

# HOW SOCIAL SCIENTISTS SEARCH FOR INFORMATION

Results from a ProQuest Survey on the  
Use and Perception of Search Resources

Rob Newman  
Senior Product Manager – Social Sciences



## INTRODUCTION

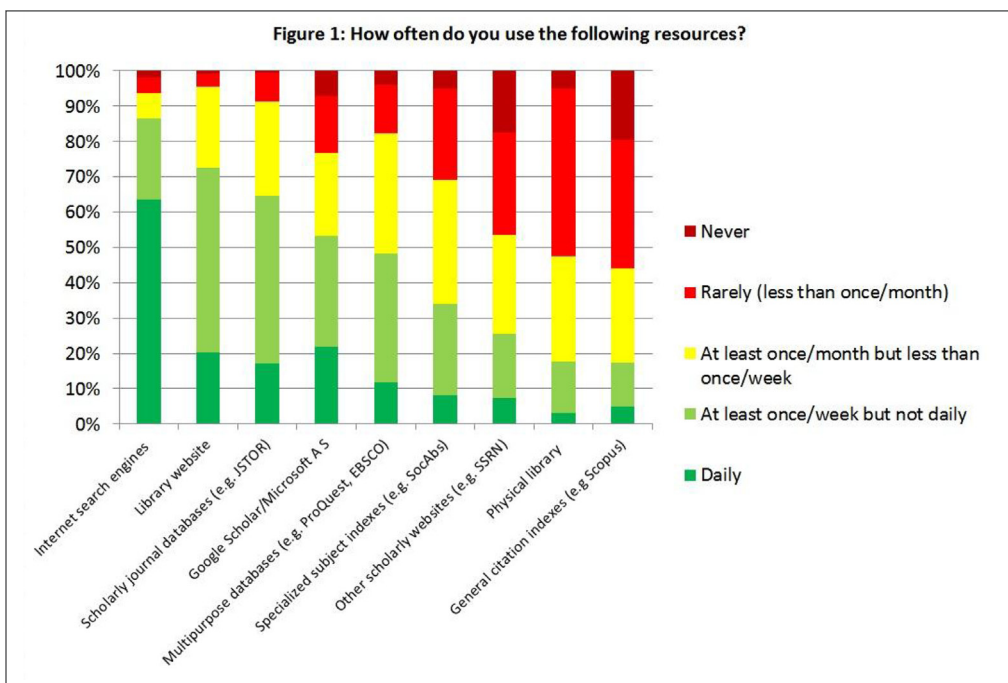
In May 2014 ProQuest conducted a survey of social science faculty in which they were asked about their use and perception of different search resources, including specialist bibliographic (A&I) databases and Google Scholar. Thousands of researchers from a range of social science disciplines including sociology, social work, political science, education, economics, anthropology and criminology were invited to take part, and 235 respondents around the world completed the survey (77% of responses were from the United States).

While we know that Google Scholar is a very popular starting point for searching, there is also evidence of the continuing importance of other options to expert faculty researchers. For example, Gardner & Inger (2012) reported that specialist bibliographic databases remain the most popular starting point for academic researchers when searching for an article. Ithaka's faculty surveys (2012) reported that over 40% of social scientists in the United States and around 30% in the United Kingdom typically begin their research in "a specific electronic research resource", but this category could be understood as including Google Scholar.

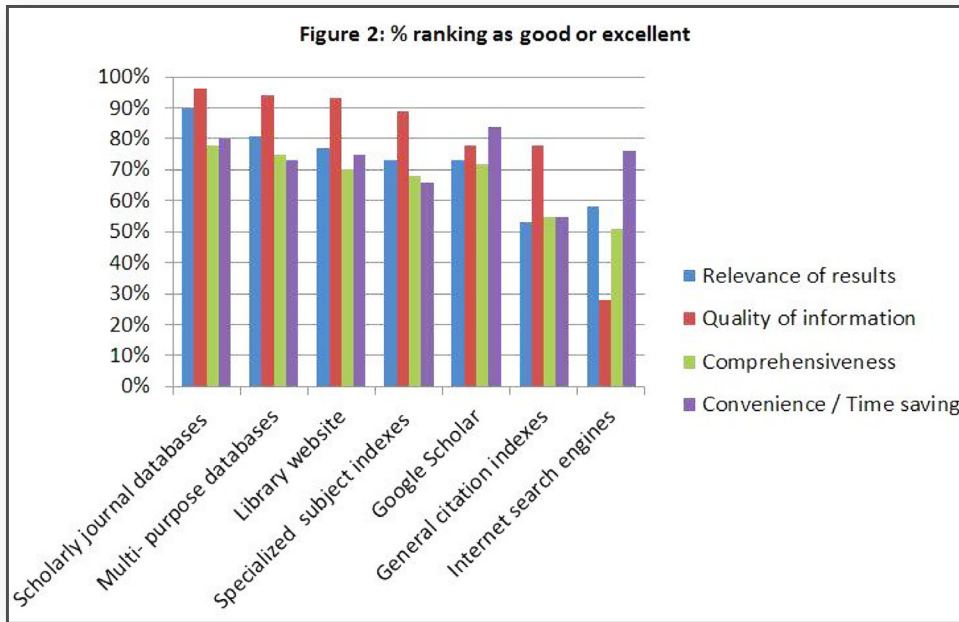
In this survey, we sought to understand the extent to which the value of specialist databases and other library resources was recognized by social science researchers, including those who more frequently start with alternatives such as Google or Google Scholar. We were also interested in perceptions of the relative strengths and weaknesses of these different resources as regards relevance of results, comprehensiveness, reliability & quality of information, and convenience & ease of use. Finally, we wanted to test the hypothesis that comprehensive but relevant results are of near-universal importance, and that faculty who make more use of specialist indexes get more relevant results.

## USE OF RESOURCES

As anticipated, search engines, the library website, Google Scholar and journal databases such as JSTOR are the most used, but multipurpose databases (e.g. ProQuest aggregation) are used regularly by a clear majority of researchers (see Figure 1). Specialized subject indexes (A&I databases such as Sociological Abstracts and ERIC) are used at least once a month by two thirds of faculty, and at least once a week by one third. The library website is used at least once a month by 96% of respondents, with 73% using it at least once a week, in contrast to the physical library, visited once a month or more by just 48%. With the adoption of discovery solutions such as the Summon® Service, the library website has remained central to the online research of social science faculty, and by linking to and recommending the other databases available from the library, this is also likely to be contributing to the continuing regular use of journal databases, multipurpose databases and specialized subject indexes.

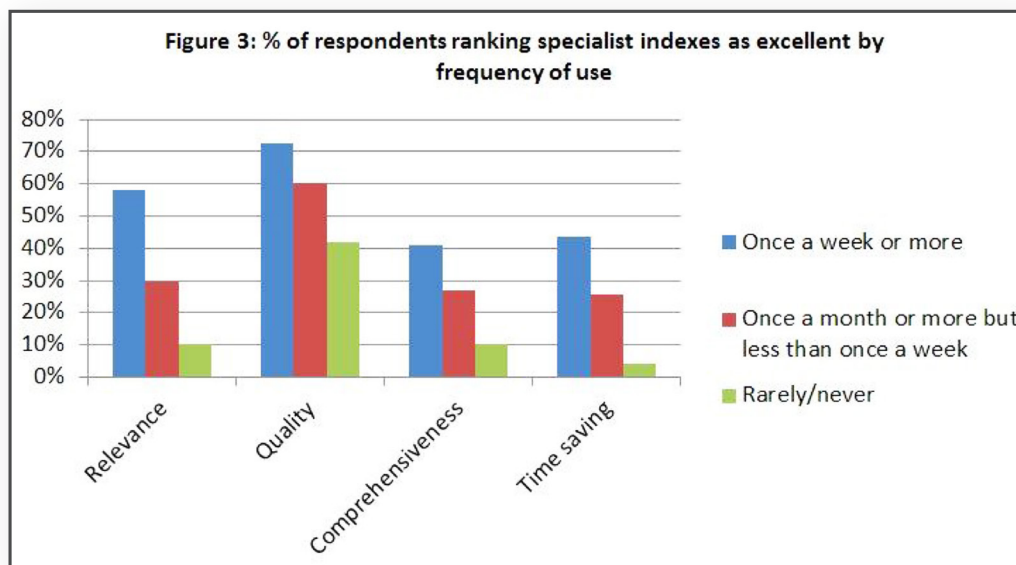


How often do you use the following resources? Unlike Gardner & Inger, our survey did not mention any specific use context, but simply asked researchers how often they use each of these resources, which could be as a starting point for searching for scholarly articles, a destination from citations found elsewhere, searching for specific items or browsing.

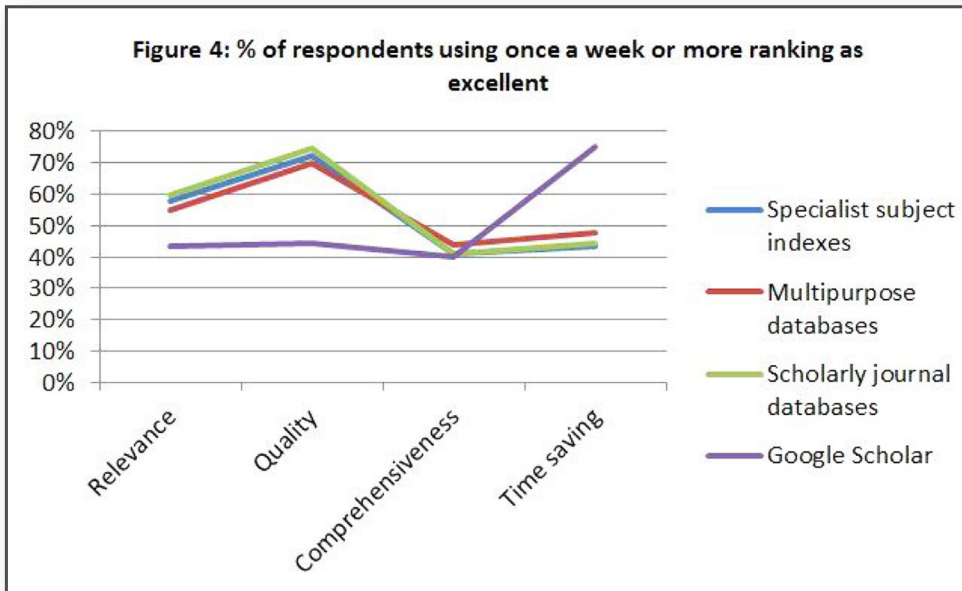


As shown in Figure 2, scholarly journal databases were the best-scoring resource in three of the four categories (relevance, comprehensiveness, and quality). Google Scholar received the highest scores for time saving. Multipurpose databases and specialized subject indexes scored well in all categories, but are relatively strongest for quality and weakest for convenience. With the exception of general search engines for quality of information, few respondents marked any resource as unsatisfactory in any category, with the differences being primarily between satisfactory, good and excellent.

## PERCEPTION OF RESOURCES

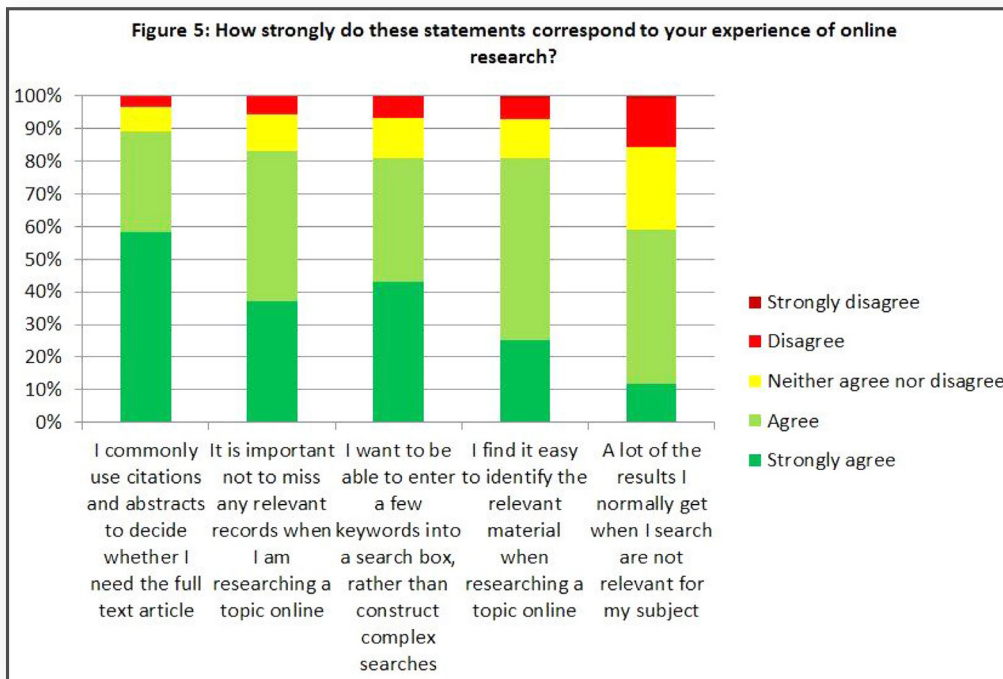


Correlations between frequency of use and perception of resources. Looking at specialized subject indexes specifically, there was (unsurprisingly) a strong correlation between frequency of use and higher ranking in all four categories, but the divergence was particularly strong for relevance and convenience/time saving (see Figure 3). Those who use specialized subject indexes most frequently tended to consider their relevance to be a relative strength. Those who use them less often are not dissatisfied with relevance, but don't consider this to be a specific area of excellence compared to other options.



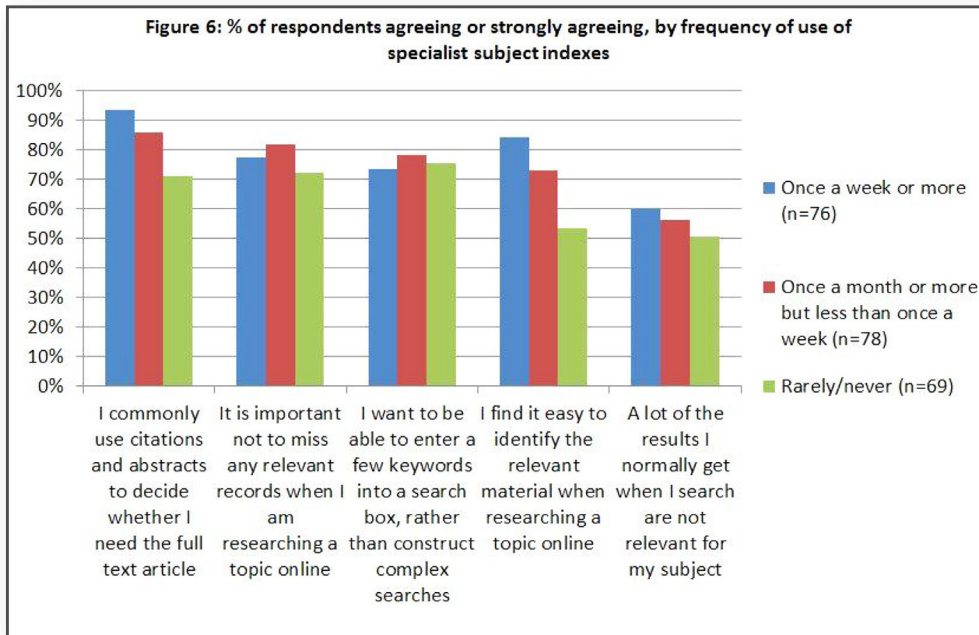
When controlled for frequency of use, there was no significant difference in perceptions of journal databases, multipurpose databases or specialized indexes amongst those researchers who use them regularly. Google Scholar has a different profile, favoured for convenience rather than relevance or quality, as seen in Figure 4.

## EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE RESEARCH



A further question asked about respondents' experience of online research (see Figure 5). 89% of researchers agreed that they commonly use citations and abstracts to decide whether they need the full text article. This remains a core activity in a typical researcher workflow: searching in a bibliographic database or discovery service, briefly examining the citation record and abstract where available, and then going on to access the full text for those results which appear relevant.

The responses also confirm that most researchers don't want to construct complex searches, but also don't want to miss any relevant records. While they find it fairly easy to identify the relevant material, only 25% strongly agree that they find this easy, and 59% agree that they normally return a lot of irrelevant results.



Researchers who use specialist indexes more often are more likely to find it easy to identify relevant content. Combining the results from this question with the frequency of use for specialist indexes revealed interesting results (Figure 6).

While there was little difference for three questions, and a predictable increase for use of citations/abstracts, it was noticeable that those frequently using specialist indexes are much more likely to say they find it easy to identify relevant material. 84% of the 76 respondents who use specialist A&I once a week or more agreed that they find this easy, compared to just 54% of those 69 respondents who rarely or never use such resources. Those who use specialist A&I more often were also a little more likely to agree that a lot of the results they normally get when searching were not relevant. However, these respondents are rarely using specialist A&I to the exclusion of other options, and it is possible that they are more attuned to the less relevant results returned when they do use more general search engines due to their greater experience of more sophisticated indexes.

## CONCLUSIONS

The data from this survey of over 200 social scientists supports the hypothesis that while specialist library databases are not used as frequently as Google Scholar, most faculty recognize the value in these resources when it comes to relevance and quality of the results. The main reason why researchers like to use Google Scholar is for convenience and time saving, where it scores very highly. They are habituated to using Google for general web searching, prefer to enter a few keywords in a single box while searching rather than learn how to construct complex queries, and so may be put off using specialist scholarly databases due to a perception that these require advanced information skills.

Those researchers who do make frequent use of specialized subject indexes such as ProQuest's Sociological Abstracts, though, were much more likely to report that they find it easy to find relevant material when researching a topic online. Because these resources are focused on the content relevant for their disciplinary area – while still incorporating a wide range of sources to support interdisciplinary study – and use a consistent subject vocabulary to index records, for many queries they will return a more relevant results set for the same basic keyword search. For example, a search for “coalition formation” in Google Scholar, a library discovery service or other general search tools would return about half a million records, but many of the top results will relate to computer science or psychology and be of no interest to a researcher looking for empirical studies on the formation of political coalitions. An identical search in ProQuest's Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, by contrast – without using any advanced search options or techniques – would immediately return a comprehensive set of results from within the relevant discipline. Better understanding of the value such resources can bring will help scholars save time and return more relevant results more quickly, without necessitating their learning expert search techniques.

### Works Cited

- Tracy Gardner & Simon Inger. *How Readers Discover Content in Scholarly Journals*. Renew Publishing, 2012.  
 Ross Housewright, Roger C. Schonfeld, and Kate Wulfson. *Ithaka S+R | Jisc | RLUK UK Survey of Academics 2012*  
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