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THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE: A LIBRARY WITHOUT A PUBLIC CATALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

Two years ago Utrecht University Library (UUL) in the Netherlands decided to focus on delivery instead of discovery. Based on international studies, users statistics and surveys UUL concluded that library discovery tools have become less relevant because users find their research and teaching material increasingly outside the framework of the library. This conclusion had major implications for both UUL and her users. In 2012 UUL decided to shut down the discovery system Omega, custom-made for finding electronic material owned by her library, and – more important - not to implement another library discovery service. After nine months of preparation, on September 1st, 2013, Omega closed. Recently UUL decided to close her own public library catalogue too. Instead, she advises her users to find their material via alternative general or subject specific discovery tools.

This paper hopes to encourage libraries to rethink and evaluate their efforts on discovery and delivery. The principle idea while doing this should be that it does not matter where users find their material. What matters is that they can use the relevant material they find.

WHERE DO USERS SEARCH FOR LITERATURE?

International studies and user statistics show that students and academic staff are moving away from the library website and the online library catalogues.

Figure 1, which contains charts based on international surveys, shows that in 2010 83% of the students started their search in a general search engine on the Web. None of the students used the library website as a starting point for their search for literature. And as for scholars, 47% used a specific research database and only 18% used the library catalogue.

Figure 1: International trends in search behavior (2010)

These numbers were the reason for UUL to have a look at her own users statistics too. Like any other library, UUL has always offered her users a public catalogue. The library

was founded in 1584 and around the year 1600 a list of books was produced, which helped visitors to find the available books. In those days the library was located in an empty former Catholic church and housed only a few hundred books. But as years, decades and even centuries passed by, the library grew larger, moved to other locations and now contains millions of books. How to find anything in these large numbers of books without using a catalogue?

However, as in the last two decades digital material became more dominant, the traditional catalogue became less sufficient, especially for finding scientific electronic articles. For that reason in 2002 UUL built, only slightly more than a decade ago, her own discovery tool Omega. At that time UUL told her users that if they were looking for print material they should use the catalogue. And if they were looking for electronic journal articles they should use Omega.

But since 2002 things have changed dramatically. New commercial discovery tools such as Primo and Summon entered the library market. While during the first years Omega was top of the bill and heavily used, in the following years it became rapidly outdated, to the point where it was not even able to access all the digital material of UUL. This made UUL think very hard about possible alternatives.

Meanwhile more and more users were finding their way to licensed journals through larger and stronger web based search engines, like Google Scholar, and made increasing use of paid databases like Web of Science and Scopus in their search for literature.

Figure 2 shows the trends in search behavior of Utrecht users in the years 2006-2012. During this period the number of searches in the UUL catalogue and Omega – the two

Figure 2: Relative increase/decrease in search behavior Utrecht University Library, 2006-2012

bottom lines, light brown and red – stayed equal over the years while simultaneously the number of searches in particularly Google Scholar and Scopus increased relatively. This does not mean that Omega had lost its relevance – the user statistics still showed 1.2 million searches per year – but the trend that other discovery tools were becoming more dominant was inevitable.

Given all these facts, what is the relevance for libraries of investing in their own, expensive discovery tool? And as UUL asked herself that question, she also started to wonder about a question which had previously been unthinkable to her: what is the relevance for libraries to have their own public catalogue?

To see whether the UUL user statistics were in line with the opinion of her users, UUL conducted a survey under 12 researchers and 18 students, as representatives from all main disciplines. During these interviews it became clear that by far the most of them searched for full text articles, and most searches started in Google Scholar. Of course, this is the general image and there are huge differences between disciplines. For instance, within the field of Humanities Google Scholar is less popular than in other disciplines. And of course the preference for search engines depends on what type of information or publication is needed. But the overall image is clear.

Based on the user statistics and the general findings of the survey, UUL concluded that there was no need to invest any further in updating the custom-made discovery tool Omega for scientific journals, and, more important, there is no need to buy and implement another discovery tool. Secondly, because most of the users are capable of finding information without the help of the library, UUL decided to focus predominantly on delivery.

Besides these rather radical conclusions, UUL also concluded that for the time being, she would continue her public catalogue. For two important reasons basically. Firstly, at an international level there was no good alternative for the discovery of special collections, especially for non-digital information like old books, maps, pamphlets and manuscripts. Many search engines give access to only a small part of these collections, there are problems with the metadata, and so on. The rather large and important special collection of UUL would not be easily accessible for users without the public catalogue.

Secondly, in most search engines it is not possible to filter sufficiently on what is available in your own library, or not in a very easy way for users. Especially for students it is very helpful to know what their library owns or has access to, to have quick access to material they can use to write their papers for instance. For this type of what you might call 'local discovery' a public catalogue is still indispensable.

HOW TO FOCUS ON DELIVERY INSTEAD OF DISCOVERY?

Since 2012 UUL focused on shutting down Omega and on improving delivery. But how do you do that? The strategy of UUL was based on three pillars: communication, changing the library website and improving online support.

Communication is of course always very important in these kinds of transition processes. Despite the fact that other search engines had become increasingly popular over the years, UUL also had to take into account that many of her users still used Omega as a discovery tool. To them UUL had to explain the decision to shut down Omega and to offer good alternatives or even better ways of finding material. To do so, UUL made an extensive communication plan which was optimistically named 'Better ways of finding'. UUL discussed her plans with her users, for instance while supporting them to find literature, and used social media like Facebook and Twitter to inform students and academic staff. And as a visual reminder of the impending changes, UUL added a counter to her website, counting down the days until Omega would be switched off.

Moreover, UUL redesigned her library website. The goal was to implement a website structured on the various needs of users. Users not only come to the library website to find literature, but also for help on managing data and literature, and for support on publishing. These library services are now prominently featured on the homepage of the UUL website.

But probably the most important changes, at least for users, were related to the online support. UUL redeveloped a list of available search engines on the website. UUL advises her users to use various discovery tools based on their needs and make users aware of possible biases in whatever search engine they are using. The choice for for instance a combination of more general and subject specific discovery tools has to depend on the type of information or publications users need. The library website facilitates this.

Besides, UUL kept in mind that most of her students and staff members do not visit the library website at all, or at least not very often. UUL wants to support this group too. For them she offers a simple Javascript bookmarklet users can add to their internet browser. This enables them to log in with their Utrecht ID and password while searching off-campus and get all the access to material they would have had if they were searching via the library website.

And UUL offered her SFX knowledge base to Google Scholar and Scopus so these engines know which journals the Utrecht users have access to. As a result when students or staff members are searching for information in for instance Google Scholar, they will see whether the articles can be accessed by them. And, via the so-called UBU link get access to the full text if possible.

Of course, these actions were not new, not to UUL and not within the library world. But because of her focus on delivery UUL sees and realizes how often things go dramatically

wrong. Links that don't work well, material that is not findable, users who don't know how to get access to licensed materials, and so on.

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN UUL HAD SHUT DOWN HER LIBRARY DISCOVERY TOOL?

After almost a year of intensive preparation, the big day came. On Sunday September 1st 2013, Omega was switched off as planned. Despite all her efforts, UUL expected to receive complaints, face problems she had not foreseen. But almost nothing happened. No major complaints, a lot of hits on the 'searching for literature'-webpage on the library website. And, on September 2nd, there was an enormous increase of visits to Google Scholar and Scopus via the proxy server, a trend that especially for Google is still continuing (see figure 3). In fact, the sudden

Figure 3: SFX-clicks per month, Utrecht University Library, 2012-2014

increase of Google searches via the library server was so immense that Google thought they were searched by a robot and replied with a captcha, until they realized that it were humans using Scholar.

More than a year later UUL has embedded her focus on delivery in her entire organization and work processes. She keeps track of where her users are, by means of trend watching, international studies, user surveys and statistics. UUL cooperates with other libraries or groups of libraries to be more able to influence suppliers, vendors and publishers, to use international standards, to improve linking mechanisms and to offer smooth access to licensed users.

But has UUL received no complaints at all? Yes she did, mainly from students and academic staff with a Humanities background. Their complaints were twofold: for some of them shutting down Omega came as a surprise. With hindsight UUL had to conclude that her communication was not custom-made enough, at least not for all users, maybe relying too much on social media for instance. It also confirms that when major changes occur libraries have to involve their users as early as possible, in this case certainly those disciplines which are less digitally oriented. As said before, UUL did her best to inform her users, but for some it was not enough.

Besides the communication aspect, there is also a deeper reason why shutting down Omega was not welcomed within the Humanities as warmly as in other disciplines. Many paid databases like Scopus and Web of Science are no good alternatives for Humanities scholars because they contain not enough relevant material for them. In that respect, Google Scholar might be a better alternative, but in another sense more problematic because in this database it is very hard to filter on relevant material which you have access to. And, especially for students it is often difficult to assess the quality and relevance of the (many) Google search results. So far, the best alternatives for Humanities scholars are probably those databases with bibliographical information on specific disciplines or subjects. In instructions and on the website UUL guides her users to all these alternatives.

So, although shutting down Omega was for the most part a success story, UUL also faced problems.

WILL UUL SHUT DOWN HER PUBLIC CATALOGUE TOO?

And what about thinking the unthinkable? Will UUL close her public catalogue too because most of her users don't need it anymore? Yes, she probably will. Up to this day the special collections of UUL are only accessible in a satisfactory manner via the public catalogue. But UUL thinks that in the near future it will be possible to make her centuries-old books, pamphlets, writings, maps, and so on, accessible via general search engines. In fact, she thinks this is a necessity in order to make this kind of extremely valuable, unique material better known and as a result more used. Moreover, until now even many contemporary (e)books are not adequately accessible via general or subject specific search engines. A lot has to improve related to the discovery and delivery of publications, especially those who are not electronic journal articles. But UUL is convinced this is all a matter of time (and hard work of course).

And what about what you might call 'local discovery'. Will it stay relevant for users to have a discovery tool for knowing what their library owns or has access to? For bachelor students who want quick access to material this will be the case, maybe. But is any serious scholar not primarily interested in having access to literature most relevant for his research or study, instead of wanting to use material his or her library happens to have access to? Libraries should facilitate this.

UUL realizes that her focus on delivery instead of discovery is up to this moment, in some respect more a mindset than a reality. Of course, discovery is still important to her. UUL supports her users to find their material in the best way possible, but just does not think that library discovery tools are the best way to do so. And, given her user

statistics and surveys most of her users agree with that. Simultaneously, UUL thinks that, related to discovery, her primary responsibility will be more and more to make both the publications of her academic staff and the unique material she owns findable worldwide, via as many relevant search engines as possible.

And what about delivery? In addition to developing technological facilities, UUL believes in a stronger cooperation between libraries. The Utrecht holdings are part of the Dutch national catalogue and of WorldCat as well. UUL is looking in this direction to see if she can give her users a sufficient alternative. For instance, it would be a major step forward if it would be possible to filter sufficiently in general search engines on material that is owned by or accessible via your own library. And to see whether material is currently available and in what way. Or, to give another example, that Humanities related material is better harvested and on a larger scale by Google Scholar and Scopus, so that both scientists and scholars can use these search engines. Through a stronger cooperation between libraries it is possible to build pressure on companies who develop discovery tools to make these kind of developments obvious.

To conclude, not so long ago UUL was convinced she needed her own discovery tool. However, when it comes to discovery UUL had to admit that others apparently do a better job than she does, or at least a job more users prefer. And UUL thinks this applies to most libraries. Libraries should stop spending so much time and money on discovery and focus more on delivery. After all, it does not matter where users find their material. What matters is that they can use the relevant material they find.

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