

## Chapter 8

# Undergraduate Information Seeking Behavior, E-Reference and Information Literacy in the Social Sciences

**Jason B. Phillips**  
*New York University, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

*As we consider the potential impact of e-reference, librarians should keep in mind another important concern that has received much attention in recent years, namely information literacy. The composition and differential usage of specialized indexes in the social sciences – resources that are not necessarily designed for undergraduate research – and of aggregated interdisciplinary databases present challenges to achieving information literacy. Users have e-reference tools at their disposal to help them navigate information found in such resources, but it is a classic problem of reference and now e-reference that these resources are underutilized. Interviews conducted with twelve undergraduates at New York University form the basis for a case study which is used to illuminate the issues discussed herein.*

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## **INFORMATION LITERACY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

In the social sciences, one key outcome for undergraduate students is that they have the ability to think critically about important issues through the lens of their chosen discipline. This often means acquiring the ability to distinguish social, cultural, historical, economic, or anthropological arguments from arguments that originate outside of the social sciences in fields such as the natural sciences, medicine, or technology. For instance, in sociology there is consensus around the idea that students should be able to “show the relevance and reality of structural factors in social life” (Persell 2010) and understand sociological manners of inquiry (McKinney et. al. 2004). In economics, some scholars emphasize the importance of liberal education and the ability to comprehend and apply economic arguments (Salemi 2009). If students who choose to undertake coursework in social science disciplines do not learn the skills which are crucial to social and cultural understanding in their chosen disciplines, it is fair to ask if they have learned much at all of importance.

While teaching is the province of the members of the teaching faculty at academic institutions, librarians, too, have an important role to play in promoting good outcomes by helping undergraduates navigate the information landscape. In our emphasis on information literacy, librarians have also increasingly recognized the importance of disciplinary boundaries and approaches (Grafstein 2002, Instruction and Information Literacy Committee 2008). There are modes of thought that are specific to each discipline, and reference librarians, in particular, must provide reference services with those modes of thought in their minds in order to best serve the students in their institutions.

We know, however, that one of the classic problems of reference is that undergraduates do not utilize the services of reference librarians with either the frequency or efficiency that librarians would hope they would. This phenomenon makes

it that much more difficult to promote good learning outcomes. The reasons are myriad and may include the notion that students do not perceive librarians as helpful assistants in their work (Ismail 2010), the notion that the library is primarily a physical place for study and not necessarily for reference services (Whitmire 2001), or the affinity that undergraduates have for electronic resources (Kriebel and Lapham 2008). Undergraduates are also sensitive to strategies that they perceive as saving them time (Weiler 2005).

Regardless of the cause, the problem caused by undergraduates’ lack of reliance on reference services is borne out by studies that indicate difficulties in assimilating and evaluating information gathered during the research process, in understanding how information is organized, and in identifying appropriate or useful resources for finding information (Maughan 2001). Literature indicates that undergraduates in the social sciences preferred the use of journals and normally followed citations as opposed to using indexes and abstracts (Whitmire 2002). Furthermore, students do not normally consult librarians as a matter of habit (Burns and Harper 2007).

## **SPECIALIZED INDEXES AND AGGREGATED INTERDISCIPLINARY DATABASES**

Teaching faculty want their students to use library resources. They are also likely to want their students to use many of the same resources that they utilize in their own research. Depending on how particular researchers go about their work, that can sometimes lead to the myopic use of library resources. Among databases with scholarly content, resources such as JSTOR and Project Muse are most widely known (Harley et. al. 2006). Although JSTOR was not originally intended to be used as a source of information for undergraduate instruction and research (Guthrie, Kirchhoff and Tapp 2003), its utility to a wide range of users in

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