Weighing the Evidence: Evaluating Major Research Databases

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Tony Horava
AUL Collections,
University of Ottawa, Canada
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Overview

- What are major non-journal research databases?
- Institutional and consortial overview
- ‘Threading the needle’ of assessment – what gets through and why?
- Intellectual thread
- Structural support thread
- Business case thread
- Observations
- Conclusion
University of Ottawa

- Premier bilingual (English-French) university in North America
- Comprehensive doctoral institution: 9 Faculties: Arts, Social Sciences, Science, Engineering, Law, Management, Education, Health Sciences and Medicine
- Recently admitted to ARL (125th member)
- 40,000 students, 4,000 faculty; programs across most non-professional and professional disciplines;
- Students and faculty from 150 countries
- Among the top ten institutions in research intensity in Canada
Library snapshot

- Three libraries: Arts & Sciences, Health Sciences, and Law
- Collection budget: 13.6M (2011-12)
- ~145FTE; bilingual service
- Print books (volume equivalent) – ~2M
- Ejournal subscriptions – 24,524
- Print journal subscriptions – 3,839
- ‘Accessible’ ejournals – 70,000
- Ebooks – 405,000
- Research databases – 550
Non-journal research databases

- Are primary source or raw content; in various media including text, image, audio, video, etc
- Historical, social, economic, business or legal in nature
- Typically vetted by editorial board composed of recognized scholars; lengthy gestation & quality control
- Often provides critical apparatus somewhat analogous to print resources…but used very differently
What is evidence anyway?

- “Evidence is shown to us every single day - as we practice our profession, we learn what works and what doesn’t in certain situations. We have practical, real-life experiences to draw upon that are wrapped in different contexts.”
  
  - Denise Koufogiannakis, Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice 2011, 6.2
  

- Trial and error
- No uniform approach
- Context is everything
Consortial landscape

- National consortium: CRKN (Canadian Research Knowledge Network – 75 universities)
- Regional consortia, eg OCUL (Ontario Council of University Libraries – 21 universities)
- Subject or program-based consortia, eg Health Sciences; Maps; Data services; Law
- Language-based: CREPUQ (Quebec universities); CIFNAL (Collaboration on French language collections – CRL initiative)
### ‘Intellectual’ thread

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Consortia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-journal research material</td>
<td>Of high importance</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coverage</td>
<td>Could be broad or niche-based</td>
<td>Same</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unique value</td>
<td>May complement existing resources</td>
<td>Critical mass of content to address many needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinarity</td>
<td>Important for strengthening value proposition</td>
<td>Same...but greater savings expected</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prioritization</td>
<td>Balancing of different interests among faculty – are we democratic? If not, why?</td>
<td>Balancing of different interests among institutions from small to very large - flexibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Existing evidence</td>
<td>Input from faculty; trial use; perhaps reviews</td>
<td>Member surveys/wish lists are critical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discoverability</td>
<td>Metadata in local discovery system (webscale)</td>
<td>Diffuse need to take into account various systems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integration with researcher workflows</td>
<td>Focus on local tools and workflows</td>
<td>Focus on a range of tools, eg citation management software</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobile access</td>
<td>Becoming critical</td>
<td>Same</td>
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<tr>
<td>Functionality/platform</td>
<td>Core functions; bells &amp; whistles not essential</td>
<td>Same</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compatibility with standards, eg COUNTER, SUSHI, KBART, etc</td>
<td>Important for managing the resources</td>
<td>Important but institutions have different needs &amp; infrastructures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indexing</td>
<td>Important for precision &amp; efficiency</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trials</td>
<td>Can be valuable – not always needed</td>
<td>Same</td>
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# ‘Business case’ thread

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost models</td>
<td>Affordability</td>
<td>Cost-sharing is critical; perception of equity is essential</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financing</td>
<td>Self-financing. Cost-sharing among funds or disciplines</td>
<td>Multiple approaches to cost-sharing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scale of costs</td>
<td>All products, small to large in costs</td>
<td>Products with small costs not worth the effort</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Recurring costs a challenge</td>
<td>Lowering recurring costs – overhead as well</td>
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<tr>
<td>Value proposition (ROI)</td>
<td>Associated with institutional performance measures</td>
<td>Associated with strategic consortial goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Licensing issues, eg permissions, rights, archival solutions</td>
<td>Institutional relationship; minimal bargaining power</td>
<td>Bargaining power as strength to be leveraged</td>
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Charleston Conference Theme:
‘Something’s Gotta Give’

- Where do we cut corners in assessing evidence?
- If we know the vendor, and we know the platform and business model, we can be more efficient in our evaluation.
- What breadth of interest is necessary for a purchase decision? Much depends on cost, impact, and degree of interdisciplinarity.
- In general, one-time purchases will not elicit the same scrutiny as ongoing commitments.
Observations

- Libraries are faced with an explosion of scholarly resources, challenged budgets, emerging needs, and chronic lack of time
- Consortia face longer processes and timelines than institutions. Is there an opportunity cost?
- For consortia, the multi-faceted evidence is filtered through the prism of strategic goals
- Dynamics of decision-making in consortia and in institutions affect the forms of evidence that are used – political aspects
Observations (a few more)

- Tools to analyze non-journal scholarly resources are difficult to come by – no easy equivalent to the standard unit of the journal article as vehicle for scholarly communication.
- Comparing digital resources to print ‘equivalent’ is a dubious proposition: differing content, uses, and interactions.
- Institutions are focusing on quantitative and now qualitative measures of value – can we link these research databases to learning outcomes, to research outcomes?
- What happens when evidence is contradictory or inconclusive?
Conclusion

- Evidence for non-journal databases is multi-layered and multi-faceted
- Weighting the evidence – we need to prioritize the different threads, and this will vary depending on the product
- More than ever, libraries have an obligation to spend their monies as wisely and effectively as possible.
- Libraries and consortia apply different but overlapping strategies to evidence-gathering
- Understanding & sharing best practices can be of much value
Thanks!

Tony Horava

thorava@uottawa.ca

(613) 562-5800 ext 3645