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Keeping the Enemy Close
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and expensive tools in the online information economy even when the expensive products are much better.¹ Librarians know that students gravitate toward the easiest search interfaces available to them regardless of how useful it is for their research needs. Although librarians often attribute this behavior to laziness or inexperience, Shapiro and Varian would argue that the students are making a rational choice because information is an “experience good.” Due to the uncertainty inherent in the quest for knowledge, researchers never know how valuable their discoveries will be until after they spend their time, effort, and money on the search process. Perhaps the extra time spent on doing a thorough search in an intimidating database like Web of Science ultimately will be “worth it” in the eyes of the researcher, but perhaps not. When researchers have ready access to an easy search tool that gives them adequate results, it often does not make sense for them to take the risk of investing additional effort on a difficult search tool that may not do better.

The greatest danger of Google Scholar from the perspective of academic librarians is that it will degrade the marketplace for scholarly research so that it no longer will be possible for anyone to invest the resources required to produce a sophisticated search tool such as Web of Science. If students abandon the library’s subscription databases to use Google Scholar instead, it will become increasingly difficult for libraries to justify their expenditures on these tools. Without the support of library subscriptions, Google’s competitors will be unable to continue producing high-quality scholarly search products, and Google could become the dominant option for discovering scholarly content. At that point, Google would have even less incentive to develop Google Scholar in a way that is consistent with the needs and values of the academic community than they do now.

Google Scholar as an Ally

Google Scholar has the potential to benefit academic libraries by making their collections more visible and their services more evident to users. Two recent studies of Internet and library use somewhat surprisingly discovered that they were correlative.² On average, the more that someone used the Internet, the more that she used the library as well. These results challenge the common notion that libraries and the Internet are involved in a zero-sum competition for the same information consumers. In fact, the most recent study argues that “the use of one source leads to others; museums, public libraries and the Internet do not compete, but rather complement each other in this information-rich environment.”³ Ultimately, Google Scholar and other Google projects such as Google Book Search may stimulate a desire for information that libraries are uniquely positioned to satisfy. Google Scholar could become an entry-level research tool that introduces students to the rich resources available at the library and entices them to visit the source to get even more.

Google Scholar promotes library use in a couple of important ways. First, much of the literature that Google Scholar indexes is expensive, copyrighted material. Although researchers can read abstracts of copyrighted articles on Google Scholar, they have to pay the publisher or go to the library if they want the entire content. Because Google wants to limit the frustration experienced by its users, it has made it easier for those associated with academic institutions to get to the library’s subscriptions by setting up Google Scholar as an OpenURL source. Any library that has an OpenURL resolver can direct its users from Google Scholar to library’s ejournal subscriptions. By providing a quick and simple interface to access scholarly material, Google Scholar potentially makes it much easier for university researchers to discover expensive online content that the library has acquired for their use.

Second, the limitations of Google Scholar’s simple search interface for answering sophisticated research questions may increase a student’s appreciation for the expert assistance provided by librarians. Although students who get adequate results with Google Scholar are unlikely to look for something better at the library, a recent study suggests that Google searches are not even minimally adequate for the needs of most college students who are working on research papers.⁴ The study demonstrated that students working on a class assignment often started their research with a general Internet search engine, but quickly became frustrated with them. In the long run, the students found that they were much more successful and satisfied when they used the library tools that were built with the specific needs of the students in mind and when they could get direct assistance of librarians.

In an ideal world, academic libraries would be able to take advantage of the frustration experienced by researchers whose information needs exceed the abilities of Google Scholar by using it as a bridge between the Internet and the library. With one foot in the World Wide Web and another foot in the intimidating world of peer-reviewed journals and scholarly discourse, Google Scholar can help college students make the transition from Web surfers to information literate academic researchers. Just as a novice wine drinker who buys a few bottles of cheap wine from the supermarket may develop sophisticated tastes that lead her to try more expensive vintages, a few searches on Google Scholar may help novice scholars develop a taste for independent research that leads them to the sophisticated tools and experts available in the library.

Domesticating Google Scholar

Although it is still too soon to know whether Google Scholar ultimately will be a friend or a foe of academic libraries, librarians can influence the results by integrating Google Scholar into the library’s online environment as much as possible. If researchers see Google as an external resource completely unrelated to the library, they will be less likely to use it as a bridge into the library. The less expensive in terms of time and effort it is for the student to get from Google Scholar into the library’s resources, the easier it will be for her to take that next step.

At SFSU, we have used all the technical resources currently available to us to make Google Scholar behave like “just another library database” in the eyes of our students. We started by adding OpenURL links from Google Scholar to our SFX server through Google’s Library Links program so that researchers on campus see hyperlinks that say “SFSU: Find Full Text” on the Google Scholar results.

John Wenzler

BORN & LIVED EARLY LIFE: San Francisco.
IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE: Swing Dancing.
FAVORITE BOOKS: My current enthusiasms are No One Makes You Shop at Wal-Mart by Tom Slee and The Shock Doctrine by Naomi Klein. Moby Dick, The Brothers Karamazov, and Emerson’s essays are long-term favorites.
MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Completing my Doctoral Dissertation after about five years and 450 pages of work.
HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I’ll answer for the library industry. I see a growing effort to integrate library resources into the broader world of the Internet. And I hope that we’ll see a renewed appreciation of the social value of libraries and other public goods that try to satisfy needs that the market economy tends to neglect.

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