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From bibliometrics to altmetrics: an Australian study

Bibliometrics, by its original 1969 definition, was rooted in a world where communications were 'written' and printed (Nicholas & Ritchie, 1978). For many years, bibliometrics and the impact factor dominated as the method that researchers and authors used to measure, in quantitative terms, the influence of journal articles, journals and conference papers. Bibliometrics remained important and gained a new audience as the digital information environment took hold in the academic and research community. It also heralded new sources of bibliometric data and alternatives to the journal impact factor (JIF), such as Scopus and the Scimago Journal Rank. As the debate about using the JIF grew, there was something reassuring about the oldest of these quantitative tools - we knew how it was calculated.

Academic librarians had developed some expertise using bibliometric tools, but it was the introduction of a national research assessment initiative in Australia in 2010, known as the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), that created a more urgent need for bibliometrics-related services. The ERA also brought with it an interest in the societal impact of research, and this coincided with increased use of social media tools, such as micro/blogs, by researchers to disseminate their work. Coinciding with the wider use of social media, a new way of measuring impact, known as altmetrics or alternative metrics, emerged. Altmetrics are based on article level data and are defined as the 'study of new metrics based on the social web for analyzing and informing scholarship' (Priem et al., 2010). Academic libraries had been providing altmetrics in the form of downloads and abstract views from institutional repositories, but the new tools go far beyond this capacity and provide a measure of social engagement that operates across all disciplines. Unlike the JIF, an acknowledged problem in using altmetrics is how data are calculated and what these measures actually mean.

This paper reports on a nationwide study carried out to determine how academic libraries in Australia are promoting and using bibliometrics and altmetrics. The results will discuss the extent and types of tools relating to these metrics being used; and report on the nature of supporting materials that explain and discuss the uses and range of metrics used to assess impact. The study findings aim to highlight the importance of contextualising the use of metrics and the need to provide researchers with an awareness and understanding of their meaning.