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Conference report

Usage assessment - the French touch

International Symposium: Academic Online Resources: Assessment and Usage. Lille (France), 26-27 November 2009

In the heart of Europe, at only 1 hour 20 mins. from St Pancras, 1 hour from Paris and 30 mins. from Brussels, Lille hosted the first international conference on digital usage assessment in France. 160 LIS professionals and scientists from five continents met for two days on the scientific campus of the Lille University and discussed usage-related approaches to academic digital libraries.

Usage assessment in France

Since 2006, French information experts and academic librarians developed an intensive research activity to understand and accompany the uptake and usage of scientific digital resources. Most of the research is linked to the academic "big deals" from the COUPERIN consortium and to the CNRS scientific information portals. The scientific information centre INIST made available on its website a French version of the COUNTER Code of Practice and created a service on usage statistics. The National Research Agency ANR funded a 3-year research project (EPEF) on usage of journals, databases and ebooks by the French academic communities, based on a unique partnership between international publishers, academic libraries and experts from Lille, Nancy and Paris. Lille University supports a nationwide study on the development and usage of French open archives and hosted in 2008 the first French symposium on usage assessment.

The event is the message

The first message of the Lille conference is unambiguous: usage assessment is a hot topic for the whole value chain of the scientific information market. This market is fundamentally international, and so is research on usage. Half of the speakers, sponsors and members of the program committee came from other countries than France. The conference language was a muddle-up of French and English but as all participants shared similar experiences with digital resources, no problems of understanding occurred. Scientists and professionals from France, the UK, Germany or Japan ask the same questions, use the same tools and methods, are confronted with the same kind of difficulties. Linked to the rapid globalization of the STI industry; this is a significant change that allows for international cooperation in usage assessment and global understanding of scientific information behaviour. Keynote speaker David Nicholas from the UCL CIBER team described the web generation as "being frenetic, bouncing, navigating, checking and viewing. Also promiscuous, diverse and volatile." They are net citizens of the global village, despite of their different origins and locations. "The web is having a profound impact on how we conceptualise, seek, evaluate and use information. What Marshall McLuhan called 'the Gutenberg galaxy' is imploding, and we don't know if what will replace it will be better or worse."

The importance of log analysis

David Nicholas confirmed, too, the importance of deep log analysis methodology for the usage assessment. Based on seven years of data and millions of digital footprints in ebook, e-journal, e-learning and e-cultural databases covering every subject and coming from every country, the CIBER team got a formidable evidence base to understand what people did, not what they say they do or wish they did. Log analysis allows for separate evaluation of activity metrics (number of full text downloads, pages viewed etc.), information seeking characteristics (type of content viewed and search style) and user characteristics (geographical location, organisation etc.). The French research combines log analysis, evaluation of usage statistics, survey data (e.g. interviews with scientists from different disciplines and organisations) and direct observations. Qualitative research allows for better understanding of the quantitative usage data, e.g. in terms of behaviour, intentions and information strategies. Compared to the CIBER projects, French research is more focussed on academic resources and communities.

Same data but different use

The third message of the Lille conference is that one can use the same usage data for at least four goals: (1) Scientometrics: Usage data contribute to the assessment of scientific performance and production of scientists and institutions. (2) Services: Publishers and vendors but also libraries use access data to improve service quality and added value. (3) ROI: Institutions need these data to evaluate the return on investment in online resources acquisition and digital library tools. (4) Consumers: Last not least usage data help to understand the Internet consumers' behaviour and to link this behaviour to the specific institutional or community environment. For instance, this kind of analysis helps shaping new training programs for future LIS professionals. Yet, two issues call for attention: The risk of uncoupling between academic library services and skills and their traditional patrons muted into net citizens; and the association between usage behaviour and the technical, commercial and legal characteristics of the online resources. Scientific research on usage (demand) must not neglect the evaluation of online services such as portals, digital libraries and archives (offer). Wanted, the (missing) link between ergonomics and usability criteria and usage data.

Open access, mon amour

Some communications focussed on usage assessment of institutional and other open repositories. After some years of existence, the open access movement pulls into the same situation as digital libraries at the beginning of the big deals. Usage data are often incomplete and not compliant with other repositories or online resources. Also, there are specific and unresolved problems, such as a missing unique identifier, multiple deposits, and a mixture of full text and records. The Lille conference discussed German, French and UK projects that develop a framework for the open archive usage data. A lot of work remains to be done. Nevertheless, the evident synergy between the different initiatives will facilitate the emergence of an international standard such as COUNTER.

Struggling on standardization

Speakers and participants shared the need for standardization of usage data, terminology, metrics, procedures such as log analysis and related services. We have to know, especially in the emerging environment of institutional repositories, what exactly we measure and how we do it. The COUNTER project remains the central model for usage assessment, even if new developments are required, e.g. usage reports at the individual item level and log analyses.

Projects like PIRUS (JISC) and OA-Statistics (DINI) will continue to contribute to the standardization and interoperability of metrics and tools.

Beyond the flavours of Lille

Lille people are known as convivial, and locally brewed beer, chips and some strange-sounding Flemish dishes are part of the Lille culture. Conference committee, sponsors and the regional government¹ invited the participants to a nice diner at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, and some people finished the night in one of the several pubs of Vieux Lille. After the conference, people asked what will be the next step and when we will meet again and discuss ongoing research. The next step is the (bilingual) publication of the conference proceedings by the French association of LIS professionals, ADBS Paris; the presentations are already available on the conference website².

In November 2010, the Lille research team will organize the second French meeting on usage assessment., on the Lille scientific campus. In November 2011, will take place the next international symposium. New topics are forthcoming, such as usage assessment of ebooks and datasets (eScience), and the integration of usage statistics, citation data, and current research information systems (CRIS). Also, the ongoing CIBER study on digital resource acquisition (spending) scientific output surely will produce interesting results. In the meantime, to speak with David Nicholas, let's being frenetic and bounce through the ever-growing galaxy of the scientific web.

¹ Special acknowledgment to Elsevier, EBSCO, Swets and the regional government of Nord-Pas de Calais.

² <http://epef.anr.free.fr/>