

John Law, IWR Horizons 2008.

### **Observing Students Researchers in their Native Habitat**

Libraries face enormous challenges in the information age. Partly due to the mass adoption of information technologies, and the development of highly refined open-web resources like Google, today's users are savvy about online applications and have firmly established expectations for electronic library resources. When library resources don't live up to these expectations, the entire library community suffers.

The proliferation of electronic content has shifted the balance of power in libraries to end-users – today's researchers who appreciate and expect the simplicity of open-web search-engine interfaces and the ease with which content can be accessed. In contrast, when confronted with a bewildering array of electronic library resources, with little knowledge of what the resources are or how best to sort through them, library research can quickly become a frustrating, unproductive exercise that irretrievably degrades the user experience.

### **The importance of the user experience**

Recent research carried out by ProQuest showed that high value is placed on the user experience when working with research tools. Users have expectations of what their experience *should* be, and therefore tend to choose the resources that meet or exceed these expectations.

While users recognise that library electronic resources offer higher quality, more credible content, the library's e-resources are not readily available to the research process in any compelling fashion. To access the appropriate resources, users must onerously navigate through the library website to get at the right resources for their particular research task, which in most cases entails wading through pages of resource listings in order to determine where even to begin their research. Most users don't have this level of tolerance and why would they given their unencumbered experience using commercial web resources.

The lack of user-focused access and discovery solutions is widespread. Research materials cover the entire subject-matter spectrum; there may be thousands of electronic resources available, and deciphering which are appropriate for any given research task is complicated. The unintended result is that the sheer volume of online library resources discourages use.

Barriers to information access leave users with the impression that the library doesn't contain appropriate, useful and accessible research resources. This not only impacts on the users, but on the providers of research databases, such as ProQuest. In addition, they diminish the value of the library in general.

### **Why users choose Google**

ProQuest carried out extensive analysis to examine the role of the library in research. Our studies showed that if the quality of the research isn't of significant concern, users opt to use Google – even when it produces weaker research sources – when the alternative is a more time-consuming and complex task to search for superior research materials via the library. Although library electronic resources are recognised as being of higher quality and having more credible content, difficulty with

navigation, an overabundance of 'how to' guides, and poorly designed web pages all contribute to users defaulting to open web search engines for primary research.

Our findings showed that Google isn't typically used as a primary resource by most researchers. However, Google is preferred for quick look-ups, such as the URLs of known sites, seeking definitions or completing a citation for an article. However, subjects in the study clearly indicated that they did not consider Google results or information from Wikipedia to be authoritative. Rather these services are simply useful when they needed background context on a topic, a quick fact or to define an unfamiliar term.

While finding library electronic resources poses one set of problems, users consistently experience difficulty accessing the resources they do find. Simple actions, like authentication, or accessing a resource through a proxy server, can make major differences in the success of the research experience. Many users are unaware of authentication requirements or available methods yet resources may not allow full access without authentication. Another example is the library catalogue. It's intended to help users identify resources within the library, but often users don't understand the limits of the library catalogue search. They use the catalogue with the expectation that it will produce specific article-level content. Bad experiences like these often contribute to turning users to Google as a primary research source.

### **How libraries can overcome these challenges**

A well-conceived, well-executed design solution that simplifies accessibility of the growing array of resources, directs the user to the correct resources and provides unencumbered access appears to be beyond current reach. Each user comes to the library with a different research task, different needs and a unique combination of resource experience and awareness. This increases the challenge libraries face in providing meaningful resource guidance that enhances the user experience, simplifies research tasks and improves resource accessibility for all library users – especially considering that users expect seamless, intuitive choices without need for reading screen language, online help or user guides.

Educating users about the particular strengths and weaknesses of library resources, their intended uses, and the discovery and selection of more appropriate alternatives should continue to be a priority for libraries. One highly effective strategy for promoting the proper use of electronic resources is library marketing. In the university community, library marketing is often conducted informally. For example, an instructional librarian may visit students in class to deliver much needed information. Effective outreach programmes that are designed to increase user awareness of library resources, and programmes that encourage teaching staff to incorporate library resources into their classroom presentations can all improve the library research experience and, indeed, the proficiency of researchers.

Guided tours of library resources, well-constructed resource access pages, and e-resource services designed to simplify the process of discovering and selecting appropriate research databases; these are all ways in which libraries can potentially improve the user's research experience.

Collectively, the library community and information industry need to collaborate on a concerted effort to simplify the access and discovery of electronic resources.