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Rebranding the Library: Generating Visibility in the Virtual Age

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Abstract

Academic libraries (and libraries in general) need to relate and reflect the value they provide back to their users and their overarching institutions. When libraries provision access to digital information resources, there is very little visibility to the user of the library's role in providing access to that resource, especially if the user initially discovers the resource via Google Scholar, Bing Academic, or other discovery tools that are not provided by the library itself. We propose a new approach to help libraries increase their visibility when they broker access to resources—a library branding service. This service brands information resources that are provided by a library, including licensed resources. In this paper, we describe the branding concept, as well as an initial pilot of the concept.

The Problem: Library Visibility in Providing Access to Information Resources

As economic pressures continue to drive higher education institutions to focus on increasing efficiencies and demonstrating their inherent value to the communities they serve, academic libraries are under similar pressures to demonstrate their value to their overarching institutions. While new emerging services, such as research data management, help in this area, it can be difficult for a library to garner increased recognition for some more traditional, yet critical, services.

One such example is the library's role as broker of information resources, especially digital information resources. While often "discovery happens elsewhere,"¹ it is also often the library that actually provides seamless access to discovered information resources that would otherwise be behind a paywall. The challenge is that the better a library is at streamlining the delivery of content to their users, the more difficult it is for the library to be recognized for the value it delivers in actually providing the resource to the user.² For example, if a user searches on

Google Scholar and discovers an article they would like to access, they may see a link titled "Full-Text@[TheirLibrary]"—clicking on this link sends them to the publisher's web site, where they can then access the article. There is some recognition here that they are getting the full text from their library, but that recognition is minimal and momentary. In other cases, where users are IP-authenticated, there may be no indication that the library has a role in the provisioning of the information resource. We seek to inform users with a more permanent and recognizable approach, while, at the same time, remaining unobtrusive.

Proposed Approach: Library Branding of Information Resources

We propose to brand electronic resources brokered by a library by augmenting the resource itself with the library's brand information. As opposed to more transitory approaches, such as splash pages that provide momentary recognition of the library's role during the delivery process, our approach actually brands the resource itself, providing a permanent recognition of the library's role in provisioning access to the resource. This branding occurs through the addition of a cover sheet to the information resource—much akin to a cover sheet added to an ILL request.

In order to implement a branding service that works across the variety of digital information resources provisioned by a library, there must be

¹ Dempsey, L. (2007, September 16). Discovery happens elsewhere. Retrieved from <http://orweblog.oclc.org/archives/001430.html>

² Frumkin, J., & Reese, T. (2011). Provision recognition: Increasing awareness of the library's value in delivering electronic information resources. *Journal of Library Administration, 51*(7/8).

a mechanism in place that allows a library to capture, in route, the information resource as it is being delivered, so that it can be branded and then resume its journey to the user. Luckily, most libraries deploy a proxy server as part of their technical infrastructure, and by leveraging the proxy server, the ability to do just this is feasible. The proxy server acts as a central hub, not only enabling a library to track when a request is going out to a provider, but it also can be used to enable the routing of the resource back to the user to go back through the proxy server. Leveraging this information workflow, we are able to brand the resource as it is en route back to the user.

For our initial efforts, we have concentrated on branding PDFs, as this is the most prominent format of academic information resources. However, we expect that, in the future, we will extend this methodology to support additional formats, such as EPUB, audio, and video formats. In the case of nontext-based formats, we would need to explore alternative forms of branding appropriate to the particular format.

Pilot Project

To pilot our approach, we created a plan to test the technology on several live sites. The pilot will consist of two main phases.

In the first phase, which is currently underway, we chose two institutions with whom we could work very closely on all aspects of the implementation and testing. We requested access to their servers so as to perform the implementation ourselves and thus become better acquainted with infrastructure that was actually in use. Throughout the pilot, each institution participates in individual weekly calls with us and provides us with the requested deliverables.

In the second phase, we will choose eight institutions, though in this phase we purposely intend not to work with them as closely as we did with the two institutions in the first phase. Based on our experience in the first phase of the pilot, we will provide the institutions from the second phase with a questionnaire with technical

questions and build each institution an individual plan based on their answers. Each institution will then have to perform the implementation on its own. They will be able to ask us questions, but our intention will be to step out of the implementation phase as much as possible. The second group of pilot institutions will participate in group phone calls on a weekly basis and also provide us with the requested deliverables.

Each phase is designed to focus on three main components: implementation, data gathering, and user testing. Implementation consists of the actual setup of the service including a sanity check to make sure the service is functional. We then open the service to several libraries and computer labs exposing end users to the branding cover page. The idea behind this phase is twofold. We can gather general feedback from librarians while gathering usage statistics in the background. The user testing involves opening the service to a group organized by the library who will test the service and note their observations regarding the appearance of both HTML landing pages and the branded PDFs and overall satisfaction with the experience.

Initial Findings

The pilot is currently in the middle of the first phase. Implementation is complete, and we are currently accumulating usage data from both institutions.

Feedback from both institutions has been positive. One institution was so impressed by the service that they opened it to the entire campus at their own suggestion.

The main criticism from librarians has been that end users will complain about printing the extra page. We do not believe this will be an issue because:

1. Content providers such as JSTOR already provide cover sheets without this having been a significant issue.
2. Conscientious end users will make sure not to print the cover page.

3. End users who do print the cover page will encounter the library's message a second time thus reinforcing the point.

Next Steps

In the coming weeks, we plan to move to the final section of the first phase of the pilot, namely user testing. We hope that the feedback we receive will support our initial findings and that end users will demonstrate an overall positive attitude toward the service.

In parallel, we have started approaching institutions to participate in the next phase of the pilot. We will continue to do so and hope to begin the second phase in the coming weeks as we complete the first phase.

Future Directions

The obvious next step is to market the service and make it available to any library. Looking to the more distant future, we believe that the technology underlying the branding service could have use beyond helping to solve the library visibility issue. The cover page could include citation information for the article and/or provide article recommendations in the style of bX and Amazon.

Once the service is more established and has been adopted by more libraries, it would be interesting to assess whether we have succeeded in influencing library patrons and in causing a shift toward increased awareness of the library's vital role in the provisioning of scholarly materials.