



OPEN WEB V THE LIBRARY

No one can deny that open web search engines are a convenient way to explore content and even link to full text library holdings. But do they offer enough to deliver on real research outcomes? Richard Levy says it's high time library and information professionals thought strategically about our relationship to these resources.

I have met a number of librarians who have a bit of a thing for the open web and common search engines. Some even consider these discovery services for article content obviate the need for a commercial alternative.

After all, the open web is not only free but is generally considered to provide powerful search engines, with arguably the world's most powerful algorithms for web-based content. So why wouldn't one expect the open web to be able to deliver the same kind of relevance for academic research?

search engines (and with individual databases or catalogues, for that matter) by reducing search times and the number of searches required.

There is no doubt that the open web can be used as a complementary service, but at the core of the library's end user experience there should be a customisable service that not only reflects the content that the library invests in, but also one that the user identifies with as being brought to them by the library. Above all, they need to be confident that the service will deliver on expectations for research.

The fact is libraries have very specific requirements that are quite different from what open web search engines can provide. Research is not casual browsing but a positive means to a positive end: the production of further research for the benefit of the individual, his or her institution and society at large.

USERS SIMPLY DO NOT IDENTIFY THE OPEN WEB WITH THE LIBRARY.

One thing has always bothered me about the open web, which sometimes gets overlooked by librarians, is the precarious relationship of the library to these search engines themselves.

For the best part of a decade, librarians and library technology companies have agreed the biggest challenge to libraries is the open web and open web search engines. The logical inference that can be drawn from this is that a library that sees open web search engines as effective discovery services is effectively playing into the hands of its own enemy.

That may sound harsh, and I am certainly not suggesting for a moment that librarians should be telling their users to stop using search engines outside the library. That would be like telling a sailor not to sail or a climber not to climb. The point is that users simply do not identify the open web with the library.

Furthermore, open web search engines do not offer custom branding, have no catalogue, limited ebooks and certainly no proprietary subject indexes that a discovery service integrates to perform high quality relevance ranking, features which substantially improve usability in comparison with open web

This is where the library becomes a bridge to knowledge, and offers an experience that is grounded in the ethos of research based on standards set by universities and other research bodies.

Local collections, catalogues, repositories, ebooks, and abstracting and indexing databases represent a substantial proportion of the invaluable content that the open web does not adequately represent and, as such, the open web is not truly effective for the full breadth and depth of research that a discovery service is (or should be) designed to provide.

A discovery service that is modeled purely on open web search engines is really only halfway to being a comprehensive service. Ultimately, it has to be more.

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