.7)	2 (1.0)
Discussion/Occasional/Working papers	2 (1.0)	12 (6.2)	71 (36.6)	90 (46.4)	19 (9.8)	-
Abstracting & Indexing periodicals	29 (14.9)	53 (27.3)	71 (36.6)	29 (14.9)	12 (6.2)	-
Citation Index	42 (21.6)	63 (32.5)	62 (32.0)	17 (8.8)	8 (4.1)	2 (1.0)

Note: Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage. * Indicates no response. Five point scale: 0 = Never ; 1 = Rarely ; 2 = Occasionally ; 3 = Frequently ; 4 = Most frequently used

distributed among economists working in different academic and research institutes of India such as Delhi School of Economics, Institute of Economic Growth, Indra Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, Centre for Development Studies, Indian Institutes of Management etc. A random sample of 225 economists working as Directors, Professors/Sr. Fellows, Associate Professors, Assistant Professors/Fellows etc. were selected, out of which 194 responded. The collected data was tabulated and analyzed for the purpose of discussion.

Results and Discussion

Use of documentary sources of information

Among the formal documentary sources of information, governmental statistical publications were frequently used (54.1%) followed by research reports (53.6%),

books (51%), current journals (48.5%), handbooks/reference books (48.5%), discussion/occasional/working papers (46.4%). Theses and dissertations (47.4%), conference proceedings (44.8%), reprints/preprints (41.2%) and abstracting and indexing journals (36.6%) were occasionally used. 34.5% used magazines and newspapers daily and citation indexes were used rarely by 32.5% of economists surveyed (Table 1).

Books have been used to a lesser extent compared to government/statistical publications and research reports. This supports the view that statistical information is at the core of economics research. Current journals are used less than books, which is common in the case of social science research compared to sciences. Use of gray literature such as discussion/occasional/working papers is encouraging. Use of abstracting and indexing periodicals is occasional due to the fact that in social science research, researchers use references given at the end of articles and books rather than these periodicals for finding original articles.

(N= 194)

Table 2 — Sources of information: CD-ROM databases

Type of CD-ROM Databases	0	1	2	3	4	*
Bibliographic	25 (12.9)	22 (11.3)	45 (23.2)	78 (40.2)	23 (11.9)	1 (0.5)
Statistical	36 (18.6)	28 (14.4)	57 (29.4)	55 (28.4)	18 (9.3)	-
Citation Index	80 (41.2)	47 (24.2)	48 (24.7)	15 (7.7)	4 (2.1)	-
Full Text (E-jls)	60 (30.9)	30 (15.5)	53 (27.3)	29 (14.9)	22 (11.3)	-
Computer Programs (Programs written for economic modeling)	58 (29.9)	38 (19.6)	41 (21.1)	36 (18.6)	19 (9.8)	2 (1.0)
Discussion/Occasional/Working Papers	35 (18.0)	22 (11.3)	60 (30.9)	57 (29.4)	20 (10.3)	-

Use of CD-ROM sources of information

In case of CD-ROM sources of information, bibliographic databases were frequently used (40.2%) compared to other forms of CD-ROM sources. Discussion/occasional/working papers (30.9%), statistical databases (29.4%) and citation index (24.7%) were occasionally used. Majority of the economists never used full text electronic journals (30.9%) and computer programs (29.9%). (Table 2).

The increased use of bibliographic databases were more compared to other types of databases perhaps owing to the factors such as ease of use and wide coverage of published literature for many years. Occasional use of other databases is attributed to such factors as lack of knowledge, training, cost, time and assistance.

Use of Internet sources of Information

In case of resources, discussion/occasional/working papers were more frequently used (47.9%) followed by full text documents (41.2%), information about publications and activities of international organizations (37.1%), information about conferences (37.1%), electronic journals (36.6%), information about journals (34.5%) and OPAC (29.4%). Where as, conference proceedings (40.7%), information about other academic/research institutes (38.1%), thesis and dissertations (34%), government information (33.5%), e-newsletters (29.4%) and online bibliographic databases (24.7%)

were occasionally used. Discussion forums (47.4%), online citation indexes (43.3%), computer programs (34.5%), online statistical databases (29.4%), web OPAC (27.3%) were relatively never used by the respondents (Table 3).

It is found among the Internet sources of information, discussion/occasional/working papers are frequently used, followed by full text documents including electronic journals. The wider use of these sources may be attributed to the factors such as ease of use, carrying latest research results of ongoing research, no time lag and availability at reduced/no cost. Frequent use of Internet for finding conference details, research journal details and checking the availability of books in the library by economists shows their interest in learning and using Internet in their day today academic and research work. Occasional/Non use of other Internet resources is attributed to the factors such as non availability, lack of training, awareness etc.

Use of institutional information sources/services

Among the institutional sources of information, economists tend to make use of information sources/services offered by various international organizations, national networks and documentation centers. It has been found from the study that, World Bank was frequently used by majority of the respondents (69.6%) followed by International Monetary Fund (42.8%) and Social Science Research Network [SSRN] (40.2%). The

Table 3 — Sources of information : Internet sources

Internet Source and OPAC	0	1	2	3	4	*
Online Bibliographic databases	42 (21.6)	35 (18.0)	48 (24.7)	45 (23.2)	20 (10.3)	4 (2.1)
Online Citation Index	84 (43.3)	44 (22.7)	37 (19.1)	19 (9.8)	6 (3.1)	4 (2.1)
Online Statistical Databases	57 (29.4)	38 (19.6)	49 (25.3)	37 (19.1)	9 (4.6)	4 (2.1)
Full text documents	21 (10.8)	20 (10.3)	50 (25.8)	80 (41.2)	23 (11.9)	-
E-journals	18 (9.3)	25 (12.9)	60 (30.9)	71 (36.6)	20 (10.3)	-
Discussion/Occasional/ Working papers	12 (6.2)	18 (9.3)	52 (26.8)	93 (47.9)	19 (9.8)	-
Conference proceedings	25 (12.9)	31 (16.0)	79 (40.7)	53 (27.3)	6 (3.1)	-
Computer programs (Programs written for economic modeling)	67 (34.5)	46 (23.7)	51 (26.3)	21 (10.8)	9 (4.6)	-
Information about other academic/res institutes	12 (6.2)	37 (19.1)	74 (38.1)	62 (32.0)	9 (4.6)	-
Thesis/Dissertations	53 (27.3)	61 (31.4)	66 (34.0)	13 (6.7)	-	1 (.5)
Govt information	22 (11.3)	24 (12.4)	65 (33.5)	64 (33.0)	19 (9.8)	-
Web OPAC	53 (27.3)	31 (16.0)	50 (25.8)	44 (22.7)	15 (7.7)	1 (.5)
E-Newsletters	45 (23.2)	31 (16.0)	57 (29.4)	45 (23.2)	16 (8.2)	-
Information about activities and pub of int organizations	15 (7.7)	26 (13.4)	66 (34.0)	72 (37.1)	15 (7.7)	-
Information about journals	15 (7.7)	30 (15.5)	59 (30.4)	67 (34.5)	23 (11.9)	-
Information about conferences	14 (7.2)	23 (11.9)	64 (33.0)	72 (37.1)	21 (10.8)	-
Discussion forums	92 (47.4)	34 (17.5)	41 (21.1)	21 (10.8)	4 (2.1)	2 (1.0)
Library OPAC	41 (21.1)	20 (10.3)	49 (25.3)	57 (29.4)	27 (13.9)	-

Note: Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage; * Indicates no response Five point scale: 0 = Never ; 1 = Rarely ; 2 = Occasionally; 3 = Frequently; 4 = Most frequently used

Table 4 – Use of institutional sources of information

Sources	Y	N	Total
Developing Library Network [DELNET]	54 (27.8)	140 (72.2)	194
Information and Library Network [INFLIBNET]	39 (20.1)	155 (79.9)	194
International Monetary Fund [IMF]	83 (42.8)	111 (57.2)	194
National Social Science Documentation Centre [NASSDOC]	31 (16.0)	163 (84.0)	194
Small Enterprises Documentation Centre [SENDOC]	8 (4.1)	186 (95.9)	194
Social Science Information Gateway [SOSIG]	27 (13.9)	167 (86.1)	194
Social Science Research Network [SSRN]	78 (40.2)	116 (59.8)	194
World Bank	135 (69.6)	59 (30.4)	194

Y = Used ; N = Not used Note: Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage

services of national networks and documentation centers such as DELNET, INFLIBNET, NASSDOC etc were moderately used by the respondents. (Table 4).

The moderate use of NASSDOC by Indian economists (16%) is disheartening as NASSDOC being the only centre of documentation in social sciences; it should attract more and more researchers from all branches of social sciences. The similar situation was noted in a study undertaken by Karisiddappa et al⁵. The centre should take appropriate measures to undertake user surveys in all disciplines of social sciences to know the pulse of researchers' interest and build its collection and introduce innovative services based on it. This will enhance usage of its sources and services. It should also take measures to advertise its services at proper forums in order to attract large number of users.

Limitations of the study

The results of the study are limited only to the sample derived from specialized research and teaching institutes in the field of economics and allied fields. The results derived from the responses of economists working in these institutes are not universal. The information use by economists working in universities and colleges of India could be different.

Conclusion

It has been observed from the analysis that economists make use of various resources as per their needs. However, it is found that many of the resources, especially electronic resources and services are used to a lesser extent due to lack of awareness and training. This situation emphasizes the need for intensive user orientation programme in the libraries attached to the research institutes. Library professionals attached to these institutes need to develop skills in use of electronic resources to guide their clientele towards effective utilization of the same. This kind of situation will ensure in optimum utilization of the resources and services by Indian economists.

References

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