

Discovery Layers in Law Libraries

A progress report on how our institutions are implementing this new technology

By Valeri Craigle

Law libraries have made significant progress in the implementation of discovery layer technology in the past few years. A recent survey of technical services law librarians showed that 52 percent of respondents are either currently using discovery layers in their libraries or are in the process of implementing them.

Law libraries in particular are faced with unique challenges in the selection, implementation, and deployment of these new tools. The purpose of this article is to provide an update on the status of discovery layers in law libraries and to address some of the issues specific to discovery layers in the legal information environment.

A Single Point of Access

At the 2008 AALL Conference in Portland, Oregon, I attended a session on discovery layers for law libraries. The presentation focused on three systems: Encore (Innovative Interfaces), WorldCat Local (OCLC), and Primo (Ex Libris). I noticed only one or two hands go up when the presenter asked who had implemented a discovery layer in their libraries. A couple of years went by, and I became curious as to whether any progress had been made. I wanted to know if this new technology was having an impact, especially since I was part of a discovery layer implementation at my own institution.

I am often asked what a discovery layer is and what it does. On his blog, Lorcan Dempsey defines a discovery layer as a tool that “provides a single point of access to the full library collection across bought, licensed, and digital materials” (<http://orweblog.oclc.org/archives/002116.html>). Within this simple definition underlies a complex process for making this “single point of access” possible.

Discovery layers are complex, multilayered systems that harvest and aggregate data from a number of information sources owned or licensed by a library. After harvesting and aggregation, the data is then indexed and stored in “the cloud,” according

to the “Federated search” entry on Wikipedia. There it becomes available to search queries.

Discovery layers also interpret resource-licensing information to determine access rights. This process is unlike the meta-search or federated search concept, which requires the system to separately index and process information from sources in real time. This slows the search process considerably. It is primarily the ability to draw pre-indexed data from the cloud that sets discovery layers apart in speed and efficiency from meta-search or federated search systems.

Though discovery layer systems are complicated on the back end, the front end offers simplicity. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of the discovery layer interface is the Google-like search box, which performs a unified search across library resources. It’s no longer necessary to send users to multiple locations to search for library materials; the discovery layer does it all in one place.

The simplicity of the search box, however, can be deceiving. If the topic is broad, a basic search often returns thousands—even tens of thousands—of results, which may include articles, e-journal titles, print resources, and digital photographs. Confronted with this plethora of information, users may feel frustrated and overwhelmed.

Discovery layer interfaces address the information overload problem by offering a menu of “facets,” according to Mike Padilla’s April 2008 *Digital Web Magazine* article, “User Interface Implementations of Faceted Browsing.” Faceting is now a relatively ubiquitous strategy for browsing the contents of a website. Online retailers, for example, use facets to guide shoppers through the products in an online store. Amazon is a prime example: It offers a faceted menu on the left-hand side of the webpage, which browses books, movies, electronics, toys, etc.

Similarly, library patrons can utilize discovery layer facets to focus their search on a particular item’s location, author, subject, or date range, or they

can combine facets to increase specificity. I should note that relevancy is usually the default by which search results are sorted and displayed in a discovery layer. However, options are available for sorting results alphabetically, by date, by author, etc.

Discovery Layers in Law Libraries Survey

To better understand the status of discovery layer implementation in law libraries, I distributed a brief survey via email to AALL’s Online Bibliographic Services Special Interest Section (OBS-SIS) and Technical Services Special Interest Section (TS-SIS) (see full results of the survey online at www.aallnet.org/mainmenu/Publications/spectrum/Vol-16/No-3). The survey contained the following questions: (1) Does your library currently use a discovery layer interface for the catalog? (2) Which discovery layer interface does your library use? (3) To the best of your knowledge, which legal information sources have been activated for searching via your discovery layer interface?

The survey received 58 responses. A surprisingly large number of respondents, 52 percent, said that they were either in current implementation or working toward implementation of a discovery layer. At 44 percent, Encore was by far the most popular discovery layer system. When asked which legal resources had been activated for searching via the discovery layer, 41 percent of respondents simply said they didn’t know, and 38 percent said they had activated HeinOnline. Survey results are provided in an online supplement to this article.

Along with the responses, I received 23 comments, which basically fell into four categories: (1) those who are considering implementing a discovery layer, (2) those in the middle of the implementation process, (3) those fully implemented, and (4) undecided.

Faceting was an attractive feature to those in the consideration phase, as articulated by one respondent: “One thing we are looking for is better handling of genre/form and geographic facets, as well as better integration of federated search results.”

In-process implementers expressed frustration with the lack of legal information databases available for activation within the system.

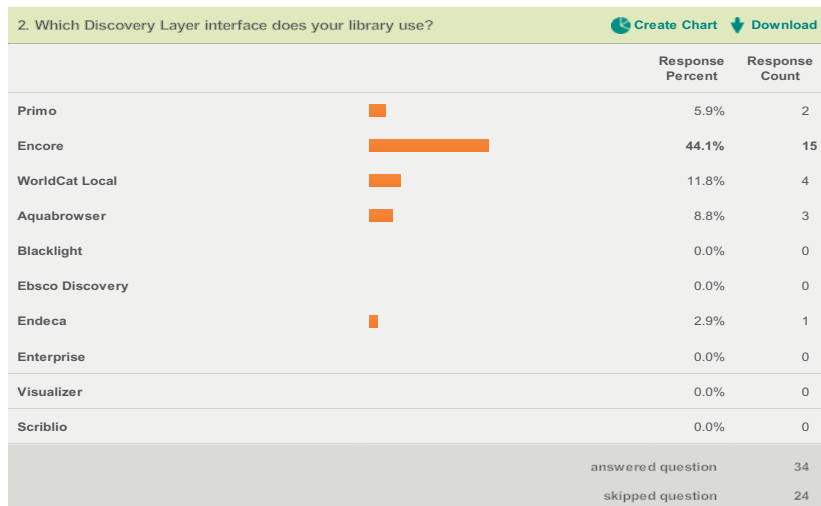
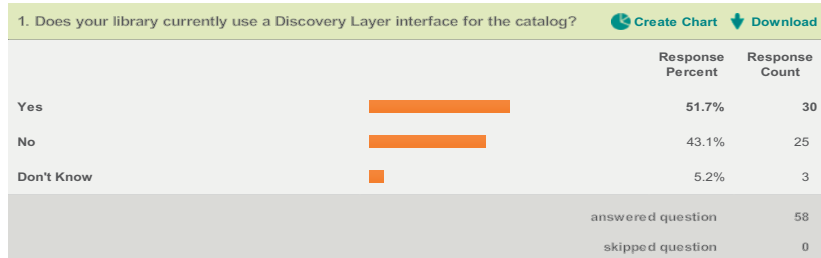


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Response Summary

Total Started Survey: 58
Total Completed Survey: 58 (100%)

PAGE: 1



the experience we had with activating legal information resources in our discovery layer, which served not just the law school, but the entire campus community.

One of the things we had not considered was whether it was a good idea to make resources “discoverable” even if they were not accessible to all users of the system. Westlaw and Lexis, for example, are the most frequently used resources at the college of law. Yet activating these resources in the discovery layer was impractical because our licensing agreement restricted access to law students and faculty. Because we were part of a larger campus-wide implementation, it made no sense to activate these sources for discovery if access was not available to the campus as a whole. Fortunately, we were able to activate HeinOnline, LexisNexis Academic, LegalTrac, and the Index to Legal Periodicals as the licenses for databases offered campus-wide access.

Also surprising was the level of difficulty experienced by some staff and faculty in learning the new system. As mentioned earlier, the volume of information in pre-faceted, pre-filtered search results can be overwhelming. The old catalog, which retrieved a manageable list of print and some electronic resources, provided a level of comfort for the less tech-savvy users. But with time and training, we found that it was possible to build the skills necessary for people to gain a sense of control over the bulk of information.

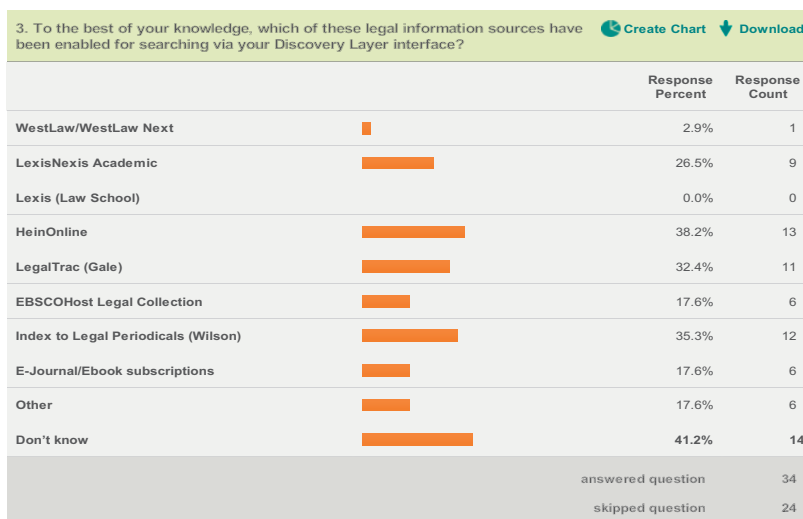
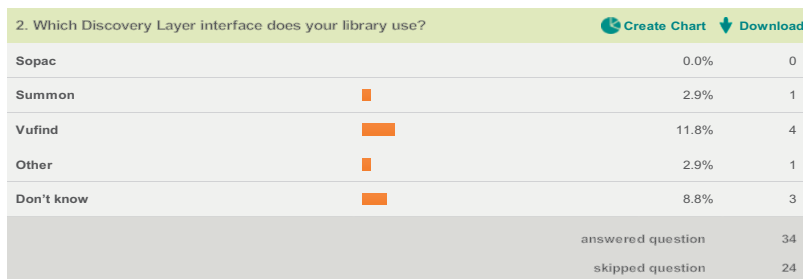
HeinOnline was noted as the most frequently activated database, while Westlaw and Lexis were the least likely to be activated.

Those in post-implementation were pleased with the cross-database article searching and the ability for users to “see search results from selected top legal and social sciences databases alongside results from our catalog.” Other libraries were incorporating local materials from their institutional repositories, the contents of which include images, newspapers, open access journals, and other materials.

The undecided group echoed the concerns of other respondents about the lack of legal resources available in discovery layer systems. Some comments also indicated confusion about who bears the responsibility for negotiating contracts between discovery layer companies and legal vendors/publishers. One respondent said that in her experience, the software companies and vendors themselves seemed confused about the issue.

Issues and Implications for Law Libraries

While the idea of offering a unified search across library resources is attractive, the reality is that unforeseen issues may arise that overshadow these benefits. One example is



Lessons Learned

Discovery layers have transformed our information seeking behaviors and have given us a deeper understanding of the depth, breadth, and value of our resources. They are particularly advantageous for college undergraduates, who must work with a variety of resources across many disciplines. However, based on feedback from students, staff, and faculty at my law school, and based on my own weighing

of the issues involved with implementation, I wonder if discovery layers in law libraries introduce an unnecessary element of complexity in an already complex information environment.

Most concerning are the restrictive and expensive licensing policies of the largest legal information publishers, whose materials are by and large unrepresented in discovery layer systems because of these restrictions. What is the

benefit of marketing such a tool to our students and faculty if their most vital sources of information are nowhere to be found in the system? I would urge law libraries, particularly academic law libraries that are part of a larger campus-wide implementation, to take these issues into consideration. ■

Valeri Craigle (craiglev@law.utah.edu) is access technologies librarian at the University of Utah S.J. Quinney Law Library in Salt Lake City.

Discovery Layer in Law Libraries Survey Comments:

- We are considering changing our cataloging system, and all the systems on your list are on our list of possibles. However, at present we are using a system that doesn't have that functionality.
- We anticipate purchasing Encore at some point in the future. One thing we are looking for is better handling of genre/form and geographic facets, as well as better integration of federated search results.
- We aren't technically on Encore yet, but are very close. We also requested connectors be developed for our BNA databases.
- We expect to add access to HeinOnline when our system vendor is finished testing and has access in general release.
- We are in the process of implementing Primo. We're not sure about Westlaw and Hein collections being enabled.
- Currently we have not enabled searching of any legal databases. However we are considering LegalTrac, HeinOnline, and Index to Legal Periodicals.
- Our VuFind implementation has not yet integrated databases with catalog and local collections. We also currently have a trial of EBSCO Discovery and have considered Summon (but can not yet afford it). None of these projects have been initiated by the law library; rather, we are able to participate as part of a larger university system.
- We have purchased Encore w/ HeinOnline as our "Synergy" option, may add more databases later. Not officially up yet, but will be in a month.
- Our AquaBrowser Library incorporates our federated searched product (360Search) as part of our search. Users can see search results from selected top legal and social sciences databases alongside results from our catalog.
- ...also includes some local materials in the institutional repository, e.g. images, newspapers, open access journals, etc.
- We have looked at Summon and Aquabrowser and have been discouraged by the vendor from pursuing because of the lack of legal sources available. They blame the publishers. We have the added problem of having Canadian packages, so even less market pressure for the publishers to open their data. Also no jurisprudence, even from free sources such as the various LII's. We would be very interested if you discover anyone who has made the legal sources available using a discovery layer.
- The Law Library does not actually use/link to the "Discovery Layer" that is provided by the Main Campus Library because it does not adequately deal with finding legal materials. I filled out the survey since we do share a catalog and one could possibly try to use it for our library from the Main Library's website.
- I think we need a discovery layer, but I am not in a position to make this happen.

