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Editor

Kinda Just Like Google: Presence and Variety of Search Options on Library Homepages

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In order to take the temperature of the academic library community with regard to external search boxes, the authors visited 111 academic **ARL** Library Websites on October 9th, 2007. A record of each homepage was kept detailing the presence and type of search boxes appearing at the top level. The resulting data paints an interesting portrait of diverse approaches, congruencies, and innovation. Globally this measure strikes to the core of current technological challenges with library search and Website design.

Authoring and managing a library Website has never been an easy task. The sheer amount of online information accessible through library portals coupled with the rise of **Google** and other large commercial search services make this task even more daunting. Patrons have come to expect simple, intuitive, and powerful interfaces that provide quick and useful information. Inherent in library Websites is a challenge to balance different interests while also trying to meet rising user expectations.

In balancing these interests, at least three discrete tensions can arise in the design of a library Website. First, library Websites are somewhat unique in the online world in that they must provide services to patrons in both a bricks and mortar and an online environment. **Google**, for example, is not especially worried about posting the hours that any of their data centers might be open. Second, library Websites can aspire to be both "sticky" and "transparent." Even though the primary mission of the library is to quickly connect users with resources, there is also a competing goal to inform users about library services and

to make the site marketable. Third, library Websites wrestle with the dichotomy of simple vs. complex. The range of users that library Websites serve and the variety of resources they provide is vast. In the case of academic libraries the same site is meant to serve the neophyte seventeen year old as well as the seasoned researcher. While the desire to make searching easy is very tangible, the landscape is complex with a variety of disparate search targets, many of which are not directly under the library's control.

All of these challenges are reflected in looking at the homepage for any given library. An often contentious decision point in any library Website design is the "search box." Should there be a search box on the homepage? What should it search? How should it be emphasized? The difficulties in answering these questions can be mapped to the three dichotomies discussed above. A "search this site" option can appeal to the bricks and mortar aspect of the library for locating information such as hours, borrowing policies, and other physical services, whereas a federated or metasearch feature can obviate the physical library altogether. Any top level search box is a seductive proposition with users who are accustomed to the "magic" of a **Google** search. A question raised in all libraries is whether our technology is good enough to be that transparent, given the variety and complexity of search options.

For the purposes of this study, only the academic **ARL** Library Websites were visited, excluding federal and state governmental libraries. Every effort was made to reach the library homepage and not an intermediate

page of a parent institution. A search box was defined as an area in which the user could type a search term to query a specific target. The total number and type of search targets were recorded for each library. The scope of a library homepage was defined as including any content available without navigating away from the page. Thus a site employing some type of client side solution like **JavaScript** to present tabs for various searches was counted as having multiple search targets on the homepage. If a site contained tabs that resulted in the loading of a separate Webpage, the subsequent page was not counted as a separate search target available on the library homepage. While the difference in the two might seem minor in terms of click-count, the client side solution keeps the user embedded in the same context of the main library homepage. The presence of a search box in that top level space was viewed as an indicator of the library's confidence in, and value of, an external search option.

From Zero to Ten Search Targets on the Homepage

Interestingly, 11.71% of the Websites visited offered no search option at all from the top level. Given the issues raised about competing goals of library Websites, it is easy to conceive that the risks of such a choice could outweigh the potential benefits. Perhaps the message in this decision is that the library search environment is simply too complicated to be consolidated at the top level of a library Website.

Almost three-quarters (71.17%) of the libraries visited offered one to four search targets. More than twenty percent (21.62%) of the libraries offered a single search target. Among the libraries with only one search target on their homepage, 15 had a search for the catalog, eight featured a "search this site" option, and one employed a federated search utility. Eleven percent of library Websites had five or six search targets, and the remaining 5% of libraries visited had seven to ten search targets. From a design standpoint, libraries tended to limit the initial appearance of search boxes to no more than two on the homepage. In order to accommodate the additional search targets, a variety of technologies were utilized, including drop down menus, radio buttons, and **JavaScript**-driven tabs.

against the grain

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IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE: Reading, free jazz drummer, and Saturn research.
FAVORITE BOOKS: *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Hamlet*, and *Mulligan Stew*
HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: More stuff for fewer people who care.