

Social Discovery - A Leading R

In March, the OLA Board approved funding for a province-wide research initiative to assess risks and opportunities for Public Libraries in the Age of the Social Web. The research will build upon a pilot phase that was conducted by BiblioCommons and Oakville Public Library earlier this year. In this article, Beth Jefferson, the founder of BiblioCommons and Gail Richardson, Web Service Manager for OPL discuss findings that emerged from this first phase of research, potential implications and outline further areas for exploration and study.

Many public libraries are reporting that virtual visits to the library are now actually exceeding in-person visits. There are many challenges and possibilities for public libraries in this new era of service delivery, but for the purposes of this article we'd like to focus on those that relate to the issue of discovery.

Discovery Means Use

Discovery has always been at the heart of the library experience. Ranganathan's third law, "Every Book its Reader," captures this function.

"The majority of readers do not know their requirements, and their interests take a definite shape only after seeing and handling a well-arranged collection of books."

Discovery plays several roles in a successful library experience, the first is in building patron satisfaction.

"All the surveys we've seen, conducted by librarians as well as non-librarians, indicate that there is virtually no service library users value more highly than the ability to match a book with a reader or to answer the question, 'What do I read next?'

Discovery and selection also make essential contributions to literacy and a culture of reading. There is always a right book for any reader, which this blog entry captures:

"If only we could find the books, music, movies we like, I know that we would be consuming a lot more of them. ... Sometimes people just give up....But ...when I discover music or books that I love, I know that I'm right back to listening or reading avidly."

Nor is the value of discovery limited to fiction or recreational borrowing. As Elaine Toms of the Faculty of Information Studies at the University of Toronto relates ... discovery is also key to successful research.

"...Although largely ignored in information systems development and research, serendipitous retrieval complements querying and browsing, and together they provide a holistic, ecological approach to information acquisition. ..."

Discovery in the Bricks-and-Mortar Library

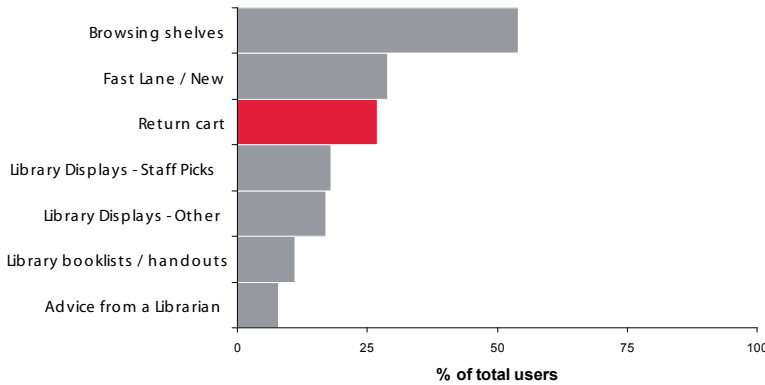
Discovery is why we opened library stacks to our readers, providing the opportunity to examine the book collection with as much freedom as in one's own private library.

"Tales abound from library users about the happy find, the unexpected, almost magical appearance of an item whose existence they had not suspected but that turns out to be exactly the resource they need...."

ole for Libraries Online



Q: How do you usually DISCOVER new materials while in the library?



The return cart is also a surprisingly popular place for serendipitous discoveries. Like shelves that feature “books worth looking into, books of the hour, interesting books recently unearthed...etc.,” sometimes helping to narrow the basis of selection in a world of overwhelming choice is all that is needed.

Ranganathan recommended profuse cross-referencing to aid discovery.

If the cross-references are not made sufficiently full, the library may have to turn away many readers unserved, while the materials sought by them are standing silently on the shelves.

The need for good discovery tools today is greater than ever. In 1931, Ranganathan wrote:

“When books are added in the hundreds, week by week, however retentive may be the memory, one loses track of the accessions and the mind cannot hold all the titles.”

Seventy-five years later, new titles are published in the thousands every week.

The trend toward non-library discovery tools becomes more focused when we look at those patrons who are most familiar with online bookstores (roughly one-third of the Oakville Public Library respondent base). They are significantly more likely to find that online bookstores are better along every dimension than online library sites.

This is not surprising when we consider that up to 75% of public library circulation is fiction or entertainment. Library OPACs have been designed primarily for finding titles, not browsing them. While the main tool we provide online for discovery is hyperlinked subject headings, both research and intuition tell us that subject headings offer limited utility to patrons for fiction, film, or music. The physical cues used for discovering titles in the bricks-and-mortar library, such as the return carts and shelf browsing, are typically absent in the online library.

Online book, music and film retailers tuned in early to the need

for discovery tools, and have invested considerable resources in designing these opportunities. The resulting tools, in the words of Jeff Bezos – the founder of Amazon – “accelerate serendipity”. These tools range from user ratings and reviews to “other readers who purchased this book...”

Will Libraries Take a Back Seat?

Our findings point to the future library user who get all their cues for what’s worth reading or watching from external discovery environments and end up only using the library as a cheap fulfilment mechanism. Patrons may do all of the fun, engaging “value-added” activities – discovery, browsing, conversations and connections with like-minded readers, viewers and listeners – elsewhere on the Web. In this light, the library’s traditional role as a “window on the world” is greatly diminished.

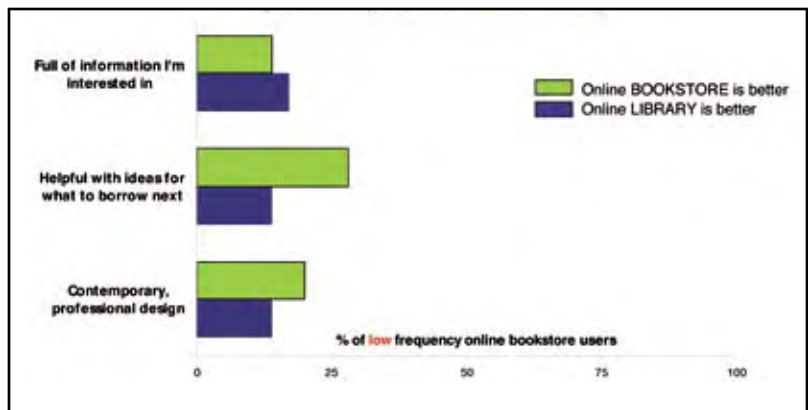
The divergent objectives of retail Web sites and public libraries also present a serious concern for the future of libraries. For example, commercial sites often want to promote popular high volume titles. However, this concentration of demand is counter-productive for public libraries, where it can only exacerbate bottlenecks with new and popular titles.

Social Discovery Brings Online Libraries to Life

As more users begin to select materials online, two questions face libraries: How can we maintain the level of discovery and selection that shelf-browsing users enjoy? And

Who is Providing Discovery Tools to Library Patrons Online?

The adoption of online library technologies is still evolving, but the usage profiles of today’s remote OPAC users offer a striking portrait of how online patrons differ from their offline counterparts. High frequency remote OPAC users typically make shorter visits, seldom use the OPAC for browsing, and make extensive use of non-library discovery tools.



what opportunities do online technologies present to go beyond those services, and to exceed other online offerings?

The shape of discovery in the online world is still unfolding. But what seems clear is that its most successful aspects will be social. Like all online systems that work well, social discovery simply enables a process that we all engage with anyway in our offline worlds.

Several years ago, after spending a great deal of money on research, the American Booksellers Association announced the not very startling fact that by far and away the most common reason for choosing a book is that we have heard about it from our friends.

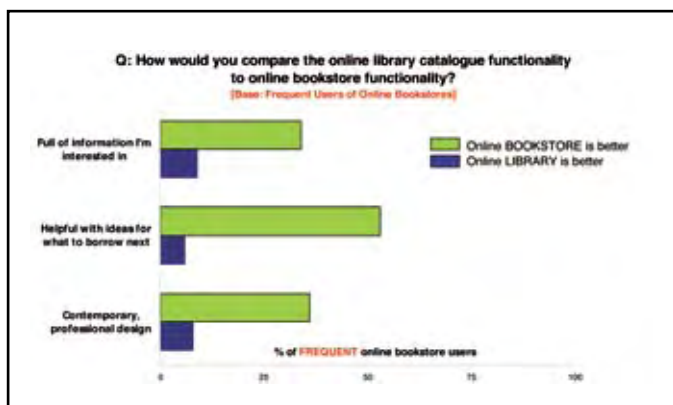
Social discovery is a system that connects like-minded individuals for recommendations that they can trust. Cross-referencing titles will still be key, as Ranganathan predicted, but it will be multifaceted, relying on a network of links within a library community.

Internet users are increasingly turning to the Web, not just as a gateway to information and services, but for rich, community-based experiences. These experiences are often organized around the information and cultural products that are at the heart of the Library's collections—books, current events, movies and music. Many Web users spend a large proportion of their leisure time engaging with each other, rating, reviewing, discussing, tagging, and exploring new titles.

Commercial players on the Web have recognized this trend, and are rapidly adapting their product offerings:

“... Yahoo will dive head first into social search, letting users participate in the discovery, categorization and sharing of indexed Web sites,” said Jeff Weiner, Yahoo’s senior vice president of search.

“While search is currently focused on indexing and retrieving Web documents, the future of the market lies in tapping the knowledge and information that people possess and that isn’t found on Web pages...”



And Adam Bosworth, VP of Engineering of Google, writes:

“As things play out, I’d suggest we will see ... the social network employed as a filter ... people coming together to rate, to review, to discuss, to analyze, and to provide 100,000 Zagat’s, models of trust for information, for goods, and for services.”

Social discovery has played a central role in the discovery processes of businesses like Amazon for some time. And recently, we’re seeing expansion of these ideas with innovative offerings like that provided by LibraryThing.com. Central to both is a belief that if you can tell a book reader by his covers, then perusing another member’s purchases or collection might go a long way toward predicting compatibility.

Conclusion

The potential of what could be is as exciting as the risks are daunting. The public library has always been about both community and discovery — helping our patrons navigate the cultural and information landscape. And the emerging domain of “Social Knowledge Discovery” on the Web


creates an opportunity to bring these together in powerful new ways.

How is the OLA engaging this brave new frontier? Research is just the first phase. The findings from this research will be presented to the community in September, in a workshop format that will allow participants to interactively explore the implications of the research to their own constituencies.

In addition, the OLA’s Knowledge Ontario Project is actively monitoring and building upon these trends through its Connect Ontario and OurOntario.ca modules. Stay Tuned.

Beth Jefferson, founder of BiblioCommons, is working with OLA, the British Columbia Department of Public Libraries and the Alberta Library in a national research aimed at creating social software for libraries.
beth.jefferson@rogers.com

Gail Richardson, Web Service Manager for Oakville Public Library, was part of the first stage of research for the project.
g Richardson@oakville.ca



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