

Systematic Literature Reviews in Social Sciences and Humanities A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to analyze the factors that may influence the results of a systematic literature review (SLR) in Social Sciences and Humanities. It is a case study focused on the analysis of a SLR centered on reading research and digital reading. Through this analysis it was possible to detect errors commonly found in bibliographic reference information provided by different sources. In addition, the diversity of sources treated permitted an understanding of the disparity in the data provided by sources of information. The difficulty in managing non-standard data, and the need to include different standardization techniques in order to reduce the number of errors and allows avoiding the distortion in interpretations of the data. The results indicated that SLR is a suitable technique to apply it in the Social Sciences and Humanities although was possible to recognize that carries more difficulties than in other areas.

KEYWORDS

Error Analysis, Humanities, Information Sources, Methodology, SLR, Standardization, Systematic Literature Review, Techniques

INTRODUCTION

The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) emerged in the field of Health Sciences due to the need of the professionals to access the most recent knowledge on a specific topic, as quickly and effectively as possible (Ramírez, 2007). Although its origins were more related to the professional field of Health Sciences, where it turned out to be a very useful tool to facilitate in-depth knowledge for the practice of evidence-based medicine (Beltrán, 2005), the SLR is currently considered one of the most accurate methodologies for conducted bibliographic reviews, and, it has proved to be useful also in studies with a more theoretical approach. Because of that, it starts to be used to frame a research within its overall context, as a previous analysis of the state of the art, a fundamental part of the process of elaboration of academic work, and can be applied in different fields, like Computer Science (Sepúlveda, Cravero & Cachero, 2016; Cruz-Benito, Therón & García-Peñalvo, 2016), Information

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Science (Ferrerías-Fernández, Martín Rodero, García-Peñalvo & Merlo-Vega, 2016) or Engineering (Rudas, Gómez & Toro, 2013).

The systematic literature review is especially useful for analyzing a large number of data since it allows to establish treatment patterns that permit the reduction and selection of the most significant references quickly and always based on criteria previously established by the researchers.

Traditionally, to conduct a bibliographical review in the areas of Humanities is more common to apply a narrative methodology (Atkinson, 2005), however, recently, due to the interest in creating conceptual maps of the subjects studied or the need to carry out a more exhaustive study of the field, the use of this type of methodology is increasing in Social Sciences and Humanities, for example in the Education Sciences (Sánchez-Meca, 2010; Riebe, 2016), in Bibliometry and Scientometry (Tomás Folch, Feixas, Bernabeu-Tamayo & Ruiz Ruiz, 2015) or Information and Documentation (González, Fushimi & Molfino, 2014).

Nevertheless, it is necessary to indicate that, although the methodology is similar in all areas, in the case of a research within Social Sciences, and even more so in the case of the Humanities, there are a number of particularities that may become inconvenient to select a type of methodology that presupposes the use of very precise standards and criteria. And this fact must be taken into consideration especially in areas such as Documentation, which is between the Social Sciences and the Humanities and that can inherit the mentioned particularities of both areas. Among these singularities are the presence of a variety of sources of information (Cordón-García, Alonso Arévalo, Gómez-Díaz, & García Rodríguez, 2016), The different types of publications, or even the absence of a common language among researchers, since it is common for research in these areas to be published in other languages not just in English.

The progress of SLRs in the area of Social Sciences and Humanities is undeniable, but is it the most appropriate methodology when preparing a literature review in this area? Is it possible to adapt this type of methodology to the particularities of this area of knowledge?

The purposes of this article are:

1. Indicate the steps that must be taken to conduct an SLR in the area of Social Sciences and Humanities;
2. To verify if this methodology is adequate to the studies of Social Sciences and Humanities verifying if it is useful or redundant the use of standards and criteria in the process of bibliographical search and in the treatment of the data;
3. Identify possible problems that may arise during the application of the mentioned methodology in Humanities as well as their possible solutions (methods or techniques) to minimize the identified problems.

This paper is organized as follows. In the next section, the case study selected, and the stages of the analysis are explained. The section after that deals with the selection of the information resources, the data treatment, and the database creation. The next section shows as results the problems found dealing with some data fields (knowledge area, author, keywords, ...). The final section gives some reflections as conclusions.

METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the objectives. The case study methodology has been used, but in this context, the case under consideration is the application of the systematic review of literature in an investigation focused on the subject of reading and digital reading, carried out in January 2016. The case selected analyzes the development of the field of study of reading from the appearance of new elements that serve as support for the text, more specifically, e-readers and tablets. This case was chosen because it is the study of a complex phenomenon that in recent years has attracted a large number of researchers, and consequently a systematic review was the most efficient way to carry out the study.

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