

COMMENTARY

What is the difference between a filter and a hedge?

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Abstract

Tracing the history of the naming of saved searches, this commentary proposes the use of two terms: filters and hedges.

Key words: search filters, search hedges.

Over time many different terms have been used by searchers to describe stored searches: pre-made searches, stored searches, saved searches, canned searches, saves, filters, hedges, and now, search blocks. De Jonge and Lein, in their paper “Sharing literature search blocks: status and ideas for a cooperative solution”, appear to have created the term “search block” to represent all kinds of stored searches apart from “filters” (1). Presumably a “search block” refers to a block of text that one could copy and paste into a database search box, analogous to the concept of a “text block” from the context of word processing (2). If this is the intended meaning, the term does not encompass the many useful stored searches that have been published in articles or on websites as text that must be retyped into a database.

The term “hedge”, has existed in the literature since at least 1977, roughly the beginning of mediated online literature searching in libraries, when Funk described a “hedge” to be used in “SDILINE and the storesearch capability of MEDLARS” (3). In 1980 Dolan credited the development of the hedge concept to the Medlars Management Section of the National Library of Medicine (4). She speculated that “it was because Medlars used tree structures that ‘hedge’ was chosen to define groups of related terms that occurred across all trees”, carrying on a vegetation theme.

Dolan distinguished between saved searches or “saves” and hedges. She defined “saves” as being

“concepts that will remain constant and will be used in a majority of searches...concepts such as age groups, grade levels, sex, race and nationalities”. In contrast, she defined “hedges” as “groups of terms representing concepts which occur frequently in the search requests, but not always in the same way... [and] combine terms which are synonyms, variant spellings of the same term or terms that are related in some other way”. The term “hedge” and the practice of storing searches for later use caught on. Early database providers charged searchers to store their searches, so before there were site-licenced databases, with simple and free ways of storing and re-using searches, searchers kept “hedge books”, where they wrote down the searches that they expected to re-use (5).

The searches that Dolan described as “saves” would now be called “filters”. One needs to look no further than PubMed, to see Clinical Queries identified as filters. De Jonge and Lein distinguish “filters” from their “common literature search blocks” saying that “[f]ilters are a type of search block developed for specific purposes e.g. finding studies within a clinical concept, like diagnosis, prognosis or therapy”. There is a functional difference between a stored subject search (Dolan’s hedge) and stored searches that are used to restrict subject searches to specific clinical concepts, geographic regions, study methods or population groups (Dolan’s save). However, the terms “search hedge” and “search filter” are often used interchangeably. McMaster University’s page

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entitled “Hedges”, describes “investigat[ing] ways to develop and harness search filters (“hedges”)” (6). In 2014, Beale *et al.* wrote “Search filters or hedges are search strategies developed to assist information specialists and librarians to retrieve different types of evidence from bibliographic databases” (7). However, the expert searcher community can use both of these terms to good purpose. Instead of creating new terminology, the term “filter” can continue to be used to represent the stored searches that are designed to extract articles with specific characteristics and the term “hedge” can be used, as Dolan originally defined it, to represent stored subject searches.

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