# Readers' Advisory Service: An Analysis of Published Literature

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## *Abstract*

*Analyses publications on RAS published in the last five decades. Finds that there is considerable growth in the RAS publications in the 21st century; feature articles are the most used type of documents; trade and scholarly journals have published most of the literature on RAS, Library Journal, Proquest Dissertations and Theses database and Reference & User Services Quarterly are the prominent sources that published most of the RAS literature. USA and Canada have produced the highest publications on this topic.*

***Keywords:*** *Readers' Advisory Service, Readers' Advisory, Reading recommendation, Readers' Advisory Service and Libraries*

## Introduction:

Reading is a very special human skill. It brings multiple benefits to the reader. It enhances vocabulary and language skills, which turn help understand any subject and thereby improves academic performance of the student. As health benefits it enables to reduce stress, help overcome insomnia. It strengthens the empathetic attitude. All in all, reading develops personality of an individual and health of the society. To make all these

benefits available to human societies, we the library professionals must make every effort to develop readers and reading societies. In the society, there are individuals who are avid readers and there are aliterate i.e. individuals though capable to read but are unwilling to do so. Both these types of reader's reading can be increased by suggesting them suitable books and other reading material. Our goal of making available right book to the right reader will be accomplished only when we recommend reading based on understanding users and adequate knowledge of the reading material. Here lies the value of readers' advisory service.



**Reader's Advisory Service (RAS):**

It is a service in which a library professional suggests reading to users. Though it originated in the public libraries in America, the academic and research libraries also work with the motto to provide right book to right time at the right time. That is why this service is now, provided by all types libraries across the globe, directly or indirectly. 'So many books and so little time to read', highlights the value of this service. A profession is an occupation that aims to provide advice based earned expertise. Librarians as professionals are providing RAS based on their reading material expertise and the skills of understanding readers. Empirical experience of usage of books, and even the indices such as Impact Factor and altmetrics are availed to recommend reading. RAS is provided under different names, whichinclude, reading advice, readers' advisory, reading recommendation, reading consultancy, recommendation service, etc. Bibliotherapy[1-2], webotherapy[3]are the other forms of RAS. Evaluation based displays and browsing rooms are alsothe indirect forms of RAS. For two main reasons this service is getting increased response from the beginning of 21st century. First is the extraordinary growth of publications and the second is limitations on the part of the readers in judging right reading material for their next read. This is primarily a service based on human skills, which are especially



valued in the technological era. The increasing literature on RAS proves value of this service.

**Literature Review:**

There are many researches published on the diverse aspects of RAS. Based on conversations with RA practitioners Tarulliand Wyatt[4]observed that despite difficulties, the RAS has bright future. The authors suggested changes to be made in the RAS education. Highlighting the value of RAS, Smith and Young[5]asserted that provision of the RAS is one of the most beneficial ways to promote reading in academic libraries.



Number of articles discussed strategies for successful RAS. According to Beard and Thi-Beard[6]clear understanding of reading theory enables librarians in providing quality RAS. For this, the authors suggested that readers' advisors must closely follow reading research. Tveit[7]affirmed that to be able to recommend a right book to the right reader the librarian has to know the book appeals or qualities of the book and she has to know the reader in all perspectives. Dali[8] too appreciated the value of appeal factors in providing RAS and suggested that apart from appeal factors the readers' advisors should consider the context of the reader for providing successful RAS.

Emphasizing the value of professionalism in RAS, one of the strong supporters of RAS, Smith[9] stated that the service has to provided based on professional knowledge and skills. Specifying the nature of knowledge needed for the readers' advisors Begum[10] asserted that escapism is associated not only with light entertaining reading but also with the reading of serious literature and affirmed that this knowledge of escapist reading is useful in providing effective RAS. Considering the likelihood of suggesting books of one's own choice by the readers' advisors, Tarulli[11] warned that



readers' advisors suggestions should not be influenced by his / her own preferences. Lawrence[12] discussed the ideological tension between populism and elitism with reference to RAS and concluded that while readers' advisors do not try to elevate readers' tastes in books or genres, they do seek to cultivate in patrons a preference for pleasure reading. Meaningful interactions between readers and advisors enable in understanding the reader for providing reading suggestions. Dali[13]explained the value of such interactions especially in providing reading advice to immigrants.



The traditional RAS mostly suggested books. However, as the RAS is spreading from public libraries to other types of libraries, so also the scope of material recommended is widening. Lee etal.[14] described the appeals useful for recommending video games. Liu, Chen and Chiu[15]reported the website-based system of recommending quality book reviews. Vellino[16]narrated the process of using citations for recommending articles and McKnight[17]presented a comprehensive review of information prescription; Elliott[18]reported methods adopted by academic libraries in promoting extracurricular reading.

Library professionals are using technology successfully in providing various services. They are using technology for providing RAS also. For example, Sievertetal.[19] developed a 'Book Matchmaking' program based on user completed web form, which proved beneficial to RAS staff as well as users. Another computer based system for RAS named Rabbit is developed by Peraand Ng[20]Thissystem adopts a multi-dimensional approach to capture the reading abilities, preferences, and interests of readers to recommend books. The authors found that this system performed better than other book recommendation systems. Endorsing that proper education and training enhances skills of reader's advisors Dana Watson[21], Bill Crowley[22] and Rebecca Vunk[23] expressed the need for upgrading RAS



education. Anderson[24]too suggestedthat adequate provision need to be made in the LIS curriculum for RAS education. There are hundreds of other publications that discuss the value, procedure, tools and other facets of RAS.

**Objectives :**

- To know the growth of publications on RAS
- To identify the types of documents and sources preferred
- To analyse contributions of different journals
- To analyse keywords and places



**Methodology :**

Data for the present research was retrieved form the LISA database in June 2021. The keyword 'Readers' advisory service' and the field 'anywhere' was used for searching literature. The search was delimited to the period, 1970 to 2021, and the search was restricted to English language publications. The search retrieved total 5408 publications. The retrieved data was downloaded in the Excel format and is analysed and presented in the forms of table and charts.

**Analysis and Interpretation:**

**Growth of Publications**

LISA covers publications from 1970, therefore the present research analyses publications on RAS published during 1970 to 2021. Chart 1 presents five decade's growth of publications on RAS. The history of RAS indicates that the RAS was initiated during 1920s[25]. Despite this, until 1990 very few documents were published on this subject. The subject regained attention of the library professionals in the last decade of the 20th century, during which approximately 9% of the total 5408 publications were published. RAS remained an important service in the 21st century.

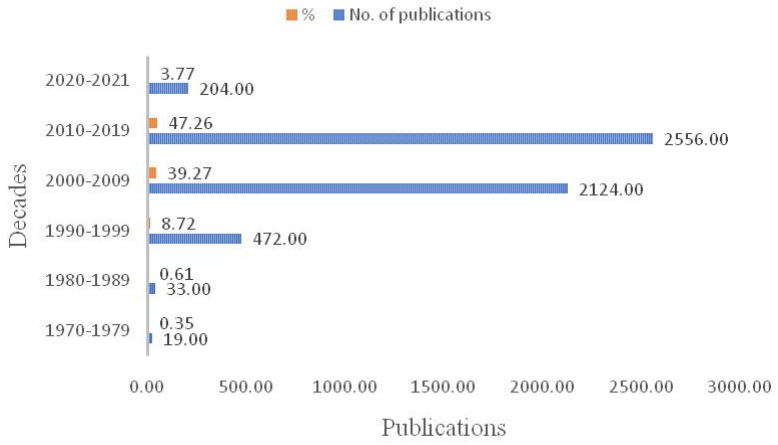


Compared to 1990s, during 2000-2009 publications on RAS increased by almost 30%. This decade has really proved to be boost year for the RAS. The growth trend continued in the 2nd decade of 21st century having an increase of 8% than the earlier decade.

Increase in the publication of books and other types of documents; need for saving users' document selection time and efforts; library professional's aspiration for innovative, human skill-based services at the background of fear of the encroachment by the other professionals are the reasons that gave boost to publications on RAS. There is a growth of 86% in the RAS publications during the first two decades of the 21st century. This indicates that the library professionals have realized the need to prove our professional abilities. The growth also shows that users are valuing reading advice offered by the library professionals. Extrapolating this trend, this author predicts that more than 5000 publications will be produced on RAS in the current decade i.e. 2020 to 2029. This means the amount of literature produced on RAS in the last five decades will be produced in a single decade.



Chart 1: Groth of publications

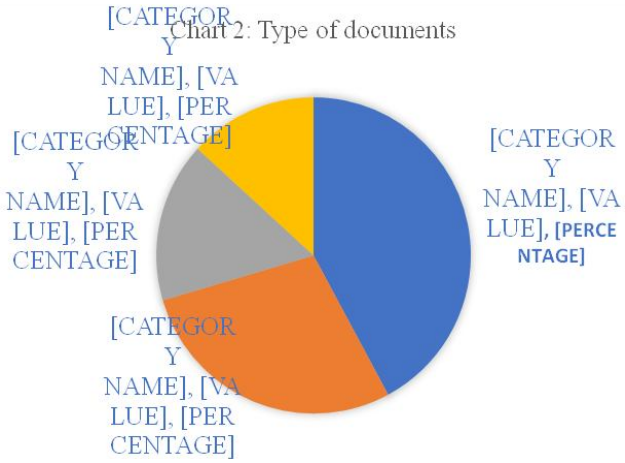


**Types of Documents Published:**

LISA listed 28 types of documents that published information on RAS. These included many less frequently used forms such as reports, correspondence, blogs, bibliography, instructional material etc. Chart 2 depicts that the feature articles is the most used type of document (42%). Feature articles report detail stories highlighting special events, places or persons. *Library Journal, American Libraries, Publishers Weekly* and other journals (Table 2 & 3) have published large number of feature articles on RAS.



Total 28% articles and 17% reviews affirm that RAS is getting the scholarly status. Out of the 714 other types of documents, 360 are dissertations and theses. This number indicates that RAS is getting enrooted as an academic and research theme. Having more publications published in the form scholarly and research documents is a good sign, as these developments will lead to increase the coverage and influence of RAS in the LIS curriculum, education and training. This in turn will produce more trained readers' advisors which will enhance the depth and width of the RAS.



## Types of Sources Used :

**Table 1. Types of Sources**

| SN | Types of sources | No. of documents | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Trade Journals | 2,491 | 46.06 |
| 2. | Scholarly Journals | 2,139 | 39.55 |
| 3. | Magazines | 384 | 7.1 |
| 4. | Dissertations & Theses | 360 | 6.65 |
| 5. | Other sources | 34 | 0.62 |



LISA's 'source types' category lists host documents that publish articles and other types of information. The only odd inclusion under this category is 'dissertations & theses' which are document themselves and not host documents publishing articles. Trade and scholarly journals have together published almost 86% publications on the RAS. In the types of sources used, 39% are scholarly journals. This is a sign of encouragement, as it will help RAS to strengthen its position as a scholarly activity. The category of other sources included conference proceedings, blogs, podcasts and websites. Appearance of these modern technologies in the types of sources indicates that the readers' advisors are adopting latest technology to enhance versatility of the RAS.

## Analysis of Journal's Contributions :

LISA identified this criterion as 'publication titles'. Total 100 publication titles were listed in the retrieved data. These 100 titles published 4907 publications. Remaining 501 publications (Total retrieved 5408) are from other sources such as internet websites. Out of these 100 titles, each of the following five top ranked publications produced 200 or more articles/items on RAS.

**Table 2. Core Titles (1st Zone)**

| SN | Publication Title | No. of items included |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Library Journal | 1009 |
| 2. | ProQuest Dissertations and Theses | 357 |
| 3. | Reference & User Services Quarterly | 271 |
| 4. | American Libraries | 225 |
| 5. | Public Libraries | 205 |
| | Total | 2067 |



The four top ranked journals and one database together produced 2067 (38%) publications on RAS (Table 2). Therefore, these titles deserve the status of core titles. The next 16 journals (Table 3) in the ranked list produced 1399 publications and the remaining 79 journals produced 1441 publications. These numbers endorse Bradford's Law of Scattering's inference that few core journals forming part of the first zone publish large number of articles. The number of titles and the number of articles in them also endorse the Bradford's findings related with the second and subsequent zones.

*Library Journal* ranked first in core titles (Table 2) is a journal that focuses on public libraries, and it is well known fact that RAS evolved in public libraries, therefore this journal obviously ranks first, publishing highest number of items on RAS. The second ranked title, *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* is a database and it has more than 300 dissertations and thesis on RAS. This is a good number and indicates that there is considerable research on RAS. This research will certainly provide a robust evidence for enhancing quality of RAS. *Reference & User Services Quarterly* is the third ranked publication in the core titles. It is one of the journals that is regularly publishing articles on RAS. It even ran a special column on RAS for more than a year. In fact 'readers' advisory' is one of the focus area of



this journal. *American Libraries* is the forth-ranked title. It is the flagship magazine of the ALA and as such, it has published many feature articles on many topics including RAS. The last journal in the list of core publications is a journal named *Public Libraries*. It is a journal of the Public Library Association. It naturally focuses on RAS, which originated and is largely practiced in public libraries. Therefore, this journal is rightly appearing in the list of core titles.



**Table 3. Ranked list of 2nd Zone Journals**

| SN | Name of the Journal | No. of publications |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | School Library Journal | 198 |
| 2. | The Booklist | 190 |
| 3. | Young Adult Library Services | 169 |
| 4. | Publishers Weekly | 127 |
| 5. | Library Trends | 86 |
| 6. | Information Today | 83 |
| 7. | Computers in Libraries | 68 |
| 8. | Teacher Librarian | 64 |
| 9. | Knowledge Quest | 62 |
| 10. | Archivaria | 60 |
| 11. | Reference Services Review | 57 |
| 12. | Library Management | 50 |
| 13. | Library Review | 49 |
| 14. | Library Philosophy and Practice | 46 |
| 15. | Children & Libraries | 45 |
| 16. | Library Hi Tech News | 45 |
| | Total | 1399 |

The 16 journals listed in Table 3 are more general journals of librarianship. These journals are neither exclusive magazines, nor journals exclusively dealing with public libraries or RAS). From the number of articles published

by these journals it could be inferred that scope of the RAS is widening and it is spreading to the academic libraries including school libraries. The list of remaining 79 journals included a large number of prominent LIS journals. This further confirms the expanding scope of RAS. *Library Trends, Library Management, Library Philosophy and Practice, Journal of Documentation, The Electronic Library, Inerlending and Document Supply, DESIDOC Journal of Library & Information Technology and Aslib Proceedings* are some of the famous journals contained in the list of second and third zone.



**Analysis of Keywords :**

Analysis of keywords (LISA named this category as 'subjects') helps in understanding the subjects in focus. The search strategy used for this research retrieved total 100 keywords that occurred 16,289 times. Table 4 lists first 18 keywords that have appeared 200 or more times in the RAS publications.

**Table 4. Most frequently appearing keywords**

| SN | Keyword | Frequency of occurrence |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Libraries | 1,342 |
| 2. | Librarians | 1,045 |
| 3. | Books | 938 |
| 4. | Library science | 555 |
| 5. | Reading | 429 |
| 6. | Novels | 428 |
| 7. | Readers advisory work | 412 |
| 8. | Book reviews | 407 |
| 9. | Nonfiction | 407 |
| 10. | Library collections | 395 |
| 11. | Academic libraries | 365 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 12. | Studies | 311 |
| 13. | Public libraries | 261 |
| 14. | Social networks | 260 |
| 15. | Writers | 229 |
| 16. | Students | 220 |
| 17. | School libraries | 214 |
| 18. | Web sites | 202 |



The keywords, 'Libraries' and 'Librarians' have occurred more than 1000 times. This affirms that RAS is directly associated with libraries and librarians. 'Books' is the third most frequently used keyword, that is because RAS basically recommends books. 'Novels' (429) and 'Nonfictions' (407) are the specific types of books suggested during RAS that is why these two keywords have occurred more than 400 times. The keyword 'Public Libraries' appeared 261 times, which this author thinks is unexpected. Because, RAS originated in public libraries and is practiced extensively in these libraries; therefore, it should have appeared more than 1000 times. 'Academic libraries' (365) and 'school libraries' (214) together have appeared more frequently than the public libraries keyword. From this it is inferred that reading advice, reading recommendations, reading consultancy, reading suggestions, reading guidance as service are getting more recognition in the academic libraries. This is very encouraging scenario, as the provision of RAS by academic librarians will help prove their information sources' expertise and their professional abilities to prescribe reading material. Provision of this service in academic libraries will help librarians of these libraries to earn the status and designation of 'professor of books and reading'[26]. Frequent use of 'Book reviews' (407), 'Social networks' (260) and 'Websites' (202) keywords reveal that these tools are increasingly used for providing RAS.



## Locational Analysis :

Contribution to RAS publications coming from specific continents is very uneven (Table 5). RAS originated in the USA and it is practiced in this country even today very enthusiastically. Therefore, it could be noticed that USA produced highest number of publications on RAS. Amongst European countries, UK has major contribution (145). China (41) and India (32) are the main contributors form Asia.



**Table 5. Continents and their contributions**

| SN | Continents | No. of publications |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | USA and Canada | 3065 |
| 2. | Europe | 384 |
| 3. | Asia | 188 |
| 4. | Africa | 82 |
| 5. | Australia and New Zealand | 56 |

It is encouraging that countries across the globe are providing RAS and are publishing based on their practice. However, libraries form other than USA, must provide this service extensively and the readers' advisors from the rest of the world must produce more publications based on their RA practices.

## Conclusion :

RAS is emerging as an important human skill-based professional service. Acquiring reading material expertise and based on this expertise advising reading, recommending reading will be the most sought after paradigm shift in the 21st century librarianship. To avail this service, readers will come to the library for seeking library professional's advice for their next reading. Provision of this service will help assert that like other professionals, librarians too offer advice and prescription. This will enable librarianship to fulfil the important criteria of a profession. Let us work for attaining this goal.



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