

I just wanted to ask: A comparison of user studies of the Citizens Advice Bureau (SHIL) in Israel

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Abstract

Day-to-day information needed by citizens can be sought in a variety of ways. Specifically, we were interested in users of online, citizen rights websites, such as the SHIL site (<http://shil.info>). Our results report findings from three parallel data collection efforts. Surveys were undertaken to gain a better understanding of how the SHIL website is used and to compare the information needs and information sources used by SHIL users and potential users unaware of the existence of the website. The surveys were administered to samples from three populations (current users of this site, previous users of the site, and users who filled in an offline questionnaire and were mostly unaware of the existence of the SHIL website). We report several interesting differences between the three groups, and suggest future work on analyzing the site, its users, the content it provides and the needs it serves.

Keywords

Citizens Advice Bureaux, ELIS (everyday life information seeking), information needs

Introduction

Getting useful information in a timely manner is one of the hardest tasks citizens face in the process of solving problems related to public and/or governmental services. Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) or Information and Referral services have been set up in several countries to serve as intermediaries between citizens and available services (Marcella and Baxter, 2000a). With the broadening of e-government initiatives, the use of the Internet has penetrated many of these services as web-based services. SHIL, the Israeli Citizens Advice Bureau, was established in 1957. Nowadays, about one thousand volunteers operate SHIL offices in 55 municipalities throughout the country and SHIL also runs a telephone hot-line and an Internet site (<http://shil.info>) (Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, 2009; Tractinsky et al., 1998). SHIL operates through the Israeli Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services in collaboration with the municipalities.

This research investigates citizens' information needs through a variety of sources. We gather the needs and attitudes from current and past SHIL website users and users of the bricks and mortar offices, through web-based, email-based and hand-delivered questionnaires. Our results are based on an analysis and comparison of these populations in order to find out what information needs users have, and how these needs can be fulfilled online.

The remainder of the paper is organized in the following way. The next section reviews the literature and builds the theoretical foundations of everyday life information seeking (ELIS) and previous results of information seeking in Israel, as it appears in ELIS research. This is followed by a section describing the methodology of the study. The fourth section reports and discusses the results of the study, the fifth its limitations, and the final section the conclusions and recommendations.

Literature review

Everyday life information seeking

Studies on 'non-work information studies', also called 'citizen information seeking', go back to the 1970s, but the term 'everyday life information seeking' (ELIS) was first coined in 1995 (Savolainen, 1995). ELIS expresses the view that work and non-work information needs overlap and it is hard to distinguish between them. ELIS and job-related information seeking complement each other.

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Savolainen (1995: 266–267) defines ELIS as ‘the acquisition of various informational (both cognitive and expressive) elements which people employ to orient themselves in daily life or to solve problems not directly connected with the performance of occupational tasks’.

The basic model of ELIS claims that the active seeking of information arises as a consequence of a need perceived by an information user. The user’s query to formal and informal information sources or services results in success or failure. If successful, the user can use the information and share it. If it fails to satisfy the need, the user re-initiates the seeking process or gives up (Wilson, 1999).

According to Harris and Dewdney (1994: 27), people ‘tend to seek information that is easily accessible, preferably from interpersonal sources such as friends, relatives or co-workers rather than from institutions or organizations, unless (an important qualification) there is a particular reason for avoiding interpersonal sources’. Case (2007: 8) also noted that: ‘people use formal sources rarely, instead gathering and applying on informal sources, chiefly friends and family throughout their lives’.

Several researchers have studied the everyday life information seeking of different groups. For example, McKenzie (2003) proposed an alternative model of ELIS derived from a discourse analysis of accounts of everyday life information seeking. The participants in her study were women pregnant with twins. Her model is a two-dimensional one where one dimension relates to the mode of information seeking (active seeking, direct scanning, non-directed monitoring and by proxy), while the second dimension differentiates between connecting and interacting. In ELIS there is often difficulty in identifying the appropriate source, thus the emphasis on connecting.

Savolainen and Kari (2004) studied how users view the acceptability, accessibility and usability of Internet sources in the context of ELIS. Most participants in this study faced difficulties in defining the Internet in general, and provided concrete examples instead. Many described the Internet as a space, similar in some sense to a library. In terms of quality the Internet had not met the expectation of many participants in the study, but had been accepted as a valid information source for solving everyday life problems.

Agosto and Hughes-Hassell (2005) considered urban young adults, and found that friends and family were the preferred information sources, while the preferred information channel was the cell phone. They were interested in topics related to schoolwork and social life, and had unfavorable views of libraries and librarians.

The Swedish-based Stockholm Challenge project has been collating and ranking an impressive collection of public, online systems for the provision of information regarding coping skills and opportunities for citizens. The Stockholm Challenge has been in operation since 1995, and its online site (<http://www.stockholmchallenge.org/>) provides a database of almost two decades of such activity. On

this site one can also see a geographical mapping and articulation of activity types. One of the challenges faced by the Stockholm Challenge and similar public projects (inter alia by the City of Rome, and by the Baltic states) was the creation of quantitative assessment and evaluation tools.

Results of citizen surveys

Marcella and Baxter (1999) report on results from the Citizenship Information Research Project conducted in the UK in 1997. More than 1200 respondents were given a list of organizations and people and were asked to indicate whether they would approach them for information. The sources that were chosen by more than 50% of the respondents were in decreasing order: public libraries (77.3%), family and friends (61.7%), offices of government departments and agencies (e.g. Inland Revenue, Benefits Agency) (53.9%), post offices (53.1%), Citizens Advice Bureaux (50.3%).

From a list of methods for obtaining information, the respondents were asked to indicate their favorite three in order of preference. The top five methods were: talking face to face with someone, reading a book, looking through a collection without help from the staff, reading a newspaper, talking on the telephone to someone. The use of a computer was only the ninth preferred method, but one has to keep in mind that the survey was conducted in 1997. There were a number of differences between age groups: the use of a computer was cited as the preferred method by 40.6% of the age group of 19 and under, and by 22.1% of those aged 20–29, but by just 10.6% of those aged 30 and above. The use of computers was cited by 33.0% of the students, but just 9.7% of those who run a household and 3.4% of the retired respondents.

Marcella and Baxter (2000a, 2000b) reported on the second stage of the project where 898 doorstep interviews were conducted in 12 cities in the UK. The participants were asked whether or not they encountered problems related to employment, education, welfare and housing. At least 13% gave a positive answer in each of the areas. Almost 60% thought that computers had the potential to provide government information. The preferred sources for governmental information were public libraries (43.2%), post offices (14.7%), and Citizens Advice Bureaux (12.0%). The second-stage responses did not list family and friends or governmental departments and agencies, which were included in the first stage as sources of information.

A survey of 612 respondents in King County, Washington State revealed that 40% would use ‘someone with whom you have a strong relationship’ (Fisher et al., 2005: Table 2) as an information source, and 40% would use the Internet. The rest would use, in decreasing order: the phone book, flyers, radio, TV, newspaper; organizations: public library, school, non-profit, crisis clinics or a hot-line, etc.; other, someone with whom you do not have a strong relationship;

a department at your workplace. About 45% of the women would use strong ties, while only 35% of the men would do so. Examining gender differences regarding the Internet showed that 35% of the women and 45% of the men would use it (Fisher et al., 2005).

In a study of the 2-1-1 telephone information and referral service in Washington State, the data were derived from 30 calls to citizens who had previously used the service. Their problems were categorized in a decreasing order of frequency as utility, housing, health services, employment, food and other problems (Saxton et al., 2007).

In Ireland the 'information and referral' (CAB equivalent) services are called Citizens Information Services (CIS). A detailed report from 2008 (Citizens Information Board, 2008) shows that 71% of the CIS contacts were face-to-face and 29% by telephone, although sending in queries by email was also possible, but this option was almost never realized. Almost all the clients (86%) made queries on their own behalf. Client queries were divided into 13 categories. About 39% of the queries were related to social welfare, followed by employment rights (9%), health services (7%), housing (7%) and health services executive payments (7%). In the largest category, social welfare, disability payments proved to be most popular. In employment rights, the largest portion of the queries related to the entitlement of holiday/leave days. In order to answer citizens' queries, the most frequently used source was the service website (<http://www.citizensinformation.ie>). The main reason for the client awareness of the service was 'word of mouth', and about a quarter of the clients had used the service beforehand. More than 90% of the respondents stated that the CIS service was their first point of contact.

Research that studied the information needs of immigrants into Finland, with an emphasis on citizen information, found that the major information sources identified by the respondents were websites, friends and relatives, and relevant authorities (Chivhanga, 2005). As the respondents were immigrants, it was not surprising that during the information-seeking process, they encountered language difficulties.

In a recently released report (Smith, 2010), the PEW Internet and American Life Project reports on the usage of the Internet by American citizens for receiving information and interacting with government services. The results show that the majority of the American citizens looked for information or completed transactions through a government website during 2009. Fully 85% of home broadband and mobile Internet users had accessed information or completed a transaction on a government website in the last year.

Smith (2010) found that high-income and well-educated Internet users were more likely to use online government services. One-third (32%) said that their most recent government website interaction was with a specific federal agency. Within this group, the two sources most commonly mentioned were the website for the Social Security

Administration and IRS. Other mentions included immigration/naturalization and customs. A very large percentage of them reached government websites through the use of search engines, and the majority of the users reported that their interaction with government websites was successful. Even though the Internet was utilized heavily, offline methods, like phone calls or sending a letter were not abandoned, and often a mixture of online and offline methods were used. In the general population, a telephone contact was still most preferred. However, Internet users preferred online rather than offline contact.

Results of citizen surveys: Israeli case

An extensive telephone survey of the citizens of the city of Herzliya was conducted in 2002 (Baruchson-Arbib et al., 2006) in order to understand the citizens' information needs. The survey defined 14 problem domains, and each respondent was asked to answer a multiple choice questionnaire. The most frequently chosen problem domains were (in decreasing order): issues with neighbours, education, transportation, matters related to government, and leisure and entertainment. The preferred information sources were (again in decreasing order): the municipality, newspapers, the Internet, government agencies, and personal connections. In terms of information channels, the most preferred channel was the telephone, followed by face-to-face meetings and printed materials. It was rather interesting that the Internet was the least preferred channel, as it was not ranked by all the participants. However, among those who did include the Internet in their ranking, for 64% it was the preferred information source.

In 2006, 300 residents of the city of Rishon LeZion in Israel (Leshem, 2009, personal communication) participated in a telephone survey that dealt with their citizen information needs and information-seeking patterns. The results show that when in need for municipal information, most respondents used the municipality's hot-line. Only about 7% consulted the municipality's website. The major municipal topics of interest, in decreasing frequency were: welfare, education, culture, registering businesses, health and environmental issues and engineering. The preferred modes of receiving information were over the phone (63.5%), followed by face-to-face consultation (47.4%), email (7.4%), regular mail (5.1%) and fax (4.1%). Most of the surveyed residents (92.9%) were unaware of the existence of face-to-face SHIL services in the city. The current study intended to further explore the specific information problems and the choice of media Israeli citizens use at the beginning of the 21st century for solving everyday problems.

Methods

This paper reports on a research about information needs of citizens in Israel. We used two different methods: first we

Table 1. Major demographic indexes.

		Hand-delivered	Banner	Email	Israel Statistical Abstract No. 60 (2009)
Gender	# participants	437	95	182	
	% Women (valid)	57.2	60.4	61.7	50.5
	20–29	25.2	31.5	12.9	15.4
	30–39	21.1	28.3	36.1	13.4
	40–49	14.6	20.7	16.1	11.1
	50–59	19.7	8.7	21.3	9.5
Education	>60	14.4	8.7	13.6	14.1
	Elementary school	6.9	2.1		11.6
	High school	25.2	31.3	26.1	45.6
	Post high school	16.9	20.8	26.1	
	University/college degree	45.8	41.7	44.4	42.7
Native	Unknown/other	5.0	4.2	3.3	
	Hebrew	85.1	46.3	81.9	
	Russian	6.6	2.1	3.3	
	Arabic	2.3	4.2	4.9	
	English	1.8	29.5	63.2	
	Unknown/other	4.1	1.1	11	

conducted a survey, second we analyzed web forum discussions. For the survey, the population was divided into three groups, and each group received a survey using a different method. Each survey was comprised of 37 questions. The surveys were similar, except where wording or tense had to be changed in order to keep consistency. Hand-delivered surveys were distributed to a snowball/convenience sample of 437 people in large public places. Ninety five respondents clicked on a banner on the SHIL website and submitted a non-empty survey; these were self-selected respondents. The banner was shown on the first page of SHIL for 10 weeks. The SHIL website has a discussion board where people can access citizen-related information, and one of the options is to register with your email. Registered users get notification when their question is answered. Throughout the SHIL website's operation period, 1791 valid email addresses were gathered. Email messages with a call to participate in the research were sent to all of them; 247 users responded to this call by clicking on a link in the email message, and completed the survey. This resulted in a conservative response rate of 13.7%. However, 65 of these submitted an empty survey, and thus 182 questionnaires were analyzed. As a small reward and incentive for taking part in the survey, a small amount of money was donated to a volunteers' organization, chosen by the participant from a pre-defined list. It should be noted that many email addresses were invalid or incorrect, and some users had changed their email address since they had first provided it to SHIL.

Apart from the survey, we analyzed SHIL discussion board messages. We selected every tenth message from a total of 1190 messages in the discussion board and categorized it by its major issues. Two researchers independently categorized 10% of the sample. Inter-reliability between them was 89%.

In this study we sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the major citizen-related concerns of the respondents for which they need information?
2. What information sources/channels are consulted in order to solve citizen-related problems?
3. Are the users who use the SHIL website, satisfied with it?

Citizen-related information is a classic example of ELIS. Previous studies have found that identifying the information source is a major step in the process (McKenzie, 2003). In addition the Internet is becoming one of the major information source (Savolainen and Kari, 2004), besides friends and family (Agosto and Hughes-Hassell, 2005; Savolainen, 1995). These studies were conducted in different settings and we are interested in discovering whether their findings apply to our setting as well.

Results and discussion

Demographic characteristics of the sample

Table 1 presents the demographic details of the participants in the surveys. The table presents the three survey settings and the latest available census data as a reference regarding the population of Israel. It shows that the percentage of women in the survey population is higher than that in the general population, and similarly the age distribution is different; the majority of the participants were in their thirties. Between the three surveys, English speakers were dominant in the electronic surveys and there was an underrepresentation of the minorities in Israel.

Table 2. Distribution of occupations among responders.

Occupation (%)	Hand-delivered	Banner	Email
Salaried employee	47.2	55.2	65.6
Self-employed	11.6	8.0	9.7
Student	15.3	11.5	2.6
Retired	8.8	8.0	9.7
Unemployed	5.8	8.0	5.2
Homemaker	3.0	1.1	3.2
Other	8.3	8.0	3.9

Table 3. Internet usage.

Internet usage (%)	Hand-delivered	Banner	Email
Do not use the Internet at all	16.2		
Use daily	48.2	82.8	91.4
Couple of times a week	19.4	9.7	6.6
High level of expertise in Internet usage	43.2	83.8	78.8
Low level of Internet expertise	17.3	1.1	1.3
Use the Internet for several years	81.1	94.4	98.0

The distribution of the current occupation of the respondents appears in Table 2. As we can see the representation of salaried employees in the computer mediated surveys was higher, and few students answered these surveys. The banner survey attracted a higher rate of unemployed people which may be explained by their information-seeking behaviour.

We also asked the participants about their Internet usage behavior. As can be seen in Table 3, most of the computer-mediated survey respondents used the Internet daily and reported that they had high expertise in Internet usage. Only half of the hand-delivered survey respondents used the Internet daily and had high expertise. More than 80% had used the Internet for several years. Among those who used the Internet, the main uses were to seek information, communicate with others through email and read news. The ratio between reading blog/forum messages to writing them was 1:2, which is much higher than the famous 90-9-1 ratio (Nielsen, 2006).

Table 4 presents percentages of those who selected the two highest options on a five point Likert scale of importance of Internet applications.

Although SHIL has been operating for more than 45 years, 49.0% of the respondents to the hand-delivered questionnaires had never heard of the service, and an additional 43.9% of the respondents never used the service.

We note that in Ireland (CIB, 2008) and UK (Marcella and Baxter, 2000a, 2000b) the respondents were more aware of the relevant civil services in their countries. PEW's (Purcell 2011) study reported, as our survey did,

Table 4. Importance of Internet applications.

Importance of applications (percentage selected two highest points on 5 point Likert scale)	Hand-delivered	Banner	Email
Information seeking	73.8	62.1	79.1
Email	68.3	42.1	75.8
Reading news	54.0	33.7	59.9
Financial transactions	40.3	36.9	57.7
Instant messaging	28.6	21.1	25.3
Downloading content (music, movies, games)	28.3	16.9	26.4
Listening to music	24.0	22.1	26.9
Watching movies	23.5	27.3	28.0
Shopping	14.1	12.6	25.3
Social networks sites	12.7	14.7	16.4
Participating in forums/chats/talkbacks	10.5	11.6	18.1
Reading blogs/forum messages	10.5	12.6	23.1
Writing blogs posts	5.8	6.3	6.5

that the top Internet activities are email, search information, reading news, buying products (financial transactions) and social networking.

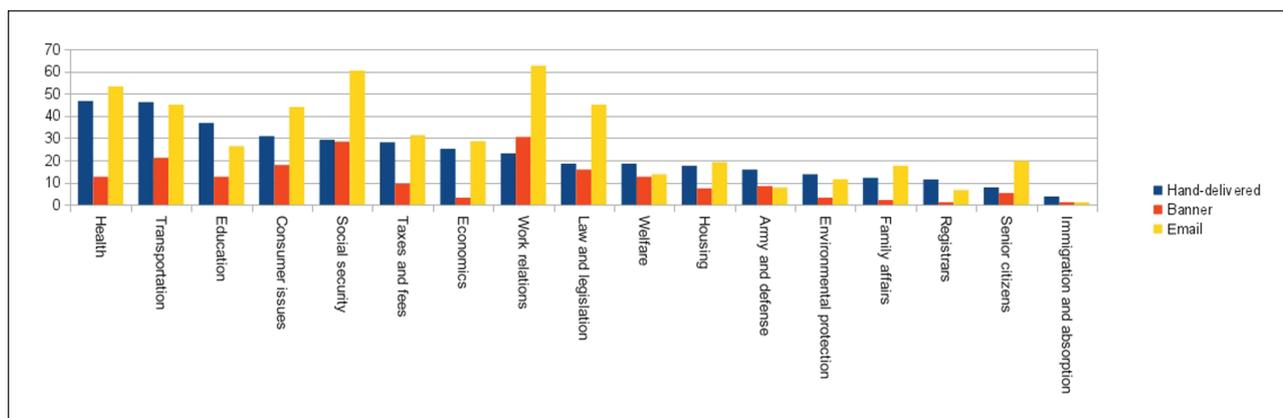
Major areas of information need

The respondents were presented with 18 topics, corresponding to the top level hierarchy on the SHIL website. Table 5 presents the topics the respondents stated that they needed help with during the half-year period preceding the survey. The right column indicates the percentage of messages on that topic in SHIL forum. This column presents the distribution of the topics and amounts to 100%, while the other columns do not sum to 100%, as the users were asked to indicate all the relevant topics. Work-related issues were important to 23.1% of the hand-delivered respondents and 30.5% and 62.6% of the banner and email respondents, while 69.0% of the messages dealt with this topic. It seems that although many people did not report its importance, they asked about work-related issues on the forum. The low importance of this issue in the hand-delivered group may be explained by the presence of the interviewer. The data are also displayed graphically in Figure 1. Analysis of the log files showed that 15.6% of the requests were for work-related issues, national insurance 9.6%, consumers 9.0%, housing and accommodation 7.6% and registrars 6.1% (Ravid et al., 2007).

We see that there are differences among the three groups. Online respondents identified fewer topics, when compared to the topics of interest indicated by print and email questionnaire respondents. Print respondents' answers average to 3.8 options, email respondents selected 4.9 topics on average, while the web-based questionnaire respondents averaged 1.9 topics per respondent.

Table 5. Major civil/social issues for which the respondents needed help in the six months prior to answering the questionnaire.

Major topic (%)	Hand-delivered	Banner	Email	Messages in the forums
	For each cell % answer yes (multiple options could be selected)			Column sums to 100%
Health	46.7	12.6	53.3	0.16
Transportation	46.2	21.1	45.1	0.33
Education	36.8	12.6	26.4	0.33
Consumer issues	30.9	17.9	44.0	4.5
Social security	29.3	28.4	60.4	1.5
Taxes and fees	28.1	9.5	31.3	1.6
Economics	25.2	3.2	28.6	0.25
Work-related issues	23.1	30.5	62.6	69.0
Law and legislation	18.5	15.8	45.1	7.3
Welfare	18.5	12.6	13.7	2.1
Housing	17.6	7.4	19.2	8.8
Army and defense	15.8	8.4	7.7	0.16
Environmental protection	13.7	3.2	11.5	0.42
Family affairs	12.1	2.1	17.6	0.58
Registrars	11.4	1.1	6.6	
Senior citizens	7.8	5.3	19.8	0.67
Immigration and absorption	3.7	1.1	1.1	0.16

**Figure 1.** Major concerns during the previous six months.

While print respondents viewed health-related issues to be most important, both email and web-based respondents placed work-related issues in the highest position on their agenda.

Information about senior citizen issues appeared to be prominent mostly in responses by email, and was graded as less important in both print and web-based questionnaire responses.

What information sources/channels are consulted in order to solve citizen-related problems?

A list of eight possible sources was shown to the respondents, and they were asked to mark how important each

source was to them when trying to solve a citizen/social problem. The possible answers were: very important, important, of medium importance, of low importance, not important at all. The sources were: friends and family, Internet, experts (e.g. physicians or lawyers), government offices, books or pamphlets, TV/radio, printed newspapers and public libraries. The comparative results for this question are presented in Figures 2 and 3.

It is not surprising perhaps, but important nonetheless, that respondents in the print sample reported that family and friends were a source that they consulted on a more frequent basis. The Internet was suggested as the most prominent go-to source for information by respondents in the web-based (site) questionnaire sample, and as a fairly important source for the participants from the email sample.

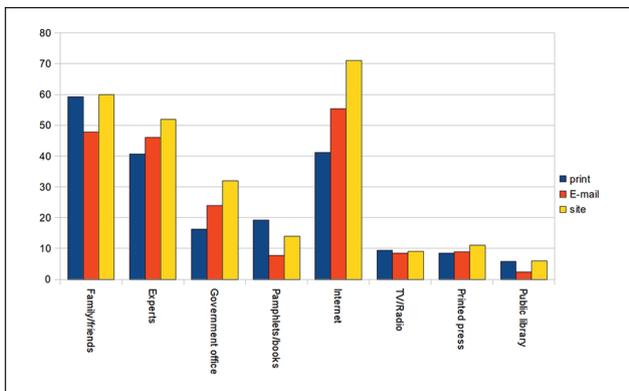


Figure 2. Very important and important sources when in need of citizen/social information.

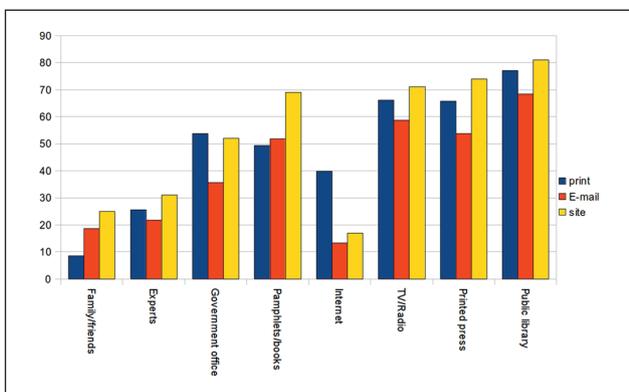


Figure 3. Unimportant sources and sources of low importance when in need of citizen/social information.

The citizens' concerns, as reported here, depend on the sample method. It seems that the print sample, those that filled in the questionnaire in the presence of the interviewer, deemed the importance of work-related problems lower. We compare our results to three previous studies outside of Israel: United Kingdom survey (Marcella and Baxter, 1999); Ireland case (Citizens Information Board, 2008) and USA (Smith, 2010). These all show that work-related information was the most important concern, although the data collection method was a face-to-face one. The UK and Ireland samples as well as the USA results show a higher importance given to the public library as a source of citizen information. In Israel, the public library was the least important category. Close tight relationships, such as families and friends, were important sources of information in all the studies. Various offices and agencies had much more importance in the UK, Ireland and USA than in Israel. It seems that the Israeli respondents preferred a face-to-face known source or the availability of the anonymous Internet connection.

People tend to look for information on behalf of others; 35.0%, 70.6% and 51.2% reported on this in the hand-delivered, email and website questionnaires, respectively,

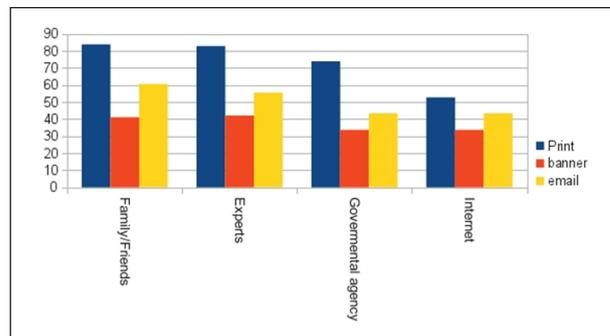


Figure 4. Concerns of privacy issues: Percentages of answer 'not at all' or 'low importance'.

most of the time for the family. People were generally in their homes (around 75%) and work places (around 25%) when they used the SHIL website: none of them were in a library, information center, learning place or Internet cafe.

Figure 2 supports prior findings that family and friends were the primary sources of information, and the second most important source of information was the Internet. Nonetheless, 26.3% (115 respondents to the hand-delivered survey) answered that they never used the Internet as a source of information. We looked at this group in more detail. There was an overlap between those who did not use the Internet for ELIS and those who used the Internet often (possibly for other reasons). Among the 115 respondents that did not use the Internet for ELIS, 24.3% used the Internet often, and only 28.7% of the respondents did not use it at all. This shows that there are citizens who are unaware of the possibilities for using the Internet for obtaining citizen-related information.

As for privacy concerns, in order to check the correlation between the source of information and privacy issues, we report that most of the respondents were not concerned about any privacy issues, regardless of the source of information. In the print sample there were fewer privacy concerns than in the email and the website samples. The distribution of 'not at all' and 'low importance' options regarding privacy are presented in Figure 4, and 'very much' and 'much' answers are presented in Figure 5. Note that around 50% (52.7%, 33.7% and 43.4% for the print, banner and email samples respectively) of the participants were not concerned with privacy issues on the Internet. The greatest concern was among the banner users (40.0% considered privacy issues as important or very important, compared to 34.7% among email responders and 26.2% among print responders)

Satisfaction with the SHIL website

The participants in the hand-delivered survey were almost all unaware of the existence of SHIL, as an organization, and of the website (49.0% were totally unaware, another

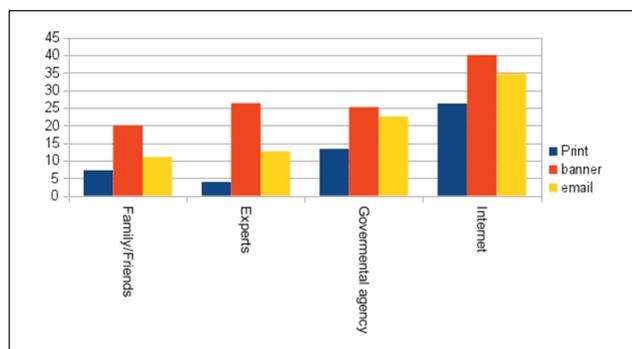


Figure 5. Privacy concerns: Percentages of answers 'very important' or 'important'.

43.9% had heard of the service, but never used it, and only 7 (1.6%) participants had used SHIL's website before). As can be seen from Table 6, even the banner users were only partially aware of SHIL's other, offline services (offices and hotline).

Participants who use or used the SHIL website (banner and email respondents respectively) were asked a number of questions regarding the website, for example how they reached the website (see Table 7). Log files analysis of the same website reveals that 67.8% reached the site through a search engine, 4.1% by clicking on a link in a portal or other website and 28.1% typed the URL or used their Favorites (Ravid et al., 2007). Additional questions asked were: were they satisfied with the information received from the SHIL website; did they intend to use it; did they plan to return to the site in the future; and were they going to recommend the site to others (see Table 8). The SHIL website operates a very active forum; it turned out that 63.0% and 35.6% of the respondents to the email and banner survey respectively utilized the forum. We also asked them about their impressions regarding the amount of information, reliability, clarity, navigation and design (see Table 9).

As can be seen from Tables 8 and 9, users who reached the SHIL website were generally satisfied with the information and they trusted the website. The email users were slightly more satisfied than the respondents who filled in the survey on the site. They were not very satisfied with the design of the website, but still the overall impression is that SHIL is a useful website for citizen information.

Limitations of the study

One of the major limitations of the study is that the samples were not truly random, and as such it is not certain that the findings can be generalized to Israel. Surveying nation-wide audiences is a daunting task. Providing information to broad audiences is one of the attractive characteristics of online, web-based systems; however, being responsive to large-scale measures of audience preferences

is difficult because the creation of random samples and surveys on a national basis is complex. In this case, in particular, given the multicultural and multilingual composition of the population, such random sampling often proves to be prohibitively expensive. Because of cultural differences it is almost certain that the findings cannot be generalized for other countries. However, we saw that the findings in the current study replicate findings in previous studies conducted in other settings and thus support the validity of our findings.

Conclusions and recommendations

This project focused on the preferences and choices of intended recipients of support on Citizens Advice online channels. The two avenues of investigation explored in parallel the media choices (and awareness) of the audience, as well as the information needs perceived to be important by the intended audience.

The general public, as reflected by the responses to the banner survey are mostly unaware of the existence of the SHIL website. This seems to be a perennial problem plaguing Citizens Advice efforts. As the provision of online information and the use of such sites are both relatively painless and inexpensive, it is even more important to make up for such deficiency. Steps should be taken to promote the SHIL website, because based on the replies of the banner and email users we conclude that the SHIL website is useful for providing citizen information. Knowledge, skills, developments and facts available through Citizens Advice boards are very important for the day-to-day life of large strata of the population, while much of this information encounters obstacles in trickling down. In a sense, our findings suggest a market failure of sorts in the provision of much needed information. The demand, which is demonstrably there, fails all too often to meet the supply, which is also present in abundance.

All the respondents have problems for which the SHIL website can provide useful information. Although family and friends remain an important information source, as they have been throughout history, the Internet is already viewed as the most important source by the on-site respondents and as the second most important source by the other groups. Israeli citizens do not view libraries as an important information source. Thus, the population, attitudes and skills, are already ripe for online delivery of such information. It seems that dissemination of the very existence of the option of online advice is the current challenge for adoption.

We find the rankings of users concerns, as evidenced by self-reporting about importance, to be dominated by a variety of citizen-related problems. The most prominent issues named by the respondents, and highlighted from the broad array of topics available on the site's offering, were work relations, social security, health and transportation.

Table 6. Awareness of SHIL's offline services by offline users.

	% of Email respondents (n=179)	% of Banner respondents (n=39)
Awareness of SHIL's offices		
Not aware	22.9	38.5
Aware but never visited	50.3	43.6
Aware and used the service	26.8	17.9
Awareness of SHIL's hot line		
Not aware	39.1	53.8
Aware but never visited	31.3	25.6
Aware and used the service	29.6	20.5

Table 7. How the respondents reached the SHIL website (percentages from those who answered the question).

	% of Email respondents (n=179)	% of Banner respondents (n=39)
Search engine	54.7	34.2
Typing in URL	5.2	2.6
Family/Friends recommendation	15.7	10.5
Other website	7.6	31.6
My Favorites	7.0	13.2
Others	9.9	7.9

Table 8. General satisfaction with the SHIL website.

	% of Email respondents (for each question) (n=179)	% of Banner respondents (for each question) (n=38)
Satisfied with information received from the SHIL website?		
Yes, fully satisfied	34.3	28.6
Yes, partially satisfied	56.0	57.1
No, unsatisfied	9.6	14.3
Are you going to utilize this information?/ Have you utilized the information?		
Yes	82.9	89.9
No	17.1	10.1
Do you view the SHIL website as reliable?		
Yes	98.1	94.0
No	1.9	6.0
Do you intend to revisit the SHIL website?		
Yes	93.9	92.7
No	6.1	7.3
Are you going to recommend the SHIL website to friends and relatives?		
Yes	88.1	80.0
No	11.9	20.0

Table 9. SHIL website usability as assessed by the users (percentages from those who answered the questions) on a 5-point scale.

	% Email respondents answered impressed and very impressed	% Banner respondents answered impressed and very impressed
Information coverage and amount	53.4	54.7
Clarity	61.0	50.5
Reliability	67.6	65.3
Navigability and structure	41.2	41.0
Design	23.6	30.5

Further research of citizens' priorities in information seeking on the one hand, and their behavioral choice of information channels on the other hand is needed to gain a deeper understanding and to analyze trends over time.

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