

Into the Hands of Readers

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Introduction

“We are in an in-between world where we have two groups of people: those ones who already go to the library and the ones who never think about the library.”¹ That’s how Rachel Fewell, the collection services manager at the Denver Public Library, describes her view of the landscape for libraries. This view of the world prompts these questions: What can libraries do to reach those who never think about the library? What can libraries do to most effectively reach those who sometimes think about the library? Increasing the visibility of library collections on the web is an obvious answer, but the explicit goal to make that happen has not been well defined.

A review of the history of library catalogs and library systems automation reveals a trend toward a focus on efficiency and cost savings in systems and data. There are a few bright spots of innovation in discovery, and the very earliest days of library catalogs were highly focused on the user, but the trend has been on service to ourselves instead of the convenience of or improved outcomes for the user. We see this mostly by contrast: the commercial search engines have completely disrupted the user experience of discovering information on any topic while libraries have by and large focused on internal system efficiency and high-quality metadata for print books.

There is a tremendous opportunity for libraries to connect readers to content on the web. Frank Wilmot, senior reference librarian, also at the Denver Public Library, tells the story of the library users who call their reference line asking for “that product rating chart with the black circles and red dots.”²

After a reference interview, the answer to the question frequently turns out to be the *Consumer Reports* ratings on appliances and other consumer goods. The library often gets calls from readers who are buying a new appliance and want to see the *Consumer Reports* ratings before they buy. Wilmot explains that these readers get stopped by the *Consumer Reports* subscription requirement and immediately call the library for help. He reports that even the smallest branches have the subscription through an aggregator. On the phone, library staff can quickly connect the reader to the subscription resources, and he celebrates the successes but worries about the missed opportunities: the people who never get the benefit because they don't know about the service. The access model is simple: anybody with a library card can access the database, but that connection between the reference to the content and the full content is not made on the open web.

In the academic library environment, Roger Schoenfeld, Director, Library and Scholarly Communication Program at Ithaca S+R, summarizes the situation in his measured but direct style: "The user experience of working with e-journals and ebooks in an academic setting has failed to keep up with changing practices and preferences for how researchers now expect to access the scholarly literature."³

He doesn't directly say that the academic user experience should be more like the experience of the web, but it is implied that the search engines have changed the model even for researchers, and libraries have failed to keep up.

The answer to all of this is to renew the focus on the convenience and search preferences of the reader. If we remind ourselves of Ranganathan's 1931 laws, the reader is mentioned in most of them:

1. Books are for use.
2. Every reader his / her book.
3. Every book its reader.
4. Save the time of the reader.
5. The library is a growing organism. [emphasis added]⁴

Note rule four—emphasizing the convenience of the reader. In their research on the enduring value of Ranganathan's rubric, Lynn Silipigni Connaway and Ixchel Faniel from OCLC Research argue that in today's networked information environment, where the user has many choices for information, the fourth law should be the first and that "time [is] a shorthand for convenience or almost any efficiency-based value that users ascribe to their experience with a library."⁵

Eighty-five years after Ranganathan, libraries should set clear goals about the convenience of the reader and focus on the satisfaction of the reader in the discovery process. Delivering content into the hands of the reader should be an explicit goal motivating

behavior and guiding decisions. Given the reader's preference for the highly relevant and instantly informative experience on the web, it will be important to understand the rules of the web and to very explicitly change a number of aspects of culture, process, and data management. This is an important goal and the stakes are high. It is time to ask the important questions about how libraries and their partners will make this happen.

The Question: Can Libraries Improve Their Web Visibility?

Increasingly, librarians are asking the existential question: Can libraries thrive if their services aren't prominent in web search engine results? If ordinary people don't see their library's books and articles in search results, will library users disregard the library as a place to satisfy their research and leisure needs? Libraries build their collections for their readers, but if readers never find them and get them from the library, will they stop seeing the library as a place of value that should be cherished and supported?

The knowledgeable observer will take the question one step further and say that the modern library no longer features just "the collection" of books as its premier offering; the modern library offers an enormous variety of other services. What about exposing those services on the web? OCLC's 2005 *Perceptions* report helped us see clearly that the library brand continues to be "the book."⁶ But libraries invest enormously in the curation and infrastructure for everything else they offer.

What is the everything else? Academic libraries offer lectures, multimedia collaboration space, exhibits, bibliographies of their scholars, digitization services, and other assistance to scholarly communication. Public libraries offer author readings and services for adults like job search instruction; for children and young adults, they offer story time, maker spaces, homework help; they connect teens to materials on sensitive topics and provide a private space for using library resources to get answers to the most difficult questions young people can ask. The list of services is long, and the need to promote those services is urgent in an environment where ordinary people are surrounded by many options for meeting their needs for serious research and leisure reading.

The pride that librarians hold in these services is manifest in any conversation with librarians today. Philip Schreur, the Associate University Librarian for Technical and Access Services at Stanford University, describes the university's explicit mandate for the library to represent the entirety of the university's scholarly output and assets. He explains: "We have a mandate to integrate all of the information

that the university creates. That includes reading lists, research data sets, anonymized transactions, historical image collections, and many others; the library collections are the smallest of those assets.”⁷

The intellectual and financial investment in these non-book services increases with each new budget. But these services are no more favored in search engine results than books and articles. In a search engine, any search for a best seller or a work of local historical interest will not produce a link to a library on the first page of the search results. So the problem exists with either the traditional view of the library as the source for books or the expanded view that includes the wide variety of services that libraries provide: the library’s offerings are generally not prominent in search engine results. So the question remains: Can the library thrive when it is buried by sponsored results or direct links to commercial options? To understand this context, it is useful first to understand how any content is exposed on the web.

Notes

1. Rachel Fewell (Collection Services Manager, Denver Public Library), interviewed by Ted Fons by telephone, October 28, 2015.
2. Frank Wilmot (Senior Reference Librarian, Denver Public Library), interviewed by Ted Fons by telephone, November 10, 2015.
3. Roger Schonfeld, “Dismantling the Stumbling Blocks That Impede Researcher Access to E-resources,” *The Scholarly Kitchen* (blog), Society for Scholarly Publishing, November 13, 2015, <http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2015/11/13/dismantling-the-stumbling-blocks-that-impede-researcher-access-to-e-resources>.
4. “Five Laws of Library Science,” *Wikipedia*, last modified 5 February, 2016.
5. Lynn Silipigni Connaway and Ixchel M. Faniel, *Reordering Ranganathan: Shifting User Behaviors, Shifting Priorities* (Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2014), www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/library/2014/oclcresearch-reordering-ranganathan-2014.pdf.
6. OCLC, *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* (Dublin, OH: OCLC, 2005), <https://www.oclc.org/reports/2005perceptions.en.html>.
7. Phillip Schreur (Associate University Librarian for Technical and Access Services, Stanford University), interviewed by Ted Fons by telephone, November 6, 2015.