

Search-related display of bibliographic records in Online Public Access Catalogs

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Today's library catalog is no longer just a search tool to find library-specific content. It has stretched to accommodate the needs of a new, more demanding and less patient generation of users, accustomed to the benefits of intuitive, powerful search engines and instant access to information. It attempts to accommodate the risen demands in usability and interconnectivity of content, and it offers today's user the chance to contribute to its content by adding reviews, suggestions and comments, as well as aiding in the classification of content by adding tags. In short, it has become a veritable showcase for today's libraries, a strong testament to library's willingness and dedication to remain an important player in the field of information management.

The aim of this paper is to analyze how search results and bibliographic records in general are presented in online library catalogs, formerly called OPACs. This is done by analyzing 10 different catalogs, starting with now obsolete systems, dating back some 40 years, to the most recent generation of web 2.0 catalogs. The term catalog is used in a broad sense here, including meta-search engines as well as catalogs such as LibraryThing.

The focus of the analysis centers on how search-related bibliographic display has evolved over the last 40 years and how questions and information (re)presentation have become important considerations when designing digital catalogs. Usability concerning the *display* of the content of online catalogs, especially how it can be enhanced to assist users better in finding what they are looking for, is not a topic greatly discussed, certainly not in more recent years. The paper is an attempt to fill this gap with some cursory, in no way representative, data.

In the absence of literature on the subject, the analysis centers on more general aspects of information design. A questionnaire was compiled consisting of a number of general design demands regarding good-practice and usability in online user interfaces. It serves as a guideline for comparing the catalogs under scrutiny. An important factor in the analysis centers on how the brain perceives visually displayed information and makes sense of it, how various elements of information display influence cognitive absorption, and how features of design, layout and representation in online catalogs can enhance or hinder the users' perception.