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Researching user behaviour on the web –how do we provide library and bibliographic services that appeal to today's digital natives?

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This paper will summarise the findings of a number of market research studies that have been commissioned by Mimas, the UK National Data Centre based at The University of Manchester(1), in order to gain a better understanding of how students and researchers interact with and search on the Internet. The research revealed a wealth of information about the use of Google, awareness of online resources, use of new technologies, and Internet searching behaviour. The findings are valuable in informing the development of information databases and, specifically for Mimas, have provided significant insights into user expectations and experience as it looks to the next phase of development of its library and bibliographic services.

When beginning work on a number of new projects, Mimas was keen to know more about its users, and initiated the market research to inform new developments of its bibliographic services. The research consisted of a number of focus groups and interviews with a range of participants from a variety of subject disciplines. Librarians, researchers and students, were asked for their thoughts on the design and functionality of online resources, personalisation, aggregation, their use of Web 2.0, and of mobile Internet services.

Key findings of the research revealed, perhaps unsurprisingly, the popularity of Google (thus validating the findings of the CIBER Google Generation report (2)), user expectations that full text would be available online, low levels of awareness of electronic academic information services, and heavy reliance on a small and familiar range of resources. Search practices were largely habitual, and little interest was shown in personalising searches and materials (as also evidenced in the JISC Developing Personalisation in the Information Environment report (3)). Perhaps more surprising, was the lack of interest in new and emerging technologies, with few students as yet using mobile phones to access academic material online, and a dismissive attitude to the use of Web 2.0 in education. As information providers, these insights present us with our fundamental challenge: how do we provide services that appeal to today's digital natives?

This paper will discuss and demonstrate how these findings have been, and will be, translated into Mimas service development, for example in adding personalisation functionality to the Copac(4) aggregation of special and research library catalogues, and in the repurposing of the Internet Detective tutorial for use with mobile technologies. We will also consider the wider applications of our findings for the library community, and we are keen to seek the views and opinions of the participants in order to facilitate debate about the impact of user behaviour on the development of online bibliographic tools.

References:

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