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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 discrete tension can arise in the design of a 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 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 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.

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 libraries visited, a variety of technologies were utilized, and targets. From a design standpoint, libraries tended to limit the initial appearance of search options at the 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 visited 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" target, and six for "search this site" 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.