



Public Health
England

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Knowledge & Library Services (KLS) Evidence Briefing

What innovative methods are available for delivering current awareness?

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Question

This briefing summarises the evidence on the subject of current awareness from January 2017 to December 2018, with the intention of identifying innovative methods to inform future practice.

Key messages

It is considered from the evidence reviewed that the following methods are the best innovative current awareness options:

- Aggregated service provision
- Generating automated pre-programmed bulletins with minimal manual input
- Individual user information garnering through RSS feeds and tailored web alerts

It is considered from the evidence reviewed that these are the best pre-existing methods of current awareness:

- AGILE software
- Collaborative projects with other professional libraries
- Individual manually produced specialist current awareness bulletins
- Pre-existing current awareness bulletins from other organisations or libraries

Barriers encountered to finding and reviewing research for this briefing:

- Contextually many outdated papers on the subject
- Many undated references
- Fast-moving digital environment meant that outdated software was often referenced
- Content restriction to research papers because of payment charges e.g. JINFO references
- Technology which may not meet security regulations
- Software which would exceed our current budget
- Website quality assessment and validity could be poor
- Hyperlinks often broken

Evidence briefings are a summary of the best available evidence that has been selected from research using a systematic and transparent method in order to answer a specific question.

What doesn't this briefing do?

The findings from research papers summarised here have **not** been quality assessed or critically appraised.

Who is this briefing for?

This briefing was conducted to inform an evaluation of KLS Current Awareness Services.

Information about this evidence briefing

This briefing draws upon a literature search of the sources HDAS Medline, HDAS HMIC, Cochrane Library, NICE Evidence search, Turning Research into Practice (TRIP) database, Google Scholar and Google from January 2017 – December 2018.

19 relevant references were identified, 9 of which formed background reading.

Information was also taken from grey literature, webpages, search engines, and discussions with colleagues who are engaged with large scale current awareness projects. Keywords used can be obtained on request.

You may request any publications referred to in this briefing from libraries@phe.gov.uk

Disclaimer

The information in this report summarises evidence from a literature search - it may not be representative of the whole body of evidence available. Although every effort is made to ensure that the information presented is accurate, articles and internet resources may contain errors or out of date information. No critical appraisal or quality assessment of individual articles has been performed. No responsibility can be accepted for any action taken on the basis of this information.

Background

For clarity, this briefing looks at the concept of current awareness, not horizon scanning, though they are concepts that are often used interchangeably. Current awareness is essentially what is happening today, tomorrow, next week; 'current' being the operative word. Horizon scanning is about ensuring awareness of what is needed to plan for success, looking forward to the next 12 months and beyond.

Keeping up to date is an essential but often time-consuming part of a professional's role, especially in the field of health evidence. Traditionally this has been carried out by librarians in the form of alerts or bulletins to targeted individuals or groups. Deciding on the best sources, scanning and gathering the information for inclusion, pulling into a presentable format and distributing these bulletins is a time-consuming process for a librarian. Given how much the performance of key areas of information organisation and dissemination have been enhanced in recent years, after the large-scale implementation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in handling information storage and retrieval functions (1), more innovative automated methods of producing the same results need exploration.

Current awareness (CA) is about keeping up to date, but can also be a useful platform to filter out information overload (2). Too many bulletins or those that are too long can be counterproductive and add to the argument that they have no impact.

This was a difficult area to research as, due to the topic, it was not an investigation that could be run usefully on the usual specialist medical database sources (e.g. Medline, Embase) for evidence. A preliminary search on Scopus, NICE Evidence and Health Database Advanced Search (HDAS) was undertaken, but most of the material to inform this briefing was discovered through discussions with professional library colleagues and investigating the grey literature available by keyword searching (see appendix for details) on search engines and databases. Snowballing from reports and websites was also undertaken, making this an organic process of discovery.

Most current awareness procedures involve an element of human input, some more than others, when garnering, tailoring, editing and distributing information for target audiences. The most useful and innovative methods for minimal manpower outlay, were considered by regular producers of CA to be KnowledgeShare (Ben Skinner, Brighton & Sussex University Hospital Library) and MailChimp (Kieran Lamb, Stockport NHS Foundation Trust).

Data extraction methods which considered themselves to be 'innovative' were mostly of a promotional nature for the variety of software available, and were not an impartial assessment of performance. Aggregation and screening of results may still be necessary before these results could be circulated to users. Up to date reviews of these methods are often found in blogs and online forums – peer reviewed academic journals will rarely keep pace with innovative fast-moving technology or seek to promote commercial software. For example, reference to useful social bookmarking software such as Delicious and Connotea were found to have already been discontinued or rebranded.

A table of identified methods for current awareness is listed in Appendix 1.

AGGREGATED SERVICE PROVISION

Organisational

Vable

Vable is an example of software which automatically monitors, gathers, indexes and shares information from public and subscription news sources to suit client needs. Their claim is to “*automate the aggregation of all your current awareness and competitive intelligence into a single searchable index.....including accessing subscription log ins with the publisher’s permissions*”. This can then be linked to a SharePoint platform for the whole organisation, allowing individuals the ability to manage their own access.

Advantages:

- In theory, minimal manual library input after initial set up. However, this is only the case for wholly automated alerts; most require substantial user input from a librarian or user
- Already in use in PHE

Disadvantages:

- Expensive commercial service
- Not specialists in health and social care (law and corporate origins).

Knowledge Share

KnowledgeShare is an example of an organisational current awareness programme that can also be tailored by and for the very specific needs of the individuals within it.

“When members sign up to a library that uses KnowledgeShare they list their professional interests, being as broad or specific as they like. The evidence updates can encompass every aspect of clinical care, from emergency medicine to mental health. They can include public health content or focus on management topics such as patient experience, clinical risk, staff education, etc. Members are categorised according to their interests, publications are categorised according to their content, and KnowledgeShare matches the two together, sending personalised emails that tell library members what they need to know and no more” (3).

Advantages:

- Created by individuals with health library knowledge
- No librarian input necessary for individual alerts - allows individuals to decide their own requirements for CA
- Can be used to generate automated wider CA bulletins, initially tailored by library staff
- Organisational subscription has decreased as usage has spread across NHS trusts (now serving 200 health organisations)
- Can be used to store and share literature searches
- Positive feedback has been given for this service

What innovative methods are available for delivering current awareness?

Disadvantages:

- Subscription service
- Will individual registration be signed up for by busy staff?

AUTOMATED PRE-PROGRAMMED BULLETINS WITH MINIMAL MANUAL INPUT

MailChimp (internal and external distribution)

An example of this type of service is the North Grey Literature Collection (4), maintained by Kieron Lamb (Stockton Stockport NHS Foundation Trust/Stockport NHS Library & Knowledge Service). Kieron reported that since its inception there have been a quarter of a million downloads and he has '*yet to find a cleverer way of providing content than RSS*', whilst admitting that NICE and the Joseph Rowntree foundation are moving away from the RSS environment. For this service, conversion takes place by RSS feeds via Wordpress converted into MailChimp, from which bulletins are generated at specified intervals. Individuals can sign up to RSS feeds or email alerts in specific topics from the main website.

MailChimp is particularly good for monitoring usage as it can provide statistics for opening and downloading the resources sent, in numbers and/or graphics and generate reports.

Advantages:

- Free version available
- Minimal manual input
- Stats, graphics and reports generated

Disadvantages:

- Pro version with enhanced features more user friendly and subscription only

INDIVIDUAL USER INFORMATION GATHERING

Individual user information gathering can be undertaken through RSS feeds and tailored web alerts (news aggregators, databases, blogs, web alerts, organisations etc.) Blogs are good for current awareness because of their search engine optimisation (SEO) value, and because of their interactive nature. Other users have the facility to input to posted news items and updates, often giving valuable insight and examples of best practice which is otherwise unavailable. This is also true of yammer, discussion boards, discussion lists, forums, bulletin boards, Twitter, Facebook and newsgroups.

Blogs

You can open blogs one after the other and sign up for their newsletter which will be sent straight to your email immediately they update their blog or send out an email to their subscribers.

What innovative methods are available for delivering current awareness?

OR

Update from blogs and websites easily via sign up to the free Feedly app. This tool collects all new posts from your selected websites, and displays them to you in an aggregated dashboard, where you can read them or go direct to the specific site (5)

Advantages:

- Though they need updating, there is evidence that older content still gets hits because of the keyword SEO, and this may be useful.

Disadvantages:

- Conversely, depending on the topic, older posts may be detrimental to current good practice
- Ability to interact can see negative/unpleasant responses received on an open blog
- Not necessarily factual

Citation alerts

Citation alerts let you know when a specific publication is cited by a new article in that same database. Scopus and Google Scholar are examples of this facility.

Specialist Database Alerts

An example of this is NCBI in Pubmed, which retains information and preferences to provide customised services, such as automatic searches that are sent by e-mail. This alerting function is also available on other databases such as Medline and Trip.

Journal table of contents (TOCS)

Sites such as ZETOC allow users to be alerted to the latest TOCs for favourite journals (5).

Discussion boards; discussion lists; forums; bulletin boards; newsgroups; organisational newsletters

Internally within PHE, examples such as Kanban, Confluence and Yammer are excellent ways of communicating with colleagues and keeping up to date.

LISTservs

Email distribution lists such as LIS-PUBLIC HEALTH and LIS-EAHIL are extremely useful for networking and communicating with like-minded individuals with shared interests across organisations nationally, and internationally.

What innovative methods are available for delivering current awareness?

RSS feeds

Really Simple Syndication (RSS) enables the user to subscribe to various websites and have updates delivered via an RSS feed reader. Probably the most used method of keeping up to date, and very easy ('simple') to set up.

Social Bookmarking

This can be a useful tool as it readily provides researchers with up to date news and publications to read and share on the Internet (6).

Podcasts

Podcasts can be very informative, if you can find the right one. There are many lists available, but it is better to stick to those recommended by a health organisation or reliable source as content and quality varies greatly.

Disadvantages:

- All these methods of keeping up to date can lead to information overload unless they are properly organised - training can be offered by a Librarian/Information Professional to help users focus individual CA access into a manageable and informative resource using some or all of the options mentioned in this section (7).

AGILE SOFTWARE

Confluence and Kanban are examples of Agile software development, which sees requirements and organic solutions evolve through the collaborative effort of self-organising and cross-functional teams. Very flexible and easy to use.

Power BI

PowerBI is an extremely effective way of creating interactive dashboards from multi data sources that can be displayed in an attractive visual fashion within an organisation.

COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS WITH OTHER PROFESSIONAL LIBRARIES/NETWORKS CONTRIBUTING

The Current Awareness Service for Health (CASH) and Library Information Health Network North West (LIHNN) (8) projects are good examples of collaboration.

Advantages:

- Share workload as well knowledge.

What innovative methods are available for delivering current awareness?

Disadvantages:

- Possibly larger products which may lose specific focus required
- Unsure of audit management

WIKIS

Wikis allow collaborative project or topic specific knowledge workers a space where information can be added and accessed by all within the group.

CHAIN

CHAIN is a free network of professionals providing and accessing information in their specialist fields through informal social processes. Facilitators send updates on their particular subject of interest to the central coordinators, who in turn pass them on to those signed up for information on that topic. A membership directory also allows you to contact other individual members to ask for their help and advice, enabling discussion between different professional groups and organisations.

INDIVIDUAL MANUALLY PRODUCED SPECIALIST CURRENT AWARENESS BULLETINS

Empirically it has been shown that to be successful, individual manually produced specialist current awareness bulletins need careful regulation and a defined remit, a template for circulation, and an index of sources. If the format, distribution and frequency is agreed with the intended audience, its use and usefulness will be much greater. Audit of impact periodically with the recipients should also be built into the distribution process. Once set up they should be monitored for quality and impact. This can be achieved by a survey of users, to get an indication of how the bulletins have contributed to quality improvements or changes in practice in the recipients' organisations. (For reference: PHE KLS Mental Health Bulletin. Author Caroline DeBrun).

Bots

Often used to produce CA bulletins a 'bot' allows you to monitor key websites and related pages of information for current awareness updates on a 24/7 basis and sends you an email when the sites and related pages update or change. They are also known as 'web crawlers'.

Web Detection software

This software is another of the web crawlers, monitoring websites and RSS feeds for new content and changes (9) (10)

What innovative methods are available for delivering current awareness?

Advantages:

- They do the laborious searching very quickly in comparison to manual searching if programmed correctly.

Disadvantages:

- Too much data: web crawling software will search across the entire web, which brings with it the problem of Bradford's law of diminishing returns. The results returned will therefore need some element of manual input to edit out the noise
- Validity of the content and lack of precision: results are ranked by importance, but, importance is relative and when ranked by an algorithm you may not get the desired context
- Needs structuring for use

PRE-EXISTING CURRENT AWARENESS BULLETINS (CABs) FROM OTHER ORGANISATIONS OR LIBRARIES

There are many good freely available CABs already being produced that can be edited or passed on with the permission of the authors. For example – CASH is a platform showcasing health bulletins from multiple NHS libraries, as is NHS Scotland's CA webpage. Others externally produced but useful for public health are the Kent Public Health Observatory Health and Social Care Bulletin, The West Suffolk Hospital Mental Health Bulletin, and the Kings Fund Bulletin.

Advantages:

- Minimal manual input required

Disadvantages:

- The focus of the bulletin may not exactly fit the requirements of the user

SUMMARY

Many of these sources are interchangeable across the categories chosen, but the majority of them demonstrate that truly 'hands off' current awareness is not yet an option for library and information professionals, and 'innovative' methods were rarely available. There is also little evidence of impact, value or cost-effectiveness of current awareness, possibly because this is difficult to demonstrate or assess. Whether the impact of CA services is worthy of the input is a moot point and further study needs to be done in this area. It is possible the media based theory of 'uses and gratifications' could be adapted and used for an audit process.

The latest innovation is 'Current Awareness and Competitive Intelligence' (11), but there is little mention of the implementation of this except in the legal/corporate world, and the promise of emerging software design.

What innovative methods are available for delivering current awareness?

Appendix 1

Known sources

Name	Rationale
Aggregators e.g. Vable	They claim to use a combination of AI technology and human expertise to give end-users an edge by cutting out the noise, and delivering only the most relevant content.
Agile Software e.g. Confluence. JIRA & Kanban	Agile software development is an approach to software development under which requirements and solutions evolve through the collaborative effort of self-organizing and cross-functional teams and their customer/end user.
Blogs, Wikis,	<p>Weblogs or “blogs”</p> <p>These personal blogs have become the fastest growing area of the Internet and now count in the millions. Tracking relevant blogs is well worth the time and effort, as they offer a tremendous amount of current awareness information and data e.g. The Mental Elf</p> <p>Wikis</p> <p>A wiki is a collection of information on sources and topics that can be amended or added to by anybody with knowledge or interest in the topic. They act as a collaboration of knowledge on a particular topic.</p>
Bots A bot (short for "robot") is an automated program that runs over the Internet.	Web site and web page URL monitors
CASH (Current Awareness Service for Health) Free NHS Scotland	<p>The Current Awareness Service for Health (CASH) is a collaborative project provided by a network of librarians and knowledge managers in the health sector who monitor and capture content from across a range of subject areas.</p> <p>These services require a commitment of staff time to set up and maintain.</p> <p>A-Z list of bulletins on specialist Health topics</p>
CHAIN	CHAIN provides an example of how knowledge can be targeted, personalised, and made meaningful through informal social processes. It offers a mechanism for people to span the divisions between organisations and professional groups, to capture obscure items of codified knowledge, to share and shape the know-how and know-what of implementing evidence, and to link novices with experienced practitioners who are motivated to help them solve problems.
Citation alerts	Citation alerts let you know when a specific publication is cited by a new article in that same database e.g.

What innovative methods are available for delivering current awareness?

	<p>Scopus is a large subscription database with citation data across the scientific, technical, medical and social sciences literature from 1996 to date. Register with Scopus to create alerts.</p> <p>Google Scholar Citations</p> <p>Free</p>
<p>Discussion lists and forums e.g. Confluence & Kanban</p>	<p>Discussion boards; discussion lists; forums; bulletin boards; and newsgroups allow communication between people who share similar interests. A public forum, providing a place to ask questions, offer advice and exchange ideas with list subscribers.</p>
<p>Feedly</p>	<p>Feedly is a news aggregator application for various web browsers and mobile devices running iOS and Android, also available as a cloud-based service. It compiles news feeds from a variety of online sources for the user to customize and share with others.</p> <p>Free</p>
<p>JournalTOCS Free</p>	<p>Health Sciences</p> <p>ZETOC British Library search service</p>
<p>KnowledgeShare</p>	<p>Provides regular, targeted, personalised high-level evidence updates to staff, based on their specific professional interests. Subject-specific bulletins can also be produced.</p> <p>Results are emailed to registered members fortnightly (the frequency can be amended to suit).</p>
<p>ListSerts e.g. JISCmail</p>	<p>Sharing information through topic focused distribution lists with like-minded colleagues and networks</p>
<p>Mailchimp Free (MailChimp PRO Subscription service)</p>	<p>Mailchimp is a marketing automation platform and an email marketing service.</p> <p>Once set up it will automatically populate a bulletin from your programmed keywords and send out at specified intervals.</p> <p>Creates spreadsheets and graphics of content use – views, downloads etc. for audit purposes.</p>
<p>News Aggregators</p>	<p>The latest News Aggregators read the RSS news feeds and can be updated by a click of a button, or can be preprogrammed to update in certain time frames. The latest News Aggregators also feature “auto-discovery” - automatically discovering the related RSS feed associated with the blog that you subscribe to.</p>
<p>PowerBI</p>	<p>Power BI displays dashboards that are interactive, and can be created and updated from many different data sources in real time.</p> <p>Good for sharing visuals and datasets around your organisation – easy to use</p>
<p>RSS feeds and Podcasts</p>	<p>RSS (Really Simple Syndication) enables the user to subscribe to various websites and have updates delivered via an RSS feed reader.</p>

What innovative methods are available for delivering current awareness?

	<p>Podcasts may also be a supplementary way to keep up to date. Details of new podcasts may be sent via RSS feed or iTunes, or a podcast app, or an app for a specific organisation – for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 minutes to help your research career - Practical tips and insights for researchers looking to develop their career • PLOScast Diverse perspectives on science and medicine • Podcasts by the University of Oxford, covering a range of topics
Social Bookmarking	<p>Social bookmarking tools such as Citeulike and Diigo are useful tools for researchers to discover and share new research trends because they provide access to up-to-date academic research publications or news on the Internet.</p>
Specialist Database Alerts e.g. My NCBI on PubMed Free	<p>My NCBI is a tool that retains user information and database preferences to provide customised services for many NCBI databases. It allows you to save searches, select display formats, filtering options, and set up automatic searches that are sent by e-mail. This alerting function is also available on other databases such as Medline and Trip.</p>
Subject Tracer™ Information Blogs	<p>Subject Tracer™ Information Blogs created and developed by the Virtual Private Library™ (Marcus Zillman) combine the best of the latest tools on the Internet. Using bots, blogs and news aggregators the Subject Tracer™ Information blogs generate RSS feeds with the latest resources to create a current information resource flow through niched subject tracers. Index available. Under development.</p>
Web Alerts	<p>General e.g. Google Scholar Alerts allows you to create an email alert to give the latest relevant Google results using keywords of your choice.</p> <p>Scout Report weekly report offering a selection of new and recently discovered Internet resources of interest to researchers and educators.</p> <p>Specific e.g. www.gov.uk www.kingsfund.org</p>
Web Detection software	<p>Change Detectors Monitors websites and RSS feeds for new content and changes. Monitor pages for keywords Highlights all changes Notifications and alerts e.g. www.aignes.com</p> <p>The Web Watcher is a free content monitoring service that tracks web pages, web sites and other Internet resources for keyword related content or changes. http://www.thewebwatcher.com/</p>

What innovative methods are available for delivering current awareness?

	<p>Free</p> <p>ChangeDetect http://www.changedetect.com/</p> <p>Free</p>
YAMMER	<p>Employee communication app</p> <p>Yammer is a freemium enterprise social networking service used for private communication within organizations. Access to a Yammer network is determined by a user's Internet domain so that only individuals with approved email addresses may join their respective networks.</p>

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General Background Reading

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AI AND CURRENT AWARENESS

Of interest, but unobtainable without subscription.

Access to the articles below, and others on current awareness and AI was restricted by subscription to JINFO

<https://web.jinfo.com/go/topic/category/525>

Hearsey C. How will artificial intelligence alter current awareness?

Monday, 21st August 2017 [Internet]

Abstract

Over the past year, the topic of artificial intelligence (AI) and the future of work has become a political hot potato. Everyone knows that changes are coming, but very few people can anticipate the full impact and extent of those changes. The information profession is poised to undergo

What innovative methods are available for delivering current awareness?

significant transformation, and the future of current awareness could look very different. In this article, Cerys Hearsey explores the potential changes and focuses on where the profession can add the most value, whilst building a new AI-powered service.

Elliott R. What does artificial intelligence mean for current awareness?

Friday 19th August 2016 [Internet]

Abstract

Rachael Elliott examines the processes of research and current awareness and considers the impact that artificial intelligence (AI) will have on research and on the role of the information professional. She looks at key players in this market: Google with DeepMind, IBM with Watson, and Microsoft with Azure and Delve and how information professionals could tap into this technology.

Neidorf R. State of the industry - overview of current awareness suppliers

Monday 3rd September 2018 [Internet]

Abstract

In the second of a two-part article looking at the differences between current awareness and intelligence platforms and how information professionals interact with the workflow of both systems, Robin Neidorf looks at some of the key suppliers in this area, their product offerings as well as some of the key differences between them.