

Problems With Usability in OPACs – Do the Discovery and Delivery Solutions Solve Them?

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Abstract

Polish libraries' OPACs are definitely not perfect. Author's research of their usability and research on end users behavior proved many problems in their information architecture and problems with using it by patrons. OPACs are not attractive but most important problem is that in many cases they are also hard to use, especially for people who try to use it for the first time.

Discovery and delivery solutions are something quite new for Polish libraries and it is a future for them, as well. It is very important to learn analyzing previous mistake to avoid them in the future, to make library system front end intuitive, easy to use and even more – attractive to patrons and make them to come back to library discovery and delivery solution with pleasure instead of using different sources, not connected with libraries.

In the article information architecture and new solutions for libraries' usability is analyzed in comparison with previous searching and presenting library data tools. Author is considering which usability problems are usually solved by using discovery and discovery solutions.

Introduction

In 2013 in Poland few academic libraries already use discovery and delivery (D&D) solutions as a user interface to search resources provided by the library. In Polish market there are used three different systems: EDS by EBSCO (vide Górecka, 2012), Primo by Ex Libris (vide Dziubecki, 2012) and Summon by Serials Solutions (vide Craciun, 2012). However they don't replace libraries' traditional OPACs. Libraries still maintain both tools -- OPAC as a catalogue of traditional resources and discovery system as a multisearch engine.

Research on traditional OPACs used in Polish libraries proved many problems with their usability (Paleczna, 2011). Many of them could be solved by replacing OPAC by discovery and delivery system. Information architecture of modern software is more appropriate but is it enough or is it necessary to change search tool to improve usability of searching process?

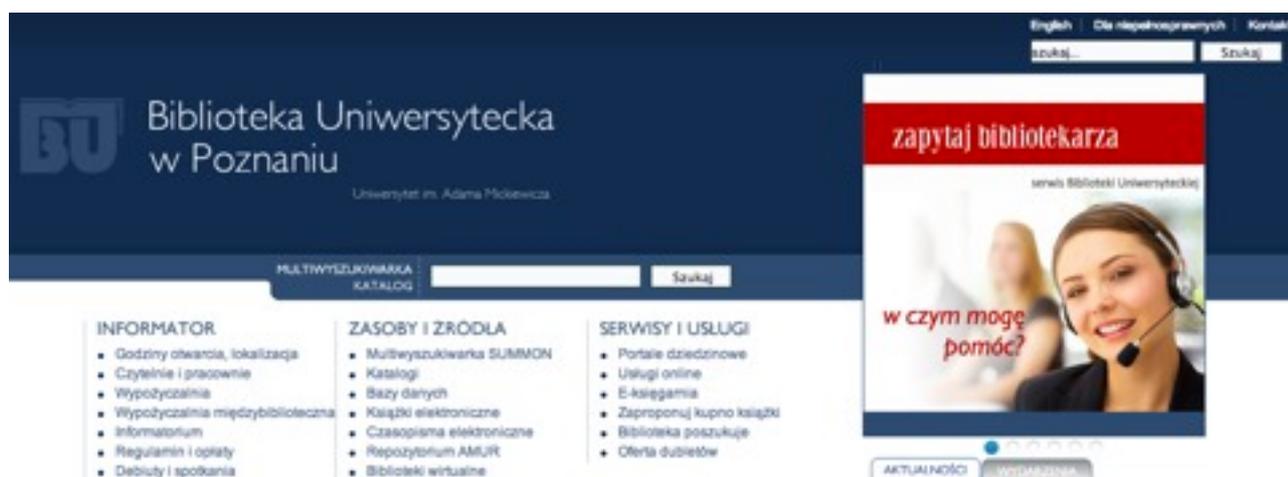
OPACs vs. discovery and delivery solutions

In Polish libraries' OPACs search boxes are rarely available on a main website of the library (what is interesting, academic libraries are more friendly than other at this point).

To start searching user have to enter proper menu item, which is not always easy to find (some of libraries use 'OPAC' label to describe it).

As a consequence library patron sees entirely different interface then the rest of the website. There is a different menu, colors and experience. User lands in different environment and she feels it is another system, without strong connections with library's visual identification. Sometimes there is logo and/or name of library at the top of the OPAC interface, but in many cases the only thing there is a logo of library system producer.

Discovery and delivery solutions search box is usually available on main webpage, but in Polish installations it is not present on each page. It causes less click to get the results but only in case user is on main page. It means there is an improvement in comparison to previous OPACs but it still could be done better, to make search easier. Also, traditional OPAC's search box could be used the same way being located on the main page, so it is not the matter of software but the way of integrating it with library's website and system' customization to follow library users needs.



University of Adam Mickiewicz Library – on the main page there is search box of both – traditional OPAC (Horizon) and discovery and delivery system (Summon). It works only in Polish version; on English version this box redirects always to Horizon OPAC. On other pages of the website search box is missing.

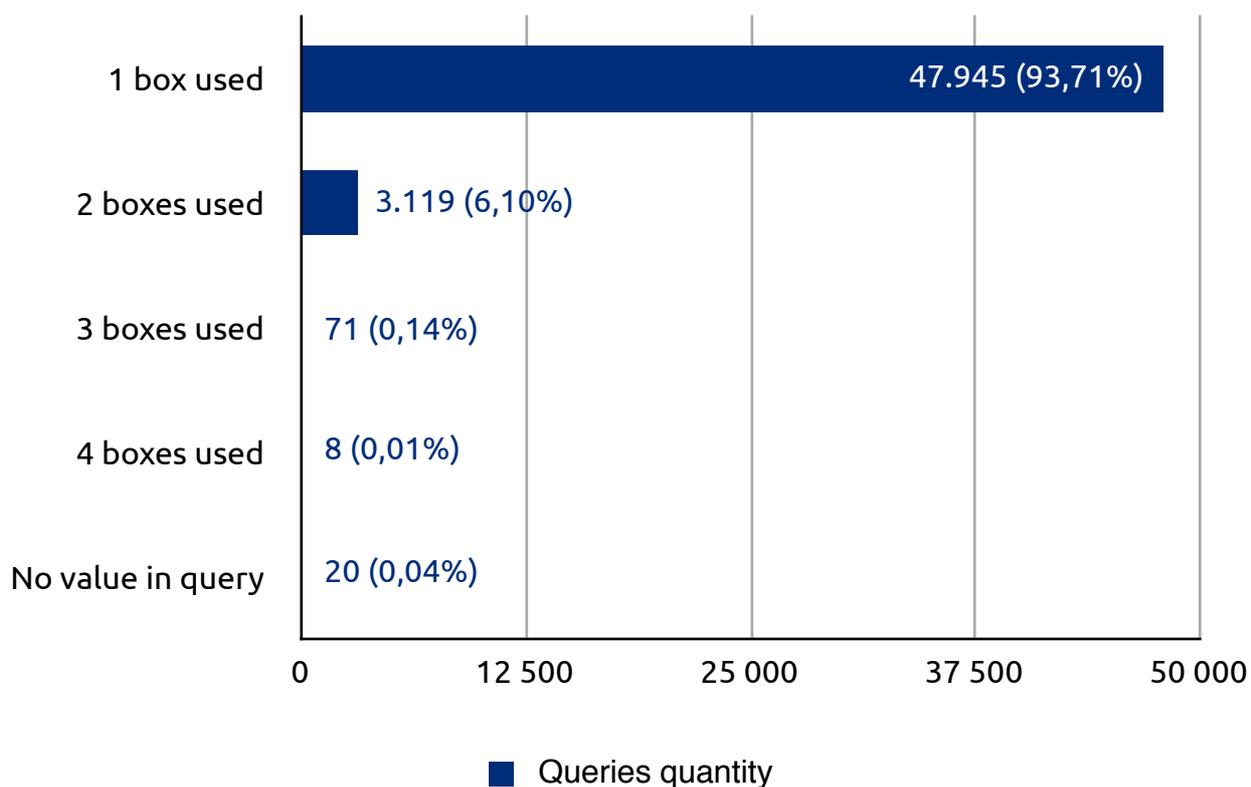
Biblioteka Uniwersytecka w Poznaniu. Retrieved April 22, 2013, from <http://lib.amu.edu.pl/>

D&D systems Primo and Summon are flexible to be redesigned. Thanks to this possibility they can look similar to a library website, but libraries do not use their potential to compose it to the website. In most cases search box on the main page is designed as a part of the page, but on page with search results there is not page menu available and it is still separate from library webpage system.

There exists one aspect which is better in traditional OPAC. To do a search in traditional OPAC there is not a necessity of signing in to start the search. When it comes to discovery and delivery solutions in April 2013 there are three installations in Poland (one

Summon and two EDS) where user have to be authenticated to be able to start the search if she is not using computer connected to university computer network.

Simplicity is key to the success. That is why searching form should be as simple as it is possible. As the author's research shows, library users do not need complicated query form. In over 93% of queries (there was more than 50.000 queries analyzed) users used only one of four available search boxes (Palczna, 2011).



Source: Palczna, 2011

Libraries implementing discovery and delivery solutions make simple one box search as a default, but advanced search is always available, too. Which is important, even if traditional OPAC could be searched with one box query in most cases it was necessary to chose searching index which is not needed in discovery and delivery systems.

This causes one step less in searching process but we can notice more important advantage of this solution. An author's research shows users creating a query often do not change default index even if they should. It is the reason of problems to find relevant records even in situation they exist in database.

With this case we can observe problems with labeling systems, as well. Libraries use many of indexes and they name them using professional vocabulary not understandable for most of patrons. If in OPAC there are two indexes: 'Title' and 'Unified Title', user usually do not know the difference between them. It is an example of inappropriate labels.

In traditional OPACs search results are often sorted in alphabetical order. Discovery and delivery software uses algorithms which helps sorting records by relevance. Even though there are major differences between algorithms in different systems. For instance in EDS there are subject headings as a most important metadata fields to search and librarians are not able to change it. In Primo the most important are words in title of document by default but librarians have influence on that and they have possibility to change it.

At the time when mobile devices are becoming more and more popular (especially in academic community) it is very important goal to enable searching library resources by smartphone or tablet. In traditional OPACs it is possible but usually hard and uncomfortable because old-fashioned search tools are not designed to use on mobile devices. In 2012 there were still quite a lot of OPACs which was impossible to use on smartphone (using Prolib by Max Elektronik's OPAC was impossible to click 'search' button, now this button works but it is still impossible to scroll the page).

Discovery and delivery systems interfaces use responsive design or additional mobile version of the website. That is why EDS, Primo or Summon are easy to use on mobile devices.

There are also additional functionalities offered by discovery systems which make them more user friendly. The most important one is possibility to search OPAC, digital repositories, subscribed and Open Access databases during one search process using 'megaindex' (not metasearch). It allows users' save time and search many sources using one interface, which is also easier -- user does not have to get to know many different search interfaces.

Also facets refining was not available in previous library search tools. Facets are very useful way to precise a query, especially when searching all of existing indexes in many databases give many search results.

Conclusions

In fact many usability problems can be solved with discovery and delivery systems. But the truth is that many of them could and should be solved even in traditional OPAC. Releasing new system is especially not a solution in case library still maintenance OPAC as a search tool available for user. As long as library provide old OPAC, it should be improving to follow users' needs and giving them comfortable tool. It is not the technological barrier which makes advanced search as a default and causes using professional vocabulary in user interface.

Problems with labeling systems show that it is not enough to update software to modern one, even if library replace old OPAC with the brand new discovery system. The most important thing is to understand users' needs and try to fulfill them, whatever what kind of software library use.

However using discovery and discovery system gives many possibilities as searching many databases at once very quickly or search results' facets refining. This kind of software makes searching easier, more intuitive, effective and attractive.

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