Using Qualitative Data to Manage and Improve Theological Libraries

TIMOTHY D. LINCOLN

A theological library exists to serve a specific group of patrons, typically the students and faculty of a particular seminary, school, or the members of a religious community. Managers of theological libraries want to meet the information needs of their patrons as well as possible. In order to understand these needs, managers try to find out what user needs are and what aspects of library services might frustrate or empower users during their research. Armed with such information, a library manager is able to make a reasoned argument for changing some aspect of the library operations, such as adjusting hours of service or for requesting more funds from school leaders. This chapter describes how library managers can collect and use qualitative data to support efforts to improve library services.

The chapter first explains the distinction between quantitative data (typically derived by counting events, participants, or

transactions) and qualitative data (words and images used to describe the texture and impact of experiences). Second, managers learn how qualitative data can communicate the emotional impact of library services as a kind of storytelling. Third, the chapter introduces interviews and the gathering of testimonials as pertinent methods to collect qualitative data. Fourth, the chapter links qualitative data (stories and testimonials) to managers' requests for the resources needed by theological libraries and the management of staff. A list of resources for further reading is provided at the end of the chapter.

Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Social scientists divide data about their object of study (for instance, the workings of a library) into two broad categories. Quantitative data is information that can be summarized and manipulated using mathematical or statistical tools. In other words, such data begins as numerical counts. For instance, by counting the number of library books checked out during an academic year, a librarian can calculate descriptive statistics like the total number of books circulated, the average number of books checked out per week, or the average number of books checked out per student. Integrated library systems and database vendors collect such counts (for instance, which online journals were used most frequently by patrons) without explicit human intervention. Answers to survey questions about activity (e.g., how many times did you visit the library building last week?) are also quantitative data.

By contrast, qualitative data begins as observations, interviews, or answers to open-ended questions. Qualitative data values human experience and wants to understand those experiences in all of their texture and variety. Qualitative questions about library services for a specific library might include:

- Most of the time, what motivates you to use library services?

- How easy or difficult is it for you to use the library catalog? Why?

- Please provide an example of a library staff member helping you.

- Do you have a favorite place in the library, and why?

- (For faculty) What parts of library services might be improved to help you instruct students better?

It requires more human effort to collect and tabulate qualitative data than to collect quantitative data. For instance, if a librarian wants to interview a group of students to learn how they search for information, the librarian needs to schedule a meeting, issue invitations, and decide how to capture student comments. By contrast, usage counts of database searches, journal article downloads, or books checked out by patrons may be automatically generated by library software.

Quantitative and qualitative data both help library managers understand how patrons use library services and where areas of improvement might lie. Standard library reports, such as those sent to accrediting agencies, frequently ask only for quantitative data (how many faculty do you serve? How many information literacy presentations were made last year?). Qualitative data supplements simple counts and helps to show librarians and other stakeholders the complexity of library services and their value to patrons.

Communicating the Value of the Library through Storytelling

How can library managers explain the benefits of library services to a board of directors, skeptical students, or school leaders who control the budget? One way is through nonfiction stories about library usage. By story, I simply mean examples of user experiences and opinions collected by an interviewer. Just as a journalist interviews many individuals and then writes a story that is faithful to the facts, a library manager can also use stories collected from library patrons to make a case for the value of the library. Well-told stories capture and retain our attention. Vora notes that "data when converted into stories generates emotions . . . which park such data events in the audience's long-term memory while also increasing their inclination towards a recommended decision or action" (2019, 17). Of course, interviewees tell stories for a variety of reasons. Researchers need to discern when they "suspect that we are being told apocryphal tales"

(Barbour 2008, 124). Stories of user success can communicate the library's value to other administrators in the school.

Sometimes the stories collected from patrons may point to problems experienced by library users. In a recent library questionnaire, the author asked an open-ended final question: "Is there anything else that you would like to comment on?" Several students indicated that they had experienced problems using an access code to be able to enter the building during evenings and weekends. Asking open-ended written questions provided library patrons an anonymous and safe space to express frustration—and helped staff make sure that all students had the correct access code.

Methods of Collecting Qualitative Data

Many books explain specific methods for collecting qualitative data. See the end of this chapter for some suggestions. Some of these methods are underpinned by theories and ideological commitments, such as feminism or phenomenology (Brisolara, Seigert, and SenGupta 2014; Creswell 2007). Two methods of collecting qualitative data pertinent to theological libraries are interviewing and collecting testimonials. These methods can produce reliable data for managers through the use of consistent procedures.

First, interviewing is a structured way of asking library patrons about their experiences seeking information or using a library. The results of interviews (whether detailed notes or recordings) count as qualitative data when the researcher/interviewer follows consistent procedures that allow interviewees to express themselves freely. When analyzing interviews, researchers should exercise discipline when interpreting the words of interviewees so that resulting summaries or reports accurately capture the most frequently expressed views (even if they are contradictory) and the full range of opinions expressed. Researchers should not focus only on what they may have hoped to hear. To collect good data, a researcher creates an interview protocol used for all interviews. The protocol briefly explains why the researcher is conducting the interview and a set of questions. It is good practice to ask open-ended questions ("tell me about the last time you asked library staff for help" is better than a binary question like "the last time you asked a staff member for help, were you satisfied?"). Another form of interviewing is a group interview, also

called a focus group. In such groups, the researcher asks questions to an entire group of people who are knowledgeable on subjects that the researcher cares about. For instance, a researcher might invite a group of local ministers who use a library to learn more about their reasons for visiting and which resources they use. Focus groups can provide rich data, in part because the ideas voiced by one participant spark comments by others in the group. Leading focus groups can be challenging. In contrast to individual interviews, the researcher needs to lead discussions to enable all those in attendance to participate and to ask all pertinent questions within a limited amount of time.

A second method is collecting testimonials. In contrast to an interview (which happens synchronously with the possibility of asking follow-up questions), a testimonial is a written response to questions of interest to the librarian researchers. For instance, as the COVID-19 pandemic lessened and libraries reopened to patrons, the author asked students for written answers to a few questions about their recent experiences with library services. One was: "What did you miss the most about visiting the library during the COVID-19 pandemic?" There was a wide variety of answers. One student said they missed "a place to retreat from the world and rest among the books." Such testimonials help explain to school leaders the value of a library building as a place. Conducting a face-to-face interview no doubt has greater promise to discover the texture of experiences using a library than answering a written question or two. It can be challenging to schedule in-person interviews. On the other hand, patrons can provide testimonials at their convenience. For instance, patrons may answer a question posed in an email, or a print questionnaire available at the library service desk.

Both testimonials and notes or transcriptions of interviews provide vivid first-person stories about real people using a theological library. After collecting these words, the researcher makes sense of them in a two-step process. First, the librarian looks for the themes (repeated topics or ideas) expressed by participants. Social scientists call this process coding. When coding, the researcher notices repeated words or ideas in the data set (i.e., the transcripts) that belong together. Coding allows a librarian, for instance, to summarize words spoken by several interviewees under a common heading. Coding does not require software. A librarian may mark sections of transcripts with a symbol or colored pen to indicate that a set of words belongs to a theme. The second step in making sense of data

is thinking about why people said what they said. To put it another way, what do these data mean? Understanding both what patrons say about library services (data) and why they think that way (an explanation or theory) are foundational steps needed before using qualitative data to make decisions about improving library services.

Using Qualitative Data to Help Manage

If qualitative data are collected to support the management of a library rather than because of academic interest, then the manager needs to use the data for management purposes, such as to help inform stakeholders or make decisions. For instance, an annual report by the library director to their supervisor or board can become more impactful by sharing stories of how the library served patrons. Stories make more emotional connections with readers than simply reporting a quantitative statistic like "when asked about satisfaction with library services, 80 percent of patrons said they were satisfied or very satisfied." Adding a quotation from a satisfied patron, like "I didn't know where to start finding sources for my ethics paper, but a librarian suggested some sources for me to read," shows how the library positively impacted patrons better than a report that cites only numbers.

Qualitative data can also help managers discover the sources of changed patron behavior. For instance, imagine a case in which a theological librarian notices that the number of reference questions answered (as counted by staff) drops markedly below typical levels. There might be several explanations for this drop. Asking patrons about their use of this service via interviewing, (a qualitative data collection method) could reveal reasons that the library manager might be able to address. If patrons reported, hypothetically, that they ask fewer reference questions than in the past because the staff acts as if it is a bother to speak with patrons, then a librarian can use this new information to talk to staff members about their roles. If patrons reported instead that the library has become so hot that it is an uncomfortable place for study, then the librarian can conclude that the difficulty is not due to staff behavior, but because of the limitations of the heating and ventilation system. Qualitative data can lead a manager to explore the reasons for changes in countable behaviors (quantitative data).

Librarians may also use qualitative methods to support the work of inclusion and anti-racism. Rebecca Donald explored the experiences of students of color at Trinity International University with the goal of making the library more welcoming. In response to findings, the library has intentionally mounted displays showing different cultures and continues collecting books addressing race and culture issues (Donald 2021).

Additionally, managers can use qualitative data to encourage library staff during performance reviews. Staff members appreciate being praised for the quality of their work. A patron testimonial like "the reference librarian was always patient with me" supplements numeric summaries such as "80 percent of patrons reported their level of satisfaction with reference services as satisfied or very satisfied." Testimonial comments may also be used in reports to communicate the impact of library services to other school staff members.

To summarize, library managers benefit from collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. Reports using quantitative data communicate well to readers who value productivity and numerical precision. Reports using qualitative data communicate well to readers who focus on the human dimensions and impact of library services. Theological librarians can seek out individual testimonials and conduct interviews to collect nuanced stories about how their patrons use and value the theological library. These stories can communicate the library's value to stakeholders and help librarians change services to meet patron needs.

Resources

Many resources describe the procedures for collecting and coding qualitative data, such as Aurini, Heath, and Howells (2022), and Barbour (2008). Open access resources include Lincoln (2021), which discusses individual interviews, group interviews, and coding, and Edwards and Holland (2013), which focuses on interviewing. Donald's article (2021) includes examples of open-ended interview questions. For librarians interested in group interviewing, open access resources by Krueger (2002) and The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux (2015) describe how to run focus groups and interpret the data collected from them.

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