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## Determining Librarian Research Preferences: A Comparison Survey of Web-Scale Discovery Systems and Subject Databases

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### ABSTRACT

The success or failure of any tool, service or system used in a library is predicated on the audience it finds. While web-scale discovery systems have developed widespread adoption in academic libraries, there is a sense from librarians that they continue to be in search of their true audience. Librarians play a key role in the utilization of web-scale discovery systems, and their experiences as an end user of these systems may influence their attitudes in many ways. The survey discussed in this article looks at the attitudes librarians have toward web-scale discovery systems when using them for their personal research, including feature preferences and inquiries into opinions regarding strengths and weaknesses of the system. The results of this survey provide some insights into why some librarians struggle with the idea using of web-scale discovery systems by themselves and by the patrons with which they work.

### Introduction

Web-scale discovery systems have become almost ubiquitous in academic libraries. First introduced in in 2007 (or 2010, depending on which system one judges as a true web-scale discovery system), they were envisioned as tools or services that would improve on federated search systems and fix issues such as slow retrieval and problematic relevancy ranking of result sets (Ours, 2012) as well as re-engage users with library-supported research databases and other resources and temper the use of Google Scholar. The widespread use of web-scale discovery systems indicates they have found a place in academic libraries but who uses them, why they are used, and how well they serve library patrons is an ongoing question. Most research is focused on library patrons as the end user, but one population is often ignored – that of the librarian as researcher and end user. Despite the popularity of web-scale discovery systems with end users, librarians are often the harshest critics of web-scale discovery systems, for reasons known and unknown, sometimes valid and sometimes not. In discussions concerning web-scale discovery systems, it is frequently heard that the “other” is better – the catalog, the subject database, Google. As Elizabeth Blakesley (2016) describes in her editorial, “Cognitive Bias and the Discovery Layer”, librarian attitudes toward web-scale discovery systems may be impeding the success of these services. With little literature examining how librarians use web-scale discovery systems for their own needs, it is complicated to determine how individual preferences may influence librarian approaches when working with patrons. This article describes results from a survey that investigated whether

librarians use web-scale discovery systems for their own research, the reasons why or why not they choose to use said system and what features or functionality are preferred in a comparison with subject-specific databases.

### Literature review

A web-scale discovery system is a system that searches a single, centralized index containing metadata from a variety of sources, such as article databases and local library collections. The first of these systems, *WorldCat Local*, was released in 2007 (Vaughan, 2011). *Summon*, now owned by ProQuest, was introduced by Serials Solutions in 2009 (Breeding, 2009), followed soon after by Ex Libris' *Primo Central* and EBSCO's *EBSCOhost Discovery Service* and more recently, OCLC's *WorldCat Discovery*. Adoption of web-scale discovery systems by academic libraries grew quickly and is now widespread. Many studies of web-scale discovery systems exist and many aspects of the products have been investigated.

Usability of said systems for the end user is a frequent area of evaluation. Common findings in usability studies include issues around terminology or jargon (Bull, Craft, & Dodds, 2014; Clark, Erdmann, Ferguson, Gambrell, & Shaw-Munderback, 2016), issues around interface design (Condit Fagan, Mandernach, Nelson, Paulo, & Saunders, 2012) and a need for end user instruction (Williams & Foster, 2011).

Librarian involvement in the evaluation, implementation and post-implementation stages of web-scale discovery systems is well-documented. Teams such as the University of Nevada Las Vegas Discovery

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Task Force (Vaughan, 2012) or the Article Discovery Working Group at the University of Michigan (Bhatnagar et al., 2010) were involved in the evaluation and implementation of web-scale discovery systems at those universities. Discussions of the work of specific implementation teams are described by Foster and Williams (2012) and by Clark et al. (2016), who describes impacts on end user experience based on assumptions made by the implementation team at their university. Some studies, such as one by Guajardo, et al. includes information about post-implementation groups that monitor and refine systems over time (Guajardo, Brett, & Young, 2017).

While studies have looked at the attitudes of librarians toward web-scale discovery systems, most of those are focused on specific areas, such as librarians who do information literacy instruction (Buck & Mellinger, 2011; Buck & Steffy, 2013). As Buck and Steffy report, respondents to their survey tended to teach web-scale discovery systems to lower-level undergraduates but few did to graduate students or faculty. Reasons for not teaching it included relevancy of results or lack of disciplinary coverage. A survey done by Nichols et al. in 2016 found similar results to Buck and Steffy, and also noted that few institutions require librarians to use a discovery system as part of their instructional repertoire (Nichols, Crist, Sherriff, & Allison, 2017). A few studies are geographically based, such as Aharony and Prebor's survey of librarians in Israel which reported that there was not widespread implementation of discovery tools and that possible satisfaction with said systems may be dependent on respondents' attitudes or satisfaction with the tools (Aharony & Prebor, 2015).

The body of literature on user behavior, usability and other aspects of web-scale discovery systems is deepening. However, no research has been found that explores librarians as end users of such systems themselves.

## Methodology

In order to determine whether librarians prefer to use web-scale discovery systems or subject-specific databases, a survey was developed using Doll's End-User Computing Satisfaction survey as a framework. Doll's survey is centered on five categories of questioning: content, accuracy, format, ease of use and timeliness (Doll & Torkzadeh, 1988). Doll's survey uses only twelve questions for those five areas, but they are quite general (e.g., "Is the system accurate", "Does the system provide sufficient information") and could be confusing when applied to the systems of interest. In order to elicit better understanding of the questions concerning the factors of interest used in this survey and to improve clarity of them for respondents, the number of questions was expanded beyond Doll's set and included more specific terminology related to web-scale discovery systems. Table 1 lists the survey questions to appropriate Doll's categories.

Additional questions about respondents' opinions toward both web-scale discovery systems and subject-specific databases, as well as

exposure to web-scale discovery systems were asked. No subject-specific database or platform was listed by name as examples in the survey. With an unknown population of respondents, there was a concern that listing specific databases had the potential to influence or limit the possible respondent pool. Additionally, there was a recognition that common or core databases used by librarians for their research vary widely and listing specific databases could skew responses. The full survey instrument is included in Appendix A.

A survey was used as it was determined to be the best mechanism to elicit information across a potentially large population. Once the survey was created, it was tested and refined. The final version was submitted to the author's Institution Review Board for approval to proceed. Once approval was given and the survey posted in an online system, invitations to participate were sent to a number of library focused email lists in October 2016. A variety of lists was chosen, as librarians of all types may do research for their own needs and interests. Questions were a mix of Likert-type responses and open-ended, free text comments. When the survey closed, the free text questions were coded to identify common themes in the comments.

## Data analysis

The number of people who responded and completed the survey was 287. Although the survey invitation was sent to a variety of library email lists, including those focused on technical services and public services work as well as general lists, responses overwhelmingly came from public services librarians with reference responsibilities. The next highest areas were "Other", which included those who were solo librarians or whose work crossed multiple areas, and library administration.

The majority of respondents worked at libraries that use a web-scale discovery systems; *EBSCOhost Discovery Service* was the most commonly stated system, closely followed by ProQuest's *Summon* and Ex Libris' *Primo Central*. 65% of respondents worked at libraries who had used a web-scale discovery systems for at least three years, the rest of the respondents worked at libraries who either had no web-scale discovery system or had used one for less than three years.

## Feature preferences

The first question in the survey asked about respondents' preferences toward specific features and functions of systems used for research. For each feature there were four options, "subject-specific databases," "web-scale discovery systems," "it depends on the search" and "they provide the same experience," from which respondents could choose to indicate if they felt a system was better at managing said feature. Respondents were asked to consider each feature or function within the context of their own research, not that of students or other researchers or faculty with whom they might collaborate. For only one

**Table 1**  
Survey Questions as related to Doll's categories.

Doll's end user computing satisfaction categories				
Content	Ease of Use	Format	Accuracy	Timeliness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Robust content</li> <li>• Inclusion of local collection information</li> <li>• Known Item searching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intuitive search interface</li> <li>• Basic search</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utility of pre-search limiters</li> <li>• Relevancy of search results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy to evaluate</li> <li>• Search results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Currency of content</li> <li>• Stability of system</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advanced search</li> <li>• Intuitive navigation of search results</li> <li>• Inclusion of special features</li> <li>• Integration Into Your Library's Web Site</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Availability of Post-Search Filters and/or Facets</li> <li>• Clear identification of data sources</li> <li>• Clear identification of the availability of content for your library</li> <li>• Usefulness of available post-search limiters/facets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification of the record type in results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• System downtime</li> </ul>

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