

Chapter 6

Criteria to Consider when Evaluating Web- based Discovery Tools

Amy Hoseth
Colorado State University, USA

ABSTRACT

As libraries re-think their collections, emphasizing online access and building digital resource collections that are growing at an exponential pace, Web-based discovery tools are under consideration by many academic libraries. These tools enable users to easily and quickly search across a broad range of pre-harvested, indexed content, including materials from databases, library catalogs and local collections. In 2010, the Colorado State University (CSU) Libraries conducted an extensive review of four Web-scale discovery services (EBSCO Discovery Service™; Primo Central™ from ExLibris™; Summon™ from Serials Solutions®⁵; and WorldCat® Local) in order to recommend one for purchase. Based on that experience, this chapter suggests five key criteria to consider when evaluating and selecting Web-based discovery tools.

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, academic libraries held a virtual monopoly on scholarly research: resources were widely disseminated in a variety of print publications and users had to rely on the exper-

tise of skilled librarians to help them navigate the complicated research landscape. However, today that landscape is dramatically different. The Internet has not only provided reasonable alternatives to library resources in the form of search engines such as Google Scholar™⁷, but has also reshaped user expectations regarding online search and discovery.

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Criteria to Consider when Evaluating Web-based Discovery Tools

In order to meet users' high expectations and simplify access to a vast and complicated sea of information, many academic libraries are exploring and purchasing Web-scale discovery tools. These tools, which “[search] across a vast range of pre-harvested and indexed content quickly and seamlessly” (Vaughan, 2011b, p. 6) allow users to easily search and retrieve traditional library catalog content; article-level database content; and items from local digital collections—all from one simple search box that can be easily integrated into a library's home page and search screens.

In 2010 the Colorado State University Libraries conducted an extensive review of four Web-scale discovery services in order to recommend one for purchase. Based on that experience, this chapter suggests five key criteria to consider when evaluating and selecting Web-based discovery tools and shares information learned through CSU's search process that may be useful to other institutions undertaking similar reviews.

WEB-SCALE DISCOVERY

Web-scale discovery is clearly “one of the most significant breakthroughs in library automation in recent decades” (Breeding, 2010, p. 34), but since these tools are so new to the marketplace, limited research has been published on their selection, implementation, use and impact. WorldCat® Local, from OCLC, premiered at the University of Washington in 2007. Summon™, from Serials Solutions®, debuted in 2009. The EBSCO Discovery Service™ and Ex Libris' Primo Central™ both launched in 2010.

While each Web-scale discovery tool has its own unique features, they can be united by a common definition. In general, “Web-scale discovery services for libraries are those services capable of searching quickly and seamlessly across a vast range of local and remote pre-harvested and indexed content, providing relevancy-ranked results in an intuitive interface.” (Vaughan, 2011a, p. 32)

These tools offer a single Google-like search box; functions such as faceting that allow users to easily manipulate sets of results; and flexibility so that they work well regardless of the underlying library systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the fact that Web-scale discovery tools are still relatively new, the published literature on their selection, implementation, use, and impact remains thin. In particular, few articles exist to guide libraries through the process of evaluating and selecting a Web-scale discovery tool. This gap is problematic for academic libraries seeking current information before they make a long-term and often costly investment for their institution. However, early research is beginning to appear. The most recent literature on the topic includes in-depth reviews of the technology along with use and impact studies from several libraries that were among the first to adopt the services.

The need for new, user-friendly library search interfaces has been discussed in the library literature for some time. Marshall Breeding (2010) heralded the coming of new discovery platforms “that aim to manage access through a single index to all library content to the same extent that search engines address content on the Web” (p. 34), and Jeff Wisniewski (2010) encouraged librarians to “[take] a serious look” at the newly launched Web-scale systems that seemed ready to fulfill the ““one search box to rule them all’ quest” that librarians have long desired. (p. 55) Most recently, a study from OCLC (2011) took an in-depth look at the prospects for “single search” within libraries, archives and museums (LAMs) regardless of how resources within those institutions might be siloed.

Several broad summaries and reviews of these new tools have now been published. By far the most comprehensive work is an issue of *Library Technology Reports* written by Jason Vaughan.

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