

# ***The rise of platforms could see off the web***

**By Ken Chad. December 2010**

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One of the key library system product directions identified in Sconul's Higher Education Library Technology (HELibTech) website is vertical search. 'By launching vertical search products... vendors are banking that their approach provides sufficient added value over Google or Microsoft approaches'.<sup>1</sup>

Libraries anxious to improve their relevance to students have been busy, over the last couple of years, purchasing such solutions – AquaBrowser, Primo, Encore, Summon and Ebsco Discovery Service. The main benefit that such services provide is unified search across print and electronic library resources. An underlying assumption is that library resources (as opposed to generality of

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content on the open web) are of higher quality and more relevant because they have been selected to meet the specific needs of students and researchers.

Put simply it is argued that the more you use library resources the better degree you will get. Looking at degrees awarded at the University of Huddersfield, Dave Pattern reported: 'Those who achieved a first on average borrowed twice as many items as those who got a third and logged into... e-resources 3.5 times as much'.<sup>2</sup> Vertical search

services claim to improve the usage of resources thereby further increasing the value of library collections (and decreasing cost per use). Michael Gersch, Senior Vice President and General Manager of Serials

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Solutions, says: 'Some librarians state that since the implementation of the Summon service in their libraries, use of certain journals has increased more than 100 per cent.'<sup>3</sup>

The new wave of vertical search/discovery services works in a significantly different way to earlier ('metasearch') approaches. They harvest and aggregate data to create a single, unified index rather than sending search requests (e.g. via the Z39.50 protocol) to a range of separate remote databases/catalogues. This enables much faster response times. But there is more to it. Vertical search applications are provided as 'software-as-a service' (SaaS). So all those Summon implementations are actually one big database 'out there' in the (internet) cloud. As a result, vendors are creating vast data warehouses that can take advantage of the 'collective intelligence' potential that such huge aggregations offer. Like Amazon they can better track how resources are used and provide additional features such as recommender services. ExLibris already offers such a service (bX)<sup>4</sup> for electronic resources. Other vendors are sure to follow. But will

<sup>1</sup> See <http://helibtech.com/Product+Directions>.

<sup>2</sup> See 'Library usage and final grades.' By Dave Pattern. 'Self-Plagiarism is Style: Dave Pattern's blog. Jun 30th, 2010. <http://www.daveyp.com/blog/archives/1370>

<sup>3</sup> 'The Summon™ Service Passes the 100 Customer Mark.' SerialsSolutions Press Release. 13th September 2010

<http://www.serialssolutions.com/news-detail/the-summon/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.exlibrisgroup.com/category/bXOverview>

these library-centric services be able to compete successfully for the attention of users, which is going to fewer and fewer places?

According to the web analytics company Compete, the top 10 websites in the world have accounted for 75 per cent of US page views so far this year, up from 31 per cent in 2001. 'In March [2009] the average American visited a mere 111 domains and 2,500 web

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pages, according to Nielsen Online. What's worse our attention across these pages is highly fragmented. The average time spent per page is 56 seconds. Portals and search engines dominate, capturing approximately 12 of the 75 hours spent online in March. However, people-powered sites like Wikipedia, Facebook and YouTube are not far behind, snagging nearly 4.5 hours of our monthly attention.<sup>5</sup> I suspect that UK behaviour follows a similar trend and I think it's safe to say that library websites barely figure at all in the data. Even students and researchers often start with Google. Many librarians have, for some time, acknowledged this trend and are making resources discoverable on these global platforms. Students and researchers can get directed to library e-journals from a search on Google Scholar because the citation found in Google can be connected by the library's link resolver to the 'appropriate copy' (the one licensed by the library) of the full- text journal article.<sup>6</sup>

Libraries are taking advantage of other platforms, too. The London School of Economics made some of its digital archive

available on Flickr because this has advantages over a dedicated website. 'We see Flickr Commons as a way of making these images accessible to a wider community, and also as a way of enabling people to share their knowledge and their thoughts about them.'<sup>7</sup> Platforms make life easier. They provide a ready-made low cost (often free) infrastructure to discover and share resources. You don't need to buy specialised software or expensive hardware. It is all managed in the cloud.

They also support access from mobile technologies. Within five years, Morgan Stanley projects, '...the number of users accessing the Net from mobile devices will

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surpass the number who access it from PCs.'<sup>8</sup> Mobile access is increasingly based on dedicated 'apps' rather than a generic browser. Some are arguing that the web as such is dying and instead we'll have a 'Net' monopolised by a few global app-based services. And content won't be free. 'We'll pay for convenience and reliability, which is why iTunes can sell songs for 99 cents despite the fact that they are out there, somewhere, in some form, for free. The iTunes toll is a small price to pay for the simplicity of just getting what you want'.<sup>9</sup> Will library services, even if aggregated, get the attention of a sufficient number of users?

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<sup>5</sup> 'The End of the Destination Web Era'. By Steve Rubel. Micro Persuasion blog. May 03, 2009  
<http://www.micropersuasion.com/2009/05/the-end-of-the-destination-web-era.html>

<sup>6</sup> See 'Google Scholar Library Links'  
<http://scholar.google.com/intl/en/scholar/librarylinks.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.flickr.com/people/lselibrary/>

<sup>8</sup> 'The Web Is Dead. Long Live the Internet'. By Chris Anderson and Michael Wolff 17th August 2010  
Wired September 2010 edition.

[http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/08/ff\\_webrip/all/1](http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/08/ff_webrip/all/1)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid