The Internet:
Academic Foe or Friend

Google and federated searches may point the way forward for branding law libraries

By Dana Neacsu, Ph.D.

Many people who regularly look to the internet for answers to their questions are disappointed by the potentially confusing array of information they find there, not to mention its uncertain reliability. Many others, as I point out here, often ignore the internet altogether. For me, as an academic law librarian, this is potentially good news.

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It means that people continue to want my professional help and that libraries may have a future despite so much talk to the contrary. It is only potentially good news, however, because the internet and the digitization process it engenders have added new layers of complexity to the "ask the experts" approach. The internet is shaping how we perform our jobs, how patrons see us, and how stakeholders decide our budgets. But the internet does not imply the demise of knowledge. To the contrary, it welcomes professional expertise and leadership as much as it rebukes timidness or lack of leadership.

To start, I would like to emphasize that users go to the internet to find answers when there are no other, easier ways to seek them. For instance, in Adam Davidson's article, "Making Choices in the Age of Information Overload," published in *The New York Times* on May 15, 2012, he notes that people continue to make decisions based on minimal information from trusted sources (friends or experts) rather than on internet searches. This minimal information approach, Davidson continues, works for both the avid and accidental internet searcher. People rely on what I call emotional cues, which are shortcuts pregnant with meaning because they come with embedded consumer trust in the product they represent, whether food for the body or food for thought.

Companies employ such shortcuts to convey perceived consumer strength. Economists call it "signaling." The public calls it branding, or market identity, and it helps people choose everything from baby formula to, as argued here, research data. For those with a legal bent, trademarks perform the same function.

To remain on a consumer's choice list, companies need to have a dynamic branding strategy. For example, Pepsi has continually adapted its list of paid celebrities according to their fleeting popularity. It has rotated celebrities from the late Michael Jackson to the has-been Madonna to the Romney-supporting Nicky Minaj. By hiring Nicki Minaj, Davidson argues that Pepsi signaled that is has both money to pay for her endorsement and a star-quality product.

Law Library Signaling

So what emotional cues should libraries use to remain the most trusted and easiest to use academic source-finder? We do not sell specific commodities but impart specialized knowledge. In other words, what should our dynamic strategy be to signal quality research services when so much information is accessible through the internet 24/7? If you answered, "Let's replace Bob Hope as a library spokesperson with someone younger or just alive," then you are correct for at least two reasons.

First, the internet, the cradle of free information, is rather disorganized, and any mechanism to make sense of it is welcome. The internet has the potential to equalize our intellectual abilities: we all have equal access to information. But the vaster it becomes, the more obvious it appears that web surfing requires expertise and *emotional cues.* Second, the internet's massive index, Google, the best mechanism yet to organize the internet, is not sufficiently sophisticated for searches that do not include simple terms, such as "where is the nearest Greek diner?" That's why library leadership becomes so crucial in explaining to both patrons and stakeholders what librarianship means today.

Learning from Google

Google has the right approach, and we can all learn from it. Knowledge needs to be organized, categorized, and labeled in a way that makes it easily accessible. Academic knowledge, scholarly work—at least in its Western version—builds on existing well-indexed and accessible work. To research it, then, the fastest way is by using indexes, which offer controlled searches incorporating topics deemed relevant for a scholarly area.

Library catalogs are basic indexes. To the extent they only index a library's book holdings, their usefulness is limited to that library's collection. Until the digitization revolution, the library's collection represented the academic *emotional cue* one sought. Today, when so much information is digitally available and the internet has given all of us a taste of transparency, an index search limited to one academic library's holdings has become inadequate. To exude expertise and credible knowledge shortcuts, today's index searches need to connect collections and make accessible library content that goes beyond the mere title, author, and keyword field. Today's research expertise has to impress internet users for whom Google searches are deficient.

The emotional value of a research index in the Harvard Library System is incontestable. However, because the index is too limited, it becomes a mere list of titles, and without connections to other library holdings, it loses much of its emotional cue. Perhaps due to this limited approach, the portal to the best academic library in the country has been hidden beyond the more generic concepts of "Resources and Offices" (www.harvard.edu/resources-offices). At that level, the library is one of many administrative offices, not the forefront of academic research.

Certainly, the holdings of the Harvard libraries are among the most sought-after academic resources, but they need to become accessible if they want to remain valuable. For example, as a Harvard student in the 1990s, I sampled a minuscule part of the Widener Library manuscript collection only to be amazed at its depth and diversity. Finding some Latin manuscripts of 12th century ecclesiastic court decisions was understandably difficult at the time. Perhaps in the near future the index can refer to digitized holdings so that a mere keyword search brings up the full text of this rich collection.

Learning from Federated Searches

The newest indexes, which use behind-the-scenes search engines incorporating advanced "federated searches," such as CLIO Beta at Columbia University (cliobeta.columbia.edu) or Morris at Yale Law School (morris.law.yale.edu), deliver the academic expertise Google does not and Harvard's library indexes fail to deliver. Certainly, federated search engines remain a work in progress. But they signal a trend toward openness and a library's desire to incorporate technology, which is easily feasible with the newest scanning technology.

Libraries have always been at the forefront of scholarship production. Today they need to step up their PR work. These are dynamic times. What constitutes a good strategy today may become obsolete within months. A librarian's research expertise remains as needed as ever, but digitization and especially the misperception of the limitless Google are raising patrons' and stakeholders' expectations. Butchering library collection budgets makes sense to the extent that more and more academic journals are freely available on the internet through open source journals, which many librarians (such as Duke's and Yale's) have long pioneered as the main place for scholarly publications.

But butchering budgets for technical and professional development does not make academic sense in the long run. As librarians, we still have some time to take the lead because researchers still rely on our emotional cues to find scholarship. Those cues now are embedded in federated search engines and in librarians with even more qualifications and abilities to multitask and adapt to new technologies while incorporating increasing levels of substantive knowledge. Of course, without visionary library leadership, little can be achieved. ■

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