



The changing face of current awareness: reflections from a London law librarian

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Clare Brown

I recently worked in a medium-sized Holborn based organisation and was the only information professional serving this busy law firm. During the last years in the post I have seen the most significant changes I've ever experienced in such a role, which is why I am now taking stock and reflecting on what has happened to the legal information sector. In this piece I explore one particular avenue and will ask some questions around current awareness services in the legal environment.

Year on year analysis of my service's statistics demonstrates that not only has current awareness remained central to my role, but it has increasingly impacted on other tasks more broadly. It was once an isolated and routine morning job, but this is no longer the case. Users still expect a general daily round up, but that is now just the beginning of the current awareness story.

To maintain an edge in a competitive business environment, our users rely on information professionals to manage and deliver personalised and targeted updates on news, markets, clients, and industries. We are also expected to anticipate new areas of interest and be increasingly creative with the vast amount of information available.

Our users are acutely aware of the uphill struggle they face when looking to rationalise and digest information. Many of them are overwhelmed. They are not alone, as even information professionals are being challenged by information mountains. Technology is enabling us to manipulate content in new and interesting ways, and our users expect us to provide what they need. They want flexible and personalised current awareness.

Over the past few years, it's become the norm for many firms to use aggregation services. This in turn has been a challenge for our information providers. It's no longer enough for them to provide raw data with an inadequate search engine and inflexible alerts. Thankfully as competition in this area grows, clients like us are demanding that they invest time and effort in more sophisticated systems.

These companies are rightly approaching information professionals to ask what they can do to help us. This makes sense, after all we are the link to the discerning and occasionally awkward end user. If we take our ideas and insight to the more innovative providers it will drive technological evolution. To this end, the aggregator Avention recently hosted an event to discuss the future of current awareness in legal services and to facilitate discussion about how the application of new technologies can drive change.

I've no desire to highlight any one particular current awareness aggregator here as there are many available, and in my field the major legal information providers are working to produce news aggregation services, and have been perhaps been caught on the back foot. Generally speaking the aim of these services is to make sense of everything, both subscription based information and that which is freely available. Most of them contain a vast amount of premium, proprietary, and non-traditional news services from around the world, and software ensures that the customer can tailor their bulletins in precisely the right way.

The first question we asked ourselves was, "What is current awareness?" Although it is something familiar, once you start trying to define it, there are many facets. We opted for a broad definition which would include internal company information, insight/opinion/thought leadership pieces, institutional, governmental and indeed, any press releases, from fee and free sources across the globe. Arising from this was the question of newspaper content. Many stories even in the so-called 'quality press' are nonsense, or low quality 'churnalism', and in many cases subject to political spin. Balance can be obtained by capturing the same story from different sources, or even going back to the original press release, but this can be problematic.

This led to a discussion about choice. Is there a risk of current awareness recipients being passive consumers of narrow search choices? In some cases people don't know what else they might want to see, and they may be missing some interesting stories because they are outside their chosen topics. We need to include some flexibility and intelligent searching so that relevant wider material reaches them. As we noted, effective curation sits at the centre of all current awareness.

The other aspect of recipient personal choice is where, and on what, they will be reading their round up. It has to fit in with routine and work flow which can be a technical challenge. Often we need to be encouraging technophobic fee earners to move from paper to electronic. But they may be used to reading on a Kindle, in which case, ensuring current awareness can be delivered to the device on which they are in the habit of accessing their reading material would be helpful. Similarly, given that phones seem to be getting bigger and many underground stations now have Wifi access, this would also seem like an appropriate platform to deliver updates. However email still remains the most common place for people to access current awareness.

The method of access then depends on what type of material they are reading. If it is a daily round up, then a smartphone would suffice; articles of particular interest could be bookmarked or sent to Evernote or similar for later attention. Likewise, a hand-held device would be suitable for a taxi/elevator briefing on route to a meeting. However in depth industry or company report would require a larger screen, or even a printed version, depending on the user's preference and way of working. Electronic post it notes are not for everyone.

In many firms the same type of information is used in different ways by different departments. The flow of information around the firm can be hampered by different systems, so the trend is now to ensure specialist software to communicate with one another. For instance, should I require credit information on a particular company, I would need to ask the finance department; potential client and politically exposed people information would come from risk departments; and general sector overviews would be provided by business development teams. It should be the responsibility of knowledge teams to coordinate and synthesise this valuable information and bring systems together.

If a vital piece of information is captured by a firm-wide intelligent search and gives them the edge over the competition, it could be the difference between keeping and losing a client. Part of that edge depends on what the person is reading and assimilating. Being able to anticipate where the thought leaders are going to be writing, who is going to be worth reading, and even what those experts are reading is vital. Much of this information is going to be found in the usual high quality subscription sources, but increasingly, and perhaps because of publications' unwillingness to court controversy, many people are turning to personal blogs.

Although free information might be seen as having less value than something written in *The Wall*

Street Journal or *The Economist*, well-written and reputable independent blogs published by influential and interesting thinkers have their place on reading lists. For instance, the *Harvard Business Review* or *Inforrm* blogs, to name just two, ensure that those in the know can make their voice heard. It enables an immediate creative exchange and diversifying of opinion, which perhaps formal publications are unable to offer.

To summarise, current awareness provision is therefore something far more than setting up a search, saving an alert, and then letting it run. The source feeds require constant monitoring and updating as new quality material becomes available, but it is important that the end user is in communication with the curator/administrator. Without this two-way contact, there can be no efficient consumption of vital knowledge. This is where the knowledge department is essential; we need to know our audience and trust them to tell us what they need, and they need to trust us to facilitate the technical aspects of services.

Only in this way can we ensure that we can start providing future awareness; thinking about tomorrow, rather than 'this morning'.



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