

Title:

Communication Overload: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Academic Reference Librarianship

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose

This study provides insight on the meaning of communication overload as experienced by modern academic librarians. Communication is the essence of reference librarianship, and a practically endless array of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools (ICTs) are available to facilitate communication.

Design/methodology/approach

This study relied on a phenomenological methodology, which included nine in-depth interviews with academic librarians. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using RQDA, a qualitative analysis software package that facilitates coding, category building, and project management.

Findings

Seven themes about librarianship emerged from this research: Attending to Communication Abundance, Librarians of Two Types, Instruction Not Reference, Twenty-first Century Librarianship, User Needs, Trusted Methods: Filter Not Retrieve, and Self-Impact. The shared meaning of communication overload, among these librarians, is that it is a problem when it detracts from or hinders their ability to assist their users.

Practical implications:

Further research should contribute to an understanding of communication as a problem when it interferes with serving the librarians' users, or to an understanding of interpersonal communication within the librarians' organizational structures and in their broader professional networks.

Social implications:

Research in popular psychology has focused on the negative impacts on productivity and concentration of living in an always-plugged-in environment. This research confirms that librarians should have time to work away from digital distractions to maintain job satisfaction.

Originality/value

Important work by Radford and Dervin has focused on communication with users. This study focuses on the impact of ICTs on librarians' work and personal lives.