New Information Discovery Tools Environmental Scan

Executive Summary and Web Addresses

Prepared For Dr. Dana Sally, Dean of Libraries, UWF
Prepared By Ray Uzwyshyn Ph.D., Head of Digital Services UWF Libraries
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New Online Information Discovery Tools Examined

Blacklight – http://blacklight.betech.virginia.edu/
Worldcat local – http://www.lib.washington.edu/
Worldcat Org – http://www.worldcat.org/
NCSU Endeca – http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/catalog/
VuFind - http://www.vufind.org/
Primo – http://www.exlibrisgroup.com/primo.htm
Encore - http://www.iii.com/encore/splash.html
Evergreen Open-ILS – http://www.open-ils.org/
Koha open ILS – http://www.koha.org/
Libraries Australia – http://librariesaustralia.nla.gov.au/
Minnesota Undergraduate Virtual Library - http://www.lib.umn.edu/undergrad/

Summary

The next generation of information discovery tools present incremental shifts in information discovery rather than paradigm shift. While most of the new tools present a cautious version of faceted searching, the overall variety of the approaches to innovation follows developments that are established in the wider technology landscape (Web 2.0, Open Source, Faceted Searching). The more interesting set of developments reviewed here are the open source information discovery tools (Koha, Evergreen) and Web 2.0 interface innovation (University of Minnesota Undergraduate Virtual Libraries). Preferable would be one interface that combines the spectrum of innovation in various resource discovery tools into one feature rich interface. The tenor of development is in an emergent phase without any clear winner but with innovation incrementally progressing in vendor, national and specific university library IT efforts.

Information Discovery Tools - Brief Notes on Recent Innovations

Worldcat local – http://www.lib.washington.edu/

Worldcat local is an intuitive modern interface. The faceted classification, subject searching and bringing up (Author, Content, Format) is innovative. The modality of interface in not providing too much information but focusing on information design is worthy. The presentation of facets on a lefthand menu bar is streamlined. Going to a digital object level allows immediate retrieval and location. Fundamental visual data such as the book cover (available easily from Amazon or a public library catalog) is still not implemented. Allowing the user to 'add' their own review adds 'interactivity'. The affordances of finding connections with 'local' experts in the subject area or interdisciplinary scholars is worthwhile.

Worldcat Org – http://www.worldcat.org/

The icons from the Worldcat catalog are on the right track in using of 'visual icons' – the designers could easily find 'better' icons. Usability is needed for this good conceptual idea. The interface is intuitive and searching for 'lists' compiled by others is also a good idea for resource discovery. Worldcat should be

applauded for taking “Amazon’s” list and bookcover ideas, creatively reappropriating this and using it for a catalog.

Blacklight – http://blacklight.betech.virginia.edu/

Backlight seems an interesting application but old guard in the ‘card’ metaphor for the brief and full records view – why not think visually or in terms of new metaphors or the iconology that has been introduced and popularized by a variety of new applications. The faceted searching is better done with Endeca’s intuitive and streamlined approach. The boxed frames are unvetted by any usability specialist. Little attention has been paid to possibilities to information visualization and interface design.

NCSU Endeca – http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/catalog/

On the plus side, Endeca provides an excellent and robust faceted approach to searching varying subject areas. With regards to critique, using Endeca in a large consortial system, the application has drawbacks, one of which is ‘scalability. As the result set gets larger, the speed of retrieval slows. Having said that, Endeca is firmly among a pack of new ‘faceted’ catalog applications moving information and resource discovery incrementally forward.

VuFind - http://www.vufind.org/

Vufind advertises itself as library Opac meets Web 2.0. The facets from a preliminary look seem more robust than say Endeca or Backlight. Adding to a customized ‘favorites’ list is a good addition. The ability to get an immediate APA or MLA citation of the book in question is also a good addition. Like other applications discussed, comments are available as is a books “table of contents”. The advanced version of the catalog search seems sparse and is done better elsewhere.

Primo – http://www.exlibrisgroup.com/primo.htm

The promise of Ex Libris Primo is that it will be a one stop solution for the discovery and retrieval of local and remote resources such as books, journals articles and digital objects. At the least, this will hopefully replace (SFX and Metalib) into one integrated application so library IT departments may be dealing with the challenges of one clunky application rather than several. Presently, the separate Ex Libris libraries applications (Aleph, SFX, Metalib etc) do not communicate with each other overly well. Hopefully, Primo will move this forward.

Encore - http://www.iii.com/encore/splash.html

Encore is Triple I’s competing product to Primo. Looking over the list of features, the same group comes up (ie. Federated Search, Faceted Search) in the larger list of tools presented. Triple I has implemented a tag cloud common now in open source web applications. Rather than these static tag clouds, interactive tag clouds are now possible to be connected to a larger catalog to search but this is not implemented here. This implementation of Encore looks much more streamlined ithan the Ex Libris or the Worldcat local products. Usability’ and design is in evidence.

Evergreen Open-ILS – http://www.open-ils.org/

This is the Open Source catalog that may eventually end up altering the LMS vendor product landscape. Roy Tennant spoke about Evergreen at Computers in Libraries in a session regarding catalogs/opacs for the future.Tennant felt Evergreen an emergent a strong candidate to displace expensive enterprise class Integrated Library Systems in the next few years. Libraries would be wise to keep their eyes on developments here. Most vendor systems like Aleph, Triple III etc are expensive clunky legacy old guard programmed computing systems. The promise does not live up to reality. It will be interesting to see which larger Universities start to use these new open source systems (UBC et al already).

Koha open ILS – http://www.koha.org/

Koha is another full-featured open-source Integrated Library System. This generation of open source innovation will eventually aid in breaking the monopoly of library technology vendors providing competition so that the level of innovation at the commercial vendors increases. Integrated Library Systems are usually large legacy systems with many connected parts, tables and obscure computing languages. Hopefully, the larger library community will get behind some of these new open source products and use the collective intelligence of the community to build on these to create responsive agile humanly usable systems.

Libraries Australia – http://librariesaustralia.nla.gov.au/

This seems like an interesting product integrating the library with bookshops/suppliers. The approach also integrates the Internet into the product(Online/At Libraries/At Bookshops/Suppliers). There is little attention to visualization. The usability of the interface does not seem as developed as some of the other new vendor and open source products. Still, the national library of Australia has a good reputation for library innovation in the past so this seems a product to also keep an eye on as it develops.

Minnesota Undergraduate Virtual Library - http://www.lib.umn.edu/undergrad/

This seems like a very good attempt at a Web 2.0 library information discovery tool diametrically different from the rest of the larger group discussed and of a new generation of emergent interfaces geared more towards information discovery. The interface integrates student/faculty weblogs as information tools and electronic resources tools (journal tools) with quick links to the catalog. The interface is more elegant with the drop down subject finder and the library catalog, reserves, hours and refworks all integrated into a single home page. This is a new interesting model for subject guides, eresources and interface design. Hopefully, competitors and more development along this different trajectory will occur.

Wider Reflections

Most of the improvements summarized above are in an emergent phase. Web 2.0. approaches to Information Discovery are largely unharnessed. Possibilities of visualization for information and resource discovery are beginning to be adopted in the general information landscape. More innovative approaches prevalent in the larger technology landscape should be encouraged. Harnessing interactive and visual media for resource discovery and to facilitate subject resource discovery are largely absent. Technology innovation and the possibilities for new media computing and information visualization for libraries is in a developmental phase. Taking advantage of new possibilities of visualization, interactivity, social networking tools and online gaming paradigms is largely absent in this current level of development. Multimedia online development focused towards information systems and resource discovery tools have wide possibility. New opportunities in the future will be opened by new computing progress and web 2.0 possibilities. The convergence of media, computing and communications technologies continues. A new set of current information discovery tools have made incremental progress but have yet to show contours of emerging larger shifts.