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Op Ed — Prescription vs. Description in the Information-seeking Process, or Should we Encourage our Patrons to use Google Scholar?

by **Bruce Sanders** (Head of Cataloging & Processing, Roy O. West Library, DePauw University)

There is a lively debate in the library world about how to optimize library Websites to foster information seeking by patrons. At my institution, **DePauw University**, this debate revolves around the following question, should our library Website encourage patrons to access databases via native interfaces, via federated search tools, such as **MetaLib**, or, even more radically, via search engines such as **Google Scholar**? There are two commonly held views, which I call the prescriptionist view and the descriptionist view, that answer this question.

Patrons come to librarians with information-seeking problems. Prescriptionist librarians believe that it is their job to prescribe solutions to those information-seeking problems. In general, those solutions consist of teaching patrons how to conduct optimal search strategies so they can generate extensive hit lists. Comprehensive bibliographies can then be derived from those hit lists. This means patrons need to learn which databases are best for any given subject, the command language for each particular database, the database's thesaurus (if it has one), and how to limit searches. In other words, sophisticated searching requires expertise, and librarians are available to teach these skills. Thus, for prescriptionists, a library's Website needs to encourage competent, sophisticated searching of databases. This means access to the native interfaces of databases should be front and center on the library Webpage, while access to federated searching methods should be de-emphasized.

There are two types of federated searching. One type is to search across databases using each database's own indexing. This is the strategy of **MetaLib** and similar tools. The second type is for a search engine to crawl all the information in as many databases as possible and index the information itself in one giant uniform index. This is the method of **Google Scholar** and other search engines. Databases index and structure their data in different ways. Their command languages may vary, their thesauri may be different, and most importantly, there may be no perfect mapping of these variables from one database to another. Thus, the first method, federated searching across databases, often misses many true positives. The second method, crawling all the databases, has the opposite problem.

Typically, one large keyword index of all the data is generated and relevance ranking is applied to the hit lists. There is no thesaurus involved, no authorities applied, and little or no cross-referencing of synonyms. This method encourages the use of large search strings to avoid missing relevant material, but it produces many false positive hits, some of which are moved to the bottom of the hit list by relevance-ranking algorithms. Because of these problems, federated searching, though easy, can give patrons a false sense of security about the quality of the hit lists they generate. Thus, neither method is acceptable for compiling bibliographies, which again leads prescriptionists to argue that federated searching methods should be given little importance on the library Website.

Prescriptionists are caring and service-oriented, but perhaps a little too idealistic. They have a passionate desire to help patrons to the maximum extent possible, and they believe that guided database searching is the way. Prescriptionists tend to justify their view by citing the positive results they get when working with people who have asked for help. Their justifications rarely take into account the patrons they never see, that is, the vast majority of patrons.

Descriptionists, on the other hand, understand that most library research is unmediated by librarians. Thus, descriptionists believe that you should look at how patrons actually search, describe that search, and tailor the library Website to make patron search strategies as effective as possible. While observing patrons' search behavior, descriptionists note that patrons throw words into a search box and depend on the search tool to do most of the work. Patrons would rather revise, refine, and limit their initial search until they obtain an acceptable hit list rather than construct complicated and sophisticated searches from the get-go. They are uninterested in choosing databases, and they are uninterested in repeating searches from one database to the next. They avoid learning sophisticated search techniques to the extent that they can find what they need without using those techniques. In other words, patrons *like* federated searching, especially as epitomized by **Google** and

similar search engines. Another thing descriptionists observe is that "comprehensive" bibliographies are in the eye of the beholder. Patrons stop searching as soon as they've found as much material as they need, even if there is a likelihood that more material on their topic is waiting to be found. Comprehensiveness in an absolute sense is usually more than most patrons care about.

Descriptionists are passionately service-oriented but pragmatic. Descriptionists help patrons find what they need through the use of familiar searching methods. In this regard, simple federated methods often work, and those methods are getting better all the time. Descriptionists believe that **Google Scholar**, **Academic Live**, and thoughtfully constructed, subject-based **MetaLib** searches are "easy" methods that are improvements over generic

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search engines such as **Google**. Even so, sometimes plain **Google** is good enough, and sometimes sophisticated searching is necessary. But insisting that patrons use guided search techniques (especially if they have not had any library instruction or when simpler techniques are adequate) as a first plan of attack is self-defeating and will drive patrons to use techniques that are worse than the superior "easy" techniques the library can offer. Descriptionists believe that sophisticated searching is best learned in bibliographic instruction classes or in mediated reference transactions. Thus, descriptionists believe in giving patrons choices on the library Website so they can choose the appropriate search strategy for different types of information problems. The "best" federated search methods (including **Google Scholar**) should be front and center on the Website because those search methods are the ones patrons will prefer, and nine times out of ten those methods will suffice.

For the most part, count me as a descriptionist. 🐼