MetaGoogle! Using MetaLib to deliver user-centered information

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MetaGoogle! Using MetaLib to deliver user-centered information services at Loughborough – Frank Parry  
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The term ‘MetaGoogle’ is used to represent the coming together of two information sources commonly used at Loughborough University. A little wishful thinking, perhaps, as Google is almost certainly the big brother in the relationship between MetaLib, Loughborough’s information portal, and Google.

MetaLib was purchased at the same time as the new library management system, both products of the Ex Libris group. MetaLib did not ring any bells among the library staff – it was, after all, a very new system and Loughborough was an early adopter. It was, however, going to herald quite a few changes in the years ahead.

Prior to MetaLib, Loughborough had a series of subject guides and an A-Z of databases to advertise its wares. Web statistics showed that although the A-Z was popular – and still is – the subject guides were barely used. In spite of considerable efforts in various training sessions, surveys and anecdotal evidence from enquiry points showed that readers still had considerable problems in finding relevant quality information. Databases were confusing, had very different interfaces, sometimes involved learning a specialised search language, and did not always get the results readers wanted. Furthermore, readers often had to look in any of maybe half a dozen different places. It is not surprising, therefore, that many turned to the Web first for information and, more often than not, Google. It is more straightforward, easy to use, and seems to provide more information at the press of just one button.

Before we consider how libraries might improve on this situation, we should ask ourselves, “what do readers expect from the (electronic) library?” The answer is probably a combination of most of the following: full-text – almost to the exclusion of anything else; easy access to information from a user friendly system; comprehensive results – not just all they need but often with suggestions about improving a search or search results, along the lines of Amazon’s “customers who viewed this item also viewed…”; information where they are and when they need it.

Does Google provide this? Certainly it provides a familiar, easy to use search engine with an advanced search option which is even more impressive in the new Google Scholar service. It locates hard to find material which is often not found in conventional databases. It provides access to news, images, sound and other multimedia, can create alerts and has a personalised search page option which can include an RSS reader. But most of all, it gives access to
plentiful full-text. The big question is quality. Can readers tell the good from the bad – and there is a lot of dubious material masquerading as quality research – and will they know what is brought to them courtesy of the Library’s subscriptions?

Google Scholar addresses some of these concerns. It has the ability to store a Library’s holdings and in the case of Loughborough can provide the SFX facility which links to full-text providers or the Library catalogue. The information sources are of a higher quality than Google with access to publishers’ catalogues, journal contents pages, full-text searching of the controversial Google Books project, open access journals, institutional repositories and the like. References can be downloaded into bibliographic software such as RefWorks. Nonetheless, the quality issue will not completely go away and readers might be lulled into the false impression that what they find is ‘all there is’. Nothing can be further from the truth. Google, or Google Scholar, does not have access to all of the hundreds of specialised databases and full-text e-journals which are needed for serious research. Libraries usually do – and pay mightily for the privilege!

So what do readers get from MetaLib which can help address this problem?

Readers can now look at the entire range of the Library’s information sources from one place. All resources are allocated to subject categories which are themselves deep-linked to the relevant module sections within the student LEARN portal. Unlike Google, all these resources are quality controlled and offer search facilities to indexes and other services which are not searchable via Google. There is also the ability to cross-search – sometimes called a federated search – up to 8 resources at the same time. Of the 164 subscription services 127 are cross-searchable. In total, Loughborough’s MetaLib links to 463 active resources which includes many free services and web pages. There are links to extra information and advice – for instance, each category has a link to the appropriate Academic Librarian for further advice - and it is possible to download the results of searches into bibliographic software. Readers can customise MetaLib – create their own selection of databases, search strategies and alerts. It is also possible to brand the results so that readers are fully aware of where the resources are coming from and who is paying for it. Branding of information is important as it creates a sense of ownership and is – hopefully! - a mark of quality.

But there is a downside. Readers are frequently irritated by the number of items unavailable from the library. This can make the library look a little threadbare when compared with Google and requires diplomacy and a lot of explaining! Not all databases are cross-searchable which can lead to readers ignoring those which have to be searched via the ‘native interface’. Also, it has to be said that the search mechanisms are not as sophisticated as we would like. We are at the mercy of the Ex Libris developers and although we can make representations about system design and future development features, much of what the library does is technology driven.
Nonetheless, statistics have shown that subscription database use has increased sharply since pre-MetaLib days. In the first year, search figures rose by 609% and have climbed every year as MetaLib has become established. Even the databases which cannot be cross-searched have benefited from increased exposure and have posted good search results. MetaLib is heavily promoted via posters, email drops, training sessions and word of mouth. Even those who have so far resisted the marketing push are becoming aware that you “can find it on MetaLib” which is an advance of sorts. There is still much to do to make MetaLib a more productive tool – a user study has been undertaken, but a survey is needed to help record searching habits and preferences and some measure of reader success and failure rates; improved interface design and accessibility are also needed.

I do not believe that it is an either/or situation between readers’ use of Google and MetaLib. Both have much to offer our readers and, if used wisely and in the full knowledge of their limitations, can help to enrich the learning and research experience.

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