



The Many Paths to Content Discovery: A Librarian's Perspective

By Elizabeth R. Lorbeer, EdM, MLS
Library Director

Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine
Elizabeth.Lorbeer@med.wmich.edu

The role of the librarian is to connect users to information. We do so by organizing and managing content and its connection points, but our role goes further by making content “social” so that it’s findable. According to Ulrich’s, a source for bibliographic and publisher information, there exist over 300,000 periodicals and 400 abstracting and indexing sources to assist in identifying content. When I think about how users access scholarly content, the expression “path of least resistance” comes to mind. There is so much content for information seekers to sift through that libraries have advanced past the online catalog for quick look-up to installing a discovery system to unify all of their electronic and print resources in one index. It allows our users to discover content quicker, with a single search interface, using filters to achieve desired results. But, this is where publishers need to think how to make their content social and likable by the relevancy rankings within discovery systems and search engines. If anyone is going to find your published content, it will need to appear at the top of the search results page.

Traditional bibliographic databases subscribed to by academic libraries are still popular sources to find peer-reviewed works. I recently ran a report on user activity on my library’s website that revealed the top referring sources were PubMed at 46%, followed by the full-text aggregated databases at 26%, and Google Scholar at 6%. (Note that my library solely serves a health professional community.) Referring links do not tell the entire picture of system-wide use, as institutional users will download and use mobile apps on their handheld devices. The library promotes the use of other PubMed apps such as Unbound Medicine’s uCentral and PubMed On Tap. As much as we, the content creators and information organizers, want to be the starting pathway for information seekers, they may

begin somewhere else. Popular starting points are search engines such as Google and Google Scholar, journal reader apps (eg, BrowZine, Docphin, and Read by QxMD), and social networking sites such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu, which are now acceptable go-to resources for vetted content in the academic community. As a result, library and publisher websites face competition from third-party applications and social networking sites as sources to find interdisciplinary and topic-specific content. What this means is that traditional library bibliographic databases are disrupted by freely available discovery sources. The abstracting and indexing services offer controlled vocabulary for searching for topics, whereas search engines crawl billions of webpages and build a simple index where results are ranked by relevance. The difference in results from a controlled source to a relevancy-ranked source is astounding. The content that is the most “social” is found first by the Web crawlers even though it might not be considered the best available research.

Librarians have embraced alternative discovery services by collaborating with third-party developers to supply article-level links to subscribed and demand-driven content through the OpenURL link resolver services. My library employs 360 Link from Serials Solutions (a division of ProQuest) to send our electronic serial and monograph holdings to Google Scholar. It is a monthly automated process that allows our users who choose not to search the bibliographic databases the ability to find library-subscribed peer-reviewed content. When our users search from within Google Scholar, if an article or book chapter is available through our online library, they can connect to the full-text content through the linkout. Additionally, Google Scholar will also alert the user if a full-text version is available through an institutional repository or publisher’s open access

website. The mobile journal reader apps work the same way, allowing the library to register with the application developer to make the connection to the content. Some apps offer the ability to track the individual's reading habits to record continuing education credits and offer the librarian usage reports of which subscribed resources are being accessed from within the app. As more academic institutions embrace primary learning using handheld devices, having the ability to customize third-party apps will become necessary in order to be adopted by collaborative learning environments.

App use is growing among the academic community as a way to stay connected to the current research and maximize learning efficiency. My school has adopted InKling as its single source to

deliver required textbooks to students. Using the InKling mobile app permits course instructors to highlight and annotate the digital text and allows both faculty and students to share notes as a means of fostering collaborative learning. Additionally, instructors can create individual ebooks to distribute independent guided learning events outside the classroom. What lies ahead for academic libraries is how to distribute content to their users who are relying increasingly on their tablets for primary learning. As didactic lectures are being transformed to team-based learning events, learners need quick access to content to ask questions and participate in discussion. Applications that can deliver reliable evidenced-based results and break down information into digestible chunks will be preferred by learners.

