

Chapter 3

The Challenges of Discovering Online Research/ Reference Content: An Introduction to the End User's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

“Discoverability” is the quality of being readily found by information seekers actively engaged in the search process. The path to discovery can vary based on a number of factors, including both external factors (such as accessibility issues) and ones specific to a particular user (such as the individual research habits of a given end user). However, the goal of finding efficiency within these discovery paths is universal. This chapter provides a broad outline of the problems of online research/reference content discoverability from the academic end-user perspective--in this case students in higher education and researchers. Starting with a look at common information seeking practices and the ways in which both “discovery failure” and “filter failure” can play a role, the primary challenges of new tools, content silos, accessibility, and loss of serendipity are reviewed within the context of end-user interviews, surveys, and studies conducted at Stanford University and elsewhere. The use of value signifiers—the signals that end-users look for to determine the relevance of found resources—is also discussed as an important part of the content evaluation and filtering process.

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INTRODUCTION

Publishers of academic reference content were early to recognize that by nature this content was inherently appropriate to digitize and distribute electronically. These works usually encompassed copious amounts of information that was ill-suited for the physical constraints of print, they were served well by frequent updates, they were used for quick lookups and strategic reading (rather than cover-to-cover reading), and they lent themselves well to organization as databases. Indeed online reference works abound, from collections such as Credo Reference, Gale Virtual Reference Library, Oxford Reference Online, SAGE Reference Online, and Springer Online Reference Works to stand-alone works such as the American Association of Pediatric's Red Book Online and the Oxford English Dictionary (OED).¹ It is not surprising then that users have shifted readily from print to online reference materials. "Many librarians have noticed a decline in use of print reference materials, with most patrons preferring the convenience and speed of online answers," Lindsey Schell notes (2011, p. 80) in advocating that librarians build their digital collections by looking at what users are already asking for online.

However, it is important to recognize that as information seekers become less interested in the container of information (a monograph vs. a traditional reference work vs. a review article) and focus instead on the currency and relevancy of the information contained, the term "reference content" has begun to evolve. It is now starting to include not just what we think of as traditional reference works (dictionaries, encyclopedias, medical handbooks) but also a fuller range of academic resource types and digital products that make information readily available to users in an organized fashion. It may be more fruitful to think less about reference works as containers than as just one target of the pursuit of reference information. It is this pursuit that is central to the user and, therefore, should be construed as the larger context in which to understand user behavior. For

these reasons, the exploration of discoverability challenges in this chapter will focus on the broader construct of "research/reference content" and the way in which end users still face a host of barriers in finding relevant information. Further, bearing in mind that not all users seeking information are the same, this chapter will focus on students in higher education and researchers as a specific type of end user and key constituents for research and reference content.

Understanding users and their often heterogeneous workflows and information consumption habits is an important step toward understanding why discovering appropriate content can be difficult. It is possible to divide the problems encountered by digital research/reference content seekers into two broad categories. The first—"discovery failure"—is the failure to find any content. The second—Clay Shirky's "filter failure"—is the failure to find relevant or valuable content. This chapter provides a look into these failures more closely, examining the challenges users face that might contribute to them, within the context of the information practices currently in common use by information seekers in higher education, including undergraduates, graduate students, post-doctorates, and faculty. To do this, a number of important studies that have emerged recently examining the changing behaviors of students in using digital content in general are examined. Of particular note is the work done by JISC² and the Research Information Network³ in the United Kingdom, as well as Project Information Literacy⁴ out of the University of Washington's Information School. These groups have conducted longer term studies and broad surveys of student and researcher behavior to extract hard data about how users consume digital information. HighWire Press has also conducted a series of in-depth interviews of researchers from the Stanford University community, across multiple disciplines.⁵ The findings corroborate the data gathered by other studies in this area, and this chapter draws on the insights they offer to provide illustrations of the discovery challenges users face.

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