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Back Talk -- The Unemployed Librarian

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Standards Column — Toward an Open Discovery Ecosystem

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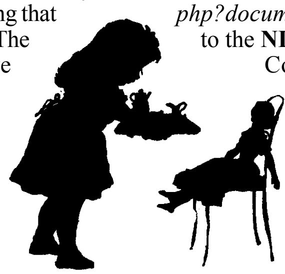
One of the challenges of buying complex digital content products or services is that it is often difficult to know in advance everything that is included with the product. To be fair, this was often the case in complex analog products as well. However, it seems more problematic with electronic products — perhaps because there is no "under the hood" that most of us can access easily.

The rapid explosion in digitization efforts and the reduction of costs of digital storage has made it possible to store the entire text of collections as large as the one held by the **Library of Congress** in something that could easily fit on your desktop. The problem from a user's perspective is knowing exactly what is included when dealing with content at that scale. This is most certainly the case with the next generation of indexed library search services that have come to the market over the past few years. Each vendor has to work out a relationship with each publisher that covers what and how much of that provider's content is included in the index and crawled regularly for updates. For a variety of competitive reasons, few organizations are willing or able to discuss what is included in their index. This problem is not limited to subscribed index services, but also exists for large search engines, such as Google, Google Scholar, Bing and Yahoo!. The "secret sauce" of each index, namely what is included, is considered a trade secret, and subscribing libraries don't have the specifics of what they are getting.



Not that long ago, no librarian would have purchased a product where they didn't know what was indexed or abstracted. How could a librarian know or trust what was included and whether that content met the library's acquisition criteria, patron needs or expectations? A&I providers routinely provided detailed documentation on their databases, such as Dialog's Bluesheets (*http://library.dialog.com/bluesheets/*), and distributed regular updates of content additions or deletions Dialog still issues Bluesheets in digital form, but most of this type of documentation has been added to the rubbish pile of former library workflow tools along with card catalogs, punch cards, and 3 1/2-inch computer disks.

The lack of knowledge about content inclusion is not the only challenge for our community related to indexed search services. Among other concerns are: How can we simplify the process of getting the sharing agreements negotiated? What protocols are available to routinely provide full levels of content to generate the index? How does one assess usage metrics on index search services? How are rights and access to be governed for these services? How can publisher or library branding be preserved in such an intermediated context?

During the **ALA Annual Conference** in New Orleans a group of roughly 20 interested people led by **Marshall Breeding** (**Vanderbilt University**) and **Oren Bet-Arie** and **Jenny Walker** (**Ex Libris**) gathered to discuss issues related to indexed search service. Those discussions highlighted the problems mentioned above and other concerns of the attendees. As a direct result of that meeting, the group brought a new work proposal (*http://www.niso.org/apps/group_public/document.php?document_id=8020&wg_abbrev=odi*) to the **NISO** Discovery to Delivery Topic Committee and the **NISO** membership. That proposal was approved in November 2011, and a new Open Discovery Initiative (ODI) project was launched to develop standards and recommended practices for next-generation library discovery services. The project aims to develop and promote adoption of a consistent vocabulary regarding all the elements involved, establish some clarity in the business rules that apply to the content once indexed, and develop clear descriptors regarding the extent of indexing performed for each item or collection of content and the level of availability of the content.

NISO issued a call for participation in the ODI project and response was overwhelming, giving some indication of the importance the community sees in this work. The working group formed in January is chaired by **Marshall Breeding** (**Vanderbilt University**) and **Jenny Walker** (Consultant) and consists of representatives of libraries, publishers, content aggregators and distributors, and discovery-service providers.

Related to this project, **NFAIS** recently released a draft Code of Practice for Discovery Services (*http://info.nfais.org/info/codedraft1312012.pdf*) for public comment on February 1. The draft code addresses some of the business practice and policy questions related to discovery services. Among the topics covered are: contractual rights and obligations of the parties, inclusion of content, identification of content ownership, description of ranking basis, content included in the index, description of service components, and authentication. **NISO** and **NFAIS** have historically worked closely together, and this draft code of practice is being reviewed by the **NISO** ODI group. It is expected the **NFAIS** and forthcoming **NISO** recommendations will be complementary rather than overlapping or contradictory.

Another related project is the **JISC/RLUK** Discovery initiative (*http://discovery.ac.uk*). This **JISC**-funded project was launched in May 2011 to "create 'a metadata ecology' that will support better access to vital collections data in libraries, archives and museums and facilitate new services" within the UK. The project is focused primarily on the availability of core metadata for search and discovery based on principles of open and available metadata. While it is not specifically focused on the discovery services per se, building consistent metadata structures for cultural content contributes to strength of discovery services.

Providing understandable and usable access to digital materials is a critical service that requires the engagement of all members of our community. From the efficient distribution of quality metadata from publishers, to the unbiased presentation of search results, to the appropriate use and measurement of these services, a great deal of coordination is required. This is where organizations like **NFAIS** and **NISO** can best serve the community — by fostering community consensus about the underlying business practices and technology.

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As I thought back on the perhaps hundreds of interviews I participated in over the past 40 or so years to fill jobs in the libraries where I have worked, I fondly remembered the times when the interviewee and their resume turned out to be the same person. But I also found that often the applicant and the resume had little in common because she or he was simply so nervous that they couldn't communicate clearly. At times I sensed that hidden in some of the people who failed the interview process were individuals who could have made a great contribution to my library but who could not sell themselves sufficiently well to gain the support of their direct supervisors or potential colleagues. Instead, someone else got the job because they had a greater gift of gab. Clearly, for me, I can see how all of the work needed to get interviews and to prepare for interviews is worth the considerable time and energy required. I would be happy to go into further detail with those looking for a job or to put them in contact with a free center like the one at which I serve, but located nearer to where they live. Email me at <anthony.ferguson185@gmail.com>. In any event, good luck with your job search.

Back Talk — The Unemployed Librarian

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Now that I am more or less retired, it seems someone has pinned a large bullseye target with the caption "Give Him Some Work" to my shirt (volunteer no-pay jobs of course). For the first few months my wife took advantage of the opportunity to add scores of tasks to my "to-do" lists. Later, others joined in the fun. In addition to all the work of moving our household from Hong Kong, this summer I also helped paint a house for a needy family. In the fall, I helped pack and move another family to Texas to find work. At Christmas I became a substitute Santa (well my girth may have made me the most qualified person around). Most recently I was encouraged to volunteer at a community employment counseling center two days a week.

While my job at the center is focused on helping people find all sorts of jobs, I have also been asked by a few friends and relatives to help the unemployed librarians in their lives find jobs. Consequently, during a recent short course on how to become a more effective job coach, I began to reflect on the situation for librarians generally, and more specifically what they should be doing to find new positions.

At the short course several instructors spoke about the worst and the best ways of finding jobs. A quick search of the Web after the course confirmed what I had heard during these sessions. The **University of Minnesota Law School Career and Professional Development Center**, for example, have identified the five worst and best ways of finding a job.

Worst ways:

1. Using the Internet. In their study only 4.1% of applicants found this to be effective.

2. Randomly mail out resumes to possible employers. Only 7% of applicants were successful using this technique.

3. Answering ads in professional or trade journals – again 7% found this useful.

4. Answering local newspaper ads. From 5-24% found this useful.

5. Going through a private employment agency – again another range of 5 to 28% of persons found this to be successful.

http://blog.lib.umn.edu/lawcso/vocare/2007/04/the_five_worst_best_ways_to_fi.html

Thinking about the situation for librarians, I found some of the above to be counter-intuitive. Perhaps the problem with methods 1, 3, and 5 is that they typically attract the most competition with only one winner possible. As for method number 2, blindly sending reams of resumes to libraries might give the applicant an illusion of making progress, but they seldom result in a job. New MLS graduates often resort to this course of action. In my own case when I first received my MLS union card, I too mailed out 40 or so resumes with carefully crafted cover letters, but I experienced the same result: a waste of postage stamps and expensive cream-colored stationary. While methods 4 and 5 might be effective for job seekers living in cities/states with lots of libraries, for everyone else, local newspapers produce too few opportunities to make this an effective approach.

Best ways:

1. Networking. Job seekers need to ask their friends and acquaintances to help them find job leads. Thirty-three percent of the participants in the Minnesota study found this to be the most cost-effective way of finding a job.

2. Knocking on doors. This was found to be effective up to 47% of the time because the door knocker learns about jobs which otherwise would have been filled internally, or which had not yet been posted.

3. Calling prospective employers on the telephone to ask whether there are job opening matching your qualifications. Surprisingly to me, this seems to be successful 69% of the time.

4. A variation of number 3 above where a group of new graduates split up the work of calling employers to find leads which turned out to produce good ones 84% of the time.

5. Undertaking what they call a "life-changing job hunt." This involves assessing what the applicant really wants to do in life, then talking to people in those jobs, and finally spending the time to find just that sort of position.

The volunteer job placement center where I serve, agrees that networking is critical. A basic requirement of the center is that clients must identify at least 25 people who might be willing to help them. Since the typical response to this request is "I don't know that many people who can or would be willing to help," clients are given a list of 17 types of people others had found willing to help them — e.g., professional colleagues (like the people you meet at the **Charleston Conference**), friends, church members, former coworkers, classmates, neighbors, etc. They are also required to get contact information for each and to prioritize these prospects — and then start at the top of the list and work their way down. If they don't have interviews/a job by the time they get to priority 25, they are asked to come up with another 25 people who might be willing to come to their aid. The center's experience is that those willing to put in this sort of "sweat equity" will get interviews. Applicants have to understand that finding a job is a full-time job and not just something they do for one or two hours/days a week.

But getting interviews is only the beginning of the pathway to success. Concurrent with their networking activities, job seekers must also begin preparing for interviews by (a) identifying their most important career goals both for their own benefit and so they can communicate them to prospective employers; (b) developing an exhaustive list of their professional accomplishments up to the present time (this will not only enable the applicant to give concrete examples of what they can do but this process will help rebuild the discouraged person's self-esteem); (c) listing their generic skills so they can further illustrate how they can help their new employer's own goals; (d) describing the specific sorts of jobs that interest them; (e) determining what additional skills they might need to make securing such jobs easier; (f) developing a series of "Me in 30 Seconds" statements which can be used in interviews to explain her/his personality and capabilities; (g) developing a concise resume; and (h) then putting together a plan or map the job seeker will follow to find a job and achieve their long term goals — e.g., plan your work, work your plan.

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