

Emerging challenges

Eight hypotheses why librarians don't like discovery



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Discovery tools have been on the market for library software for quite some time now. They promise to deliver a better search experience in a much more extensive database than traditional library catalogs and bibliographic databases. And while I would dare to say that users seem to at least like these tools better than the traditional tools, it seems that they go down much less well with librarians. It has been my personal experience in working to build a discovery solution based on open source software and also in implementing one of the commercial products, that librarians seem to have multiple reservations towards these tools. This is only mildly put, as I found when discussing my experience with discovery-people in Germany as well as internationally.

Being both a librarian and a discovery-enthusiast myself, this has me wondering. I do share many of the reservations that my colleagues have. Whatever we see out there is often far from perfect yet, for instance as far as the actual “discoverability” of large amounts of heterogeneous metadata or the level of integration of discovery systems with integrated library systems, link resolvers and other products are concerned. But for the most part, I think that these are rather interesting challenges on our road to the future. Sure, there are really early adopters of discovery tools like the University Library of Utrecht who has decided to concentrate on delivery rather than discovery (1). I tend to think of this as an avant-garde decision which could not have been made without the experience of introducing a discovery system in the first place. Putting your own metadata, licensing and availability information in the context of a discovery system (i.e. outside the system this data was born into) and actually making it work there, can be a painful experience but a necessary learning process for all departments in the library. Is that pain a convincing reason for librarians to dislike discovery tools?

This is one of the eight hypotheses I have come up with so far: librarians do not like discovery tools because...

1. They are too much extra work. As I said before, the level of integration with existing systems is not very good yet (especially when you live in Germany with a whole different landscape) and checking licensing information in the catalog, the EZB (German ERM for serials – sort of), the link resolver AND the discovery system is just too much.
2. They were not our idea in the first place. Looking at the people who are usually the drivers of decision for a discovery tool and the implementation process, I rather see IT- and management folk than cataloging or reference librarians.

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3. Strange things happen to our metadata. Our metadata for instance is being mapped from a proprietary format to MARC21. Information does in fact get lost there. Work done by librarians that is already mostly invisible work gets even more invisible. The promise that discovery tools make better use of librarian-created metadata by allowing faceted browsing has not yet been fulfilled.
4. Talking about the strange things happening to the data is hard. The guys (yes, they are mainly guys) do not speak PICA, MARC etc. But still they ooze what might be perceived as contempt for the way librarians have designed and are employing bibliographic data. For the record: I feel the disgust for this kind of data, because I know where these guys are coming from and I do appreciate the perspective they have brought (and are bringing) into library land. But I am talking about librarians and their perceptions here!
5. They mess with the concept of the catalog. A catalog used to be the inventory thing for one library, which makes the bridge between finding and obtaining items an easy one to cross. Being able to extend searches to other catalogs and bibliographic databases may be what users want, but it surely is a challenge for both discovery and delivery.
6. They are hard to use in reference interviews. Librarians know the catalog inside out; small wonder, since it was them who built the catalog. Doing a search in the catalog means getting predictable results, whereas the search in a discovery tool is a whole different matter. Many librarians I have talked to think of relevancy ranking per default as dangerous or even unethical. Not knowing how exactly the ranking algorithm works makes matters even worse.
7. They make users lazy and dumb. Sometime ago, I asked people about what they thought of the perceptions of librarians of their users. One answer I got: “they (librarians) think that users should eat their greens”. To put it less succinctly: discovery causes the mental models that users and librarians have of search processes to clash.
8. They cost us our jobs. While I have heard people stating the above-mentioned points in their speeches against discovery, I have never actually heard this particular argument. So this is probably the most far-fetched reason: in fact, this thought occurred to myself once and I am wondering if this resonates with anyone. Like I said, I think that discovery as we know is far from perfect yet. But what if it was? What about the reference desk and the classes we teach? Will discovery make those services obsolete?

Neither do I know if these hypotheses are valid, nor how to best research them further – especially not without provoking even more resentment of librarians towards discovery systems. Because, as ever, I think that even with our weird and strangely-structured metadata, our profession and its virtues can make a real contribution to discovery (and delivery, come to think of it). But I am also under the impression that there is too much unspoken discovery-related agony out there for this to work out on a larger scale – which is why I would like to see this examined and brought to light.

Reference

1. Kortekaas S. Thinking the unthinkable: a library without a catalogue.
Available at: <http://www.libereurope.eu/blog/thinking-the-unthinkable-a-library-without-a-catalogue-reconsidering-the-future-of-discovery-to>. Accessed February 13, 2013.