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Technology Left Behind -- Google Scholar and the OpenURL

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How to Order the "10 Reasons" Poster

"10 Reasons Why the Internet is No Substitute for a Library" (American Libraries, April, 2001) has been turned into a 4-color, 22" x 36" poster (ALA "READ" size poster) and is available for $10 each (this includes shipping and handling). Bulk orders are available on request and begin at 16 or more orders for $8 each. (South Carolina residents, add applicable sales tax.)

If interested, please respond to <herringm@winthrop.edu>. Check or money order is acceptable and should be made out to "Winthrop University." (You may also send a purchase order, or we will bill you.) They should be mailed to Winthrop University, Dacus Library, Attn: MY Herring, Rock Hill, SC, 29733.

Technology Left Behind — Google Scholar and the OpenURL

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Google Scholar

Last November, Google released Google Scholar, a new search tool focused on finding scholarly information on the Web. Unlike Google's basic search, Google Scholar searches a finite set of Web pages containing scholarly information and documents. Google Scholar analyzes the contents of a Web page and extracts citations, which are made available on the results screen, even if the document itself is not available online. "This means your search results may include citations of older works and seminal articles that appear only in books or other offline publications." (http://scholar.google.com/scholar/about.html)

While Google has not released the details about what titles, publishers, and vendors are included in the database, searches include results from organizations such as the American Physiological Society and the American Pediatric Society. Google Scholar also searches electronic journal collections from publishers, like the Oxford University Press and Springer, as well as aggregated collections via services like IngentaConnect. Other resources cited in Google Scholar include open-access journals, like the Journal of Biological Chemistry, as well as subscription publications. One search even included a hit on a paper provided on the Web page of the Chemistry Department at the University of Wisconsin. Overall, the database covers a broad spectrum of resources, but without specific indexing information, which Google does not provide at this time, it is difficult to evaluate the completeness of the database.

Google does not define anywhere on its Website what qualifies as scholarly and what does not. I ran a few searches in the database to see if I could get some idea of how well Google had pinpointed what is and is not "scholarly material." I searched for Leslie Marmon Silko, a prominent Native American author of both fiction and non-fiction material. Without quotation marks around Silko's name the search retrieved 577 hits. The first ten hits were citations to books authored by Silko or anthologies to which she has contributed. The eleventh citation was to a book review in a journal in Project Muse.

I then conducted a search for the chef Jamie Oliver, author of a number of cookbooks and host of the popular cooking show, The Naked Chef, which airs on the Food network. I searched the phrase "Jamie Oliver Naked Chef" without quotation marks or Boolean operators. The search retrieved 27 results, most of which were citations to Oliver's cookbooks. However, there was an article from the European Journal of Cultural Studies, a Sage publication, on British television programming, and another article from the British Food Journal on celebrity endorsement. While I consider Jamie Oliver's cookbooks to be less scholarly than Leslie Marmon Silko's novels and essays, there is an argument to be made that the articles mentioning him are scholarly in nature.

Google Scholar sorts results in relevancy order, which is determined by "the full text of each article as well as the article's author, the publication in which the article appeared and how often it has been cited in scholarly literature." (http://scholar.google.com/scholar/about.html) Unfortunately, there is no way to sort the results into any other order, such as by author or date, a feature that would certainly be useful for academics in any field.

Using the OpenURL

Almost immediately following the release of Google Scholar, librarians and information professionals began searching for ways to point their users from citations in Google Scholar to their libraries' resources.

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<http://www.against-the-grain.com> 83
Within weeks of the release Peter Binkley at the University of Alberta Libraries wrote an extension for Firefox that adds OpenURL links to the Google Scholar results screen. Binkley’s extension scrapes the Google Scholar results screen, parses a citation out of the data, and builds an OpenURL to a designated link resolver (http://www.ualberta.ca/~pbinkley/gso/). Art Rhyno at the Leddy Library at the University of Windsor wrote a similar bookmarklet designed to “add a proxy address to the search results on a Google Scholar page of results.” (http://webvoy.uwindsor.ca:8087/artblog/librarycog/1100880268) Coupled together these bookmarklets created the base for the Windsor-Alberta-Georgia Google Scholar Localization project (WAG the Dog), an open-source project available via SourceForge (http://gslocal.sourceforge.net/). While the WAG the Dog bookmarklet is effective, it requires a great deal of user intervention, and a more seamless method of providing OpenURL links would be more effective.

This past spring, Google began pursuing OpenURL linking on its own, launching a pilot program testing OpenURL linking within Google Scholar in conjunction with several link resolver vendors, including Ex Libris, Serials Solutions, and 1Cate. Initially, OpenURLs from Google Scholar included only Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) and PubMed IDs, leading to a high rate of failure when retrieving the full text. Since then, Google has begun transmitting additional pieces of metadata, like title, author, volume, and issue information, and the resolution rate has improved.

There are distinct advantages to setting up Google as a source in a library’s link resolver, such as the ability to push services out to users in a way that has never been permitted before and at the same time brand those services to the library. Google’s implementation of the OpenURL allows an integration of a Web search engine and the library’s resources that has not previously been possible. However, Google’s policies and procedures for setting up the OpenURL links have created a stir and are hotly debated in the library and information science world.

Before Google will turn on OpenURL linking for a library, it requires the library to submit its electronic full text holdings. Submitting the holdings themselves is a relatively simple process, as Google has expedited processes for this with many link resolver vendors. It is how Google has put those holdings to use that has created controversy. Using the holdings information Google determines if the electronic full text is available via the library’s subscriptions, and, if it is, the link to the resolver appears prominently in the citation in a large font. If the electronic full text is not available, the link to the resolver still appears but it is in a smaller font face and buried below the citation. Libraries have control over the wording of those links, but they cannot use a button or some other image to represent the link.

Many libraries are reluctant to share their holdings with Google, feeling that the policy is against the principle of the OpenURL. Other issues of concern are the lack of information about what Scholar is indexing, the completeness of the OpenURLs Google is sending, and the placement of the two OpenURL links.

Conclusion

Google Scholar is not bad, but it’s not great either. It is what it is, a Web search engine focused on scholarly materials. Based upon the few simple searches I conducted, the materials cited in the database seemed either scholarly themselves or at least related to the scholarly materials in some way. But we are still talking about a search engine, and I still want my patrons to approach it with the same caution that they would any other search engine for all the same reasons (incomplete indexing, lower quality metadata, unreliable linking, “scholarliness” is subjective, Web-crawlers can only do so much, etc.).

However, my gut feeling is that no matter what I tell the students I see at the reference desk they are going to hear the words “Google” and “Scholar” and think they have found the cure for what ails them. One of the reasons setting up Google Scholar as a source in our link resolver is appealing is the fact that once users perform a search we can at least point them back to our full text electronic resources, print subscriptions, and document delivery services. On the other hand, I don’t particularly want to have to maintain our electronic subscriptions in another location. Nor do I want Google to bury the link to the link resolver if the electronic full text is not available through our subscriptions.

The OpenURL link should appear in the same place every time. While we have not set up our link resolver in Google Scholar at this time, it is easy to foresee that we will need to think about the need to set up the resolver for the OpenURL links to our resources.

This conflict between libraries and Google over the best way to implement the OpenURL in Google Scholar is a demonstration in the fundamental differences in a library’s philosophy and Google’s philosophy. Google’s main priority is to get the user to the electronic full text, and their policies on the submission of holdings information and the format of the OpenURL links reflect that. While as librarians, our main priority is to find the appropriate copy whatever its format, print, electronic, microform, or a document ordered through a document delivery service.

If you are interested in further reading about Google Scholar and the OpenURL, these issues are explored in greater detail, including interviews with librarians, link resolver vendors, and Google Scholar, in an article by myself and Jill Grego, Electronic Resources Librarian at the University of Alabama in an upcoming issue of Searcher Magazine.

Other Articles of Interest


