Evaluation of usage patterns and promotion of electronic resources in academic medical libraries: the case of the Central Library of the "Carol Davila" University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Bucharest, Romania

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Abstract. The possibility to access information directly on the Internet, without the mediation offered by libraries and the fact that many users prefer electronic information services have led to the need for libraries to identify methods to promote and improve the services they offer. Along with the introduction of the new technologies, users can be considered among the most important collaborators of the library, but their experience in using electronic information resources and in searching and retrieving information in these resources varies greatly from one user to another and many still need assistance and training from librarians. Given that many academic libraries have focused in recent years on the development of large electronic collections in order to meet in a better way the information needs and preferences of users, we conducted research at the level of academic medical libraries in Romania which aimed to assess the quality of their services. We investigated how these libraries support the information and research needs of users and the advantages of access to electronic information resources for users. The situation in Romania seems to be different from Western countries in terms of not such a high use of electronic resources. In this paper we refer to some results of our research in the largest academic medical library in Romania, the Central Library of the "Carol Davila" University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Bucharest, and to possible solutions for increasing the use of information services based on electronic resources which include the need for intensive user education and promotion of these resources among the library users.

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1. Introduction

The number of users attracted to electronic information services increases every day, but their level of knowledge and their experience with the digital information resources are very different. Many people are active in the virtual environment from a very young age, but there are also many who are still beginners in what concerns the new technologies and the digital information services. Librarians and information specialists can use their skills to train them for an effective use of the electronic information resources.

Referring to the revolution which digital libraries generated in the academic world, in research and education, Romanian specialists (Moisil and Volovici, 2007; Volovici, 2007a) consider that "those who are in the management positions must take into consideration the new changes, build and set adequate strategies, starting with training programmes for the development of skills concerning information search and retrieval and measures for evaluating the possibilities to adapt to the specificity of each field and research network", but it is underlined in the Romanian library space that "in the libraries' activity, the main condition for some remarkable results is represented by the quality of the specialists involved". (Volovici, 2007b)

Librarians have the necessary expertise in the area of information literacy to provide assistance for the use of electronic information resources and in the process of information search and retrieval. Through their activities libraries "aim at offering quality services in a systematic, permanent, complex, coordinated manner" (Repanovici, Cristea and Cotoros, 2010), so they must take advantage of the rapid and continuous development of technologies, must help users understand and use the new tools for accessing information, and get the necessary skills for searching, retrieving, filtering, evaluating and using information.

Users could act till recently as key agents in the operation of an information system. Since the new technologies have been introduced in libraries, users can be considered among the most important collaborators of libraries, having the possibility to get even more involved in their activities. Referring to the Web 2.0 environment which presents a series of advantages and disadvantages for librarians and users, G. F. Miranda, F. Gualtieri and P. Coccia underline that this facilitates collaboration and information sharing, aspects which attract users, and one of the most important advantages which Web 2.0 offers is the opening toward new customized services which can meet specific needs of users and allow libraries to reach new audiences. (Miranda, Gualtieri and Coccia, 2009)

Librarians and information specialists should take advantage of all positive aspects which the new technologies present, but they must also know users' expectations, be flexible, use and adapt their skills and knowledge to the current information environment. Because today, more than ever, the user is "the ultimate goal of all activities that happen inside a library" (Repanovici, 2010)

Representing at present only one of many online information resources, libraries must think of new strategies to keep their users and improve the information services they provide.

In the context in which electronic information has become pervasive in academic environments, Volovici and Fleacă consider that "The efforts deployed in the area of

digital libraries are impressive, from new service to different searching expertise".
(Volovici and Fleacă, 2007)

2. Usage patterns of electronic resources in academic medical libraries in Romania

Academic medical libraries in Romania have been in a period of analysis of their information services with the aim of finding better modalities to meet user needs. In supporting research and education approaches, these libraries must meet the information needs of users such as students, teaching staff, PhD candidates, researchers, and physicians from the university clinics and hospitals.

The introduction of the new technologies has led to many changes in Romanian library activity among which the diversification of services and resources made available to users is one of the most important. Starting from this aspect and also from the fact that most medical libraries abroad have focused in the last few years on developing large electronic collections, we considered it extremely important to investigate how academic medical libraries in Romania support the information and research needs of users and the advantages of access to electronic information resources for users. Our studies (Buluţă, Mihăilescu and Porumbeanu, 2008; Porumbeanu, 2009a; Porumbeanu, 2009b) in the largest and the most representative academic medical libraries in Romania, among which there was also the Central Library of the "Carol Davila" University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Bucharest, clearly indicated that not very many users of the libraries surveyed used and preferred electronic information resources, a situation quite different from the one in the Western countries. If in the past the users of the academic medical libraries in Romania had access to very few information sources, in the last 15-20 years the situation changed completely and the new technologies made possible the access to many information resources. The results of our surveys showed that the printed document was still preferred and that the majority of users came to the library to consult paper documents, many of them admitting they needed assistance to access electronic materials.

Among the advantages which the use of electronic information resources brought, the participant users mentioned speedy access to many different resources, professional development opportunities and time saving. (Porumbeanu, 2009a)

More than ever users need information technology skills because these will enable them "to use computers, software applications, databases, and other technologies to archive a wide variety of academic, work-related and personal goals" (Repanovici, 2008) and this means that librarians should give more attention to assisting users to get this kind of skills.

The results of another survey which took place one year later only at the level of the Central Library of the "Carol Davila" University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Bucharest, a library which has proved its availability in recent years for research on its users but also on its organizational culture (Porumbeanu, 2010; Porumbeanu Madge, 2012), showed that the participants clearly preferred paper information sources (70%), only 38% choosing

electronic resources, 20% saying they would be interested in using them but they didn't really know them and 8% being interested in using electronic information resources but they didn't know how to use them.

The users' answers regarding how and from where they found out about medical electronic information resources and the way they learned to consult them explained in a way the low percentage of users that consulted the electronic resources offered by the library. Most of them found out about these resources from colleagues, Internet, teaching staff, library, conferences and 62% declared they taught themselves to consult electronic information resources. The difficulties the users were confronted with when using these resources can be explained if we have in view that a very high percentage (83%) of users didn't participate in any training session organized by the library about the use of these resources. (Porumbeanu, 2009b)

On the basis of these results we consider users are not really familiar with these resources. The absence of promotional activities for the electronic information resources and the lack of user education are among the main reasons of this situation. However we consider things are different among the users of the branch libraries which include residents and physicians who work in the clinics and are involved in various research projects and in the preparation of PhD theses. They consult and are interested in electronic resources much more than undergraduate students.

In the context of these results the first question that arises is what could be done in order to make maximum use of the electronic information resources to which the library offers access? Some possible solutions which we have already proposed for the specific case of the Central Library of the "Carol Davila" University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Bucharest could include in our opinion better promotion of these resources, better communication with users, a higher visibility of these electronic resources, and very important, an intensification of user education. (Porumbeanu, 2009b)

Specialists underline the fact that in order "to be able to play an active role in the students' acquiring of scholarly skills, libraries need to implement systems for uncovering the gaps in students' knowledge. We find that theories and practices from the fields of market research and marketing analysis provide a helpful perspective (…) in order to gain knowledge about the student's needs". (Landoy and Repanovici, 2010) And the results of our study make us consider too that a marketing approach would be more than necessary in this library, but in our opinion the emphasis should be also put on the users information and training about the electronic information resources.

3. Conclusions

In a similar way to libraries from other countries, the academic libraries in Romania, including the medical ones are continually confronted with many changes (Porumbeanu, 2011) such as the increase in the number of students, the diversification of the information sources, the insufficient budget for acquisitions, etc. but both through the traditional and modern services provided they support the educational and research approach of their funding university,

offering access to the scientific information in the biomedical field, meeting in this way the information needs of the Romanian medical community at all levels. (Porumbeanu Madge, 2011)

   Romanian libraries have come a long way since 1990, developing an efficient activity in the information society, passing through many changes at the level of their specific activities and of the services they offer to users.

   The current situation characterized by a true information explosion but at the same time by this low use of electronic information resources makes necessary at the level of this library an increased emphasis on the promotion of these resources among users, on a marketing approach to users, on their familiarization, on their training for using these resources and in these conditions the degree of usage of electronic information resources will increase considerably.

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