

Back Talk — OCLC Report

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December 2005 was a momentous month for the information world. We learned, surprise, surprise, that our Patriot Act President wasn't satisfied with openly seeking information about the American people and resorted to "legal" secret information gathering.¹ And for a moment at least, the library world was accused of helping the FBI learn more about the reading habits of college students. A student at the **University of Massachusetts**, Dartmouth claimed his borrowing of Mao's little Red Book brought with it a visit from the FBI.² **OCLC** was scrambling to make sure no one thought it had fed the Feds this information — which of course it had not.

Boring by comparison, but the most important information related event of the month was **OCLC's** release of its *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* (2005).³

While this report may not stack up well against the most recent **John Grisham** crime novel as bed time reading, I found it very interesting and believe it has something of value for all librarians. First the good news: "Over 80 percent of U.S. youth and young adults, respondents 14 to 24 years old, hold a library card — more than any other U.S. demographic." (p. 1-1) And now the bad news: "Nearly one-third of respondents say their library use has decreased in the past three to five years." (p. 1-1). The question for those of us working on the service provider side of the desk is: How do we prevent the other 2/3rds from following them?

I can't summarize all the interesting facts and figures that appear in the report but will share those that appealed to me as a librarian working at a university library:

- 50 percent of college students indicated that they thought their use of libraries would remain the same and only 12 percent thought their use would decrease. (1-6)
- 44 percent thought their use of libraries had increased and only 16 percent thought it had decreased in recent years. (1-4)
- 62 percent of college students were extremely or very familiar with search engines but only 55 percent said the same of the physical library. (1-10)
- While 83 percent of college students indicated they used search engines, only 61 percent had used a library's web site and only 8 percent had used an online reference service. (1-13)
- 89 percent of college students indicated they typically began searches with a search engine while only 2 percent said they went to a library Website. (1-17)
- An 18-year-old in Canada noted, "I despise searching the library for books and other sources. It takes a long time and rarely can you find sources needed. This

difficult process is the first thing I think of when I think of using the library." (1-22)

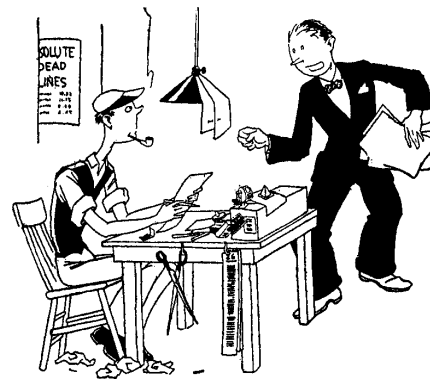
- 92 percent of college students rate search engines as very or somewhat favorable source/place for information while 85 percent said the same for the physical library. (1-24)
- 85 percent of college students agree or completely agree that electronic magazines/journals are worthwhile sources of information. (1-33)
- At least monthly, 48 percent of college students use the library for study and 39 percent borrowed books. (2-4)
- The top three online library activities for college students are to use the library's Website, 56 percent; use electronic magazines/journals, 49 percent; and use the library's online catalog, 47 percent. (2-13)
- 33 percent of all college students have asked for a librarian's help when using electronic resources; 54 percent have not. (2-17)
- 75 percent of college students agreed or completely agreed that librarians added value to the information search process. (2-10)
- 60 percent of college students were very satisfied with the overall information seeking experience using a search engine while less than 50 percent of them felt that way when they sought assistance from a librarian.

I could go on an on but will stop here and ask myself and all of you, so what? What does this all mean? For me it signifies that we are on a downward slope in terms of our war to win the hearts and minds of our student clientele — compared to that of the search engine alternative.

But I don't view the slope as slippery as yet. Eighty-five percent of students value our costly e-journals; 75 percent feel reference librarians add value; and 48 percent still come to the library to study. Yet, the evidence is there that our electronic mother nature is spraying a bit of grease around: 89 percent of students start an information search with a search engine; and 92 percent of them rate the experience as good — leading librarians at 85 percent. But students are still not completely satisfied with either search engines (60 percent) or librarians (50 percent). So where do we go from here?

The **OCLC** report asked library patrons what they thought libraries should do. I think you will find the suggestions comfortingly and/or annoyingly familiar (I have translated these suggestions into my own words):

- Buy more content/update content.
- Provide longer hours.
- Relax the rules/be less bureaucratic.



- Get rid of charges.
- Provide more seating, more comfortable seating.
- Make the library a more inviting place, e.g., add a cafe.
- Decrease the noise.
- Hire more staff, more friendly staff, and smarter staff.

I don't deny any of these suggestions and my library, like yours, is working on most of them to one degree or another. We need to make our libraries super easy to use, friendly to a scary degree, and more inviting than home (easy since most homes don't welcome a dozen or so friends in search of study, food, music, talk, computers, printers, etc.). But will this be enough? Do any of these suggestions deal with what our students hail as wonderful about the **Google** alternative?

What is it that **Google** does so well and can't we do it even better? For me, what I like about Google is it is fast and it gives me full text — not (shudder) metadata/abstracts, etc. For most common, pedestrian informational needs libraries and librarians can't compete with a good search engine. Therefore, I suggest we simply stop trying and instead make sure that our students are the most accomplished **Google** clients on the planet. Next let's understand what **Google** can't offer: current eBooks; books that never go electronic; current e-journal articles; e-journals that never go open access; local content that cannot be shared with the world; paperbacks that are easily read in bed/at the beach/ in the bathtub, and whatever else your patrons want but can't get freely/easily on the Web. And then focus on making these available and KNOWN by our user community. These are my New Year's wishes and resolutions. 🌱

Endnotes

1. See "Bush Authorized Domestic Spying: Post-9/11 Order Bypassed Special Court" by **Dan Eggen**, *Washington Post* Staff Writer. Friday, December 16, 2005; Page A01.
2. See *South Coast Today*. <http://www.southcoasttoday.com/daily/12-05/12-17-05/a09lo650.htm>
3. *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* (2005). <http://www.oclc.org/reports/2005perceptions.htm>