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People Profile: Ellen McCullough

Editor

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Search engines are everywhere, and they are meeting expectations, according to Needham, who cited the Pew Internet & American Life Project and ComScore Networks August 2004 study, “The Popularity and Importance of Search Engines” (http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Data_Memo_Searchengines.pdf). According to the study, US Internet users turn to search engines for “convenience and effectiveness.” Eighty-seven percent find what they’re seeking most of the time, expressing “satisfaction, trust, self-confidence.” Forty-four percent use search engines to discover “valuable information that they absolutely need.” In June 2004, there were 3.9 billion searches, an average of 33 searches per user, an average 4.4 searches per visit, and an average visit time of 41 minutes. Using search engines is second only to e-mail as the most popular online activity.

Search engines are so ubiquitous and pervasive, according to Needham, that they now condition users’ expectations of information resources. Users have grown accustomed to an identifiable, easy to find and use search box; a default to all subjects; formats and full-text; formulaic relevance ranking vs. mere raw keyword counting; and self-organizing results informed by custom taxonomies, with word proximity parameters.

Undergraduates are the most likely adopters of eBooks... but they don’t find them.

For the most part, the eBooks that a search engine user can find are texts in the public domain, mostly pre-1923, from Bartleby and other advertising-sponsored reference resources, as well as such consumer purchase options as Amazon, eBooks.com and individual publishers. While search engine users can find these online, the riches available at their local libraries, subscription-based content, eBook platforms, databases or aggregated collections, are, for the most part, invisible to them.

How can we enable discovery of eBooks? One effort Needham cited is the Open WorldCat project. OCLC opened WorldCat records to search engine indexing, and started with a pilot that indexed 2 million abridged records for most-cataloged books. They had more than 3 million inbound links in September, and expanded to index all 57 million WorldCat records in early November.

Google Print may also enable discovery of eBooks. Google takes all types of print books (reference, scholarly, technical, trade) and makes them more discoverable by allowing end users to view brief slices of the full-text content. Hits on the content refer the end user to an appropriate sales channel as designated by the publisher of the work. Users have also requested that these results link to libraries.

Needham noted that it’s up to the eBook and e-journal publishers and aggregators to make their content available for indexing (and hence, discovery and use) by search engine users. This would require replication of the e-journal’s landing pages for abstracts (book description, sample chapter, perhaps controlled full-text browsing). Libraries would benefit from a library locator to authentication solution, which Needham described as “Open WorldCat meets ATHENS.” Furthermore, search engines should be welcomed into the library family, as library users are already using them as their launching pad for research. Search engines are like any database: as accurate and useful as their users—particularly gate-keeping users—make them.

Needham concluded by saying, “Publishers and librarians need to step forward to lead the next stage of the Internet’s development, wherein the free Web and deep Web become intertwined, and search becomes the organizing principle of information resources and dominant mode of information discovery.”

So where does this leave us? In my opinion, it could be that users want their eBooks and e-content to behave more like search engines, but search engines need to adopt the best features of online content in order to deliver the highest value in this regard. The most thoughtful providers of online content will focus on presenting a well-arranged collection of vetted resources that will integrate well with existing library resources and will ensure that the e-content becomes both more than the sum of its parts and more than just an online representation of the print version. If search engines want to be more like libraries, they need to deliver meaning and context, in addition to results.

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