

# Chapter XXI

## Surveying Online Scholarship

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### ABSTRACT

*Part of the importance of descriptive studies, such as surveys, is the identification of directions and issues that can be pursued in future research. Surveying online scholarship helps scholars to identify component features of their fields reflecting where research scrutiny and deficiencies reside. Online access is providing users with the ability to survey exhaustive datasets available previously to a relatively few information scientists. Because of the relative newness of this level of access, scholars outside information and library science are just beginning to wrestle with issues that have a mature but somewhat obscured literature available. This chapter describes technologies, components, and possible analytical techniques related to some of these struggles. Specifically, it addresses their use in examining trends, producers, artifacts, and concepts of scholarly communication. Additionally, it provides a targeted application of these components to the literature concerning computer-mediated communication.*

### INTRODUCTION

The original “reality television show” was not “Survivor” or any of a number of other so-called “reality” shows. For many, the original reality television show was sports television. It has all the attributes of reality TV (no script, drama, relatively economical production costs); however, it tends not to be viewed as reality television because it does not fit the current manifestation model. For this author, the original “online research” was not Web-based surveys, or any of a number of current manifestations. It was database research in the university library (Wallace, 1999). It has many of the attributes of online research (computer use, data from distributed locations, methodological

strengths and weaknesses). While Web-based online research is substantial, the current Web-centric manifestation may tend to obscure some of the more obvious and prolific forms of research in computer-mediated environments.

To be sure, the publication, procurement, and production of online research is fraught with many of the difficulties inherent in computer-mediated communication (CMC). As early as 1984, Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire offered the generic distinction that “electronic communication differs from any other communication in time, space, ease of use, audience, and opportunity for feedback” (p. 1127). McClure (1991) puts the implications in a clearer light when he states that: “The advent of CMC has created new communication needs

(Hellerstein, 1985, 1986) and has encouraged the emergence of patterns of communicative change which did not previously exist" (p. 58).

## SURVEYING SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION

There are any number of ways to review a literature, from simple compilation of bibliographies to more sophisticated meta-analytical and bibliometric techniques. The publication manual of the American Psychological Association articulates the usefulness of reviews in: "... organizing, integrating, and evaluating previously published material ..." (American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 7). All of these methods have inherent strengths and weaknesses. Choosing among them is often determined by ends desired, resources available, and value for resources expended. The following sections discuss three broad categories of describing and synthesizing literature: qualitative, quantitative, and bibliometric. Then it expands the discussion to include a more comprehensive treatment of scholarly communication.

*Qualitative literature examination.* Some of the most common qualitative examinations of literature include bibliographies and literature reviews. The existence of bibliographies concerning CMC supports its position as an increasingly prevalent area of study. Extensive bibliographies both accompany literature reviews, and are a source of publication themselves (e.g., Romiszowski, 1992). Possibly because the individuals who study CMC tend to be users, they seem to avail themselves of the Internet as an outlet. The Internet provides a number of notable bibliographies containing hundreds of references specifically targeting the CMC literature base (e.g., Shah, 1999; Walther, 2004). These reviews bring with them the informed view of their respective authors. These views often disseminate nuances of the relevant and significant, while discarding the unnecessary. The weakness of bibliographical description is that, while they do

contain many pertinent examples of a given field, they do little to tell about the general make-up of what the examples include. Also, bibliographies are typically more closely aligned to the research forays of their producers than to a generalizable literature (Chung, 1994; Rubincam, 1987).

Rosenthal (1991) points out that even the most rigorous reviews have difficulty in providing more than cursory descriptions. Moreover, these reviews are seldom exhaustive and hardly replicable, two qualities that help the scholastic community agree on a characterization of a field of study. While subjective reviews have value for the reasons previously stated, there is little chance for a common description of a literature to emerge. Quantitative methodologies are generally thought to be a less subjective approach to describing literatures as a whole, increasing the chances for a common description (Ely, 1990; Everett & Pecotich, 1991).

*Quantitative literature examination.* Content analysis is one way to develop a treatment of quantitative literature examinations. It has been articulated for almost half a century, and has long predominated in some literatures (Berelson, 1952; Dick & Blazek, 1995). There are any number of source materials for this technique (e.g., Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 2004). Content analysis can provide a preliminary glimpse into the strength of the purveyance of topic, word, or author within a given area. However, traditional content analysis tends to fall short in describing complex relationships within a sampling frame (Dick & Blazek, 1995; Everett & Pecotich, 1991; Krippendorff, 2004). This technique, with its widest interpretation, includes many of the bibliometric techniques to be discussed subsequently. Generally, however, it is thought of in reference to simple frequency comparison.

Another quantitative method is meta-analysis of literature in a particular area. Meta-analytic studies are able to discern consistent levels of significance over a range of literature. Their focus, by design, must be confined to a narrowly defined

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