Simplifying the Discovery Environment for Electronic Resources

Strategic Directions

- Build and Strengthen Relationships with Faculty, Students, and the MIT Community

Goal of Specific Objective

Increase the discovery and use of library resources for members of the MIT community by simplifying user discovery of and access to electronic resources via the MIT Libraries website.

Justification of Effort

The 2011 MIT Libraries user survey finds that a significant majority of our user community considers access to “Electronic journals and magazines” to be “Very important” or “Essential” to their research or coursework. This is especially the case among our graduate student and faculty population. Further, the user survey indicates a strong user preference for electronic resources over print resources in areas such as articles, journals, and conference proceedings across all surveyed user groups. Less than 5% of users surveyed preferred print access over electronic access to this content. We consider that discovery of and access to electronic resources, particularly electronic journal content, to be a core service offering to the MIT community, and that demand for this service will remain strong for the foreseeable future.

In 2011, over 95% of the MIT Libraries expenditures for ongoing subscriptions were allocated to electronic resources. There is evidence of a trend of increasing year-to-year allocation to electronic resources over the last 10 years.

Given the MIT community’s need for library provisioned electronic resources, we should evaluate our service offerings in this space and make improvements to modernize our online service infrastructure and user experience around this core library service offering.

Problem Statement

The MIT Libraries provides access to a wealth of electronic resources (e.g., articles, e-journals, databases, e-books) through its website presence. This online library “discovery environment” for electronic resources provides access to numerous searchable content repositories, some locally managed (e.g., Vera), and some externally hosted (e.g., licensed article databases, Google Scholar). The fragmented nature of the online discovery environment poses several challenges for users who expect the discovery of library resources, to be much easier and simpler than it is in practice. Some of these challenges include:

1. Too many content repositories for users to choose from for a given information need
2. Ineffective differentiation between content repositories; we don’t make it obvious to the
user to know what search tool to use
3. Poor or non-existent cross-linking between silos in cases when the user is using the wrong silo for their information task

These challenges can be mitigated by improving how we present electronic resource discovery options to our users on the MIT Libraries website, and by deploying better infrastructure for users to search library collections.

**Recommendations**

This proposal recommends a staged approach composed of several discrete work activities that occur in sequence. Our assumption is that although we cannot fully complete the work of optimizing our entire online library resource discovery environment in a single fiscal year, we can make substantial improvements that would yield tangible results by the end of FY13, and position us well for progressive enhancement of the library discovery environment moving forward.

A reassessment of this nature typically demands research to identify the current state of affairs, research to assess available options for moving forward, and planning work to describe a desired future state. That said, the MIT Libraries can learn from peer institutions that have previously undertaken similar efforts, so much prior work can be leveraged. In addition to planning and research work, the outcomes of this initiative should also yield tangible user-facing changes to our library discovery environment.

The intended scope of this proposal is to improve access to electronic resources on the MIT Libraries web sites for members of the MIT community. We do not intend for this strategic objective to focus on improving the discovery of MIT Libraries curated digital content (e.g., OA/IR content, Archives and Special Collections) which has a much broader audience than the MIT community and involves a different set of strategies (e.g. search engine optimization).

**Tasks for FY13**

An initiative of this scope can take many possible directions. Below we describe some discrete activities that could be pursued, broken out into three phases. In addition, further work will be required to assess the level of effort, to scope the work appropriately, and to identify expertise and staffing required.

**Planning and Research**

- Inventory our electronic resource content repositories and tools. Identify the building blocks of our online discovery environment, and decide which content repositories are in scope or out of scope for this initiative.
- Conduct an environmental scan of library web site designs from peer institutions to identify existing models for electronic resource discovery.
- Review the recommendations from the Discovery Plus team’s evaluation of vended discovery products and map out 2–3 scenarios of how such a tool could be implemented in the MIT Libraries’ discovery environment.

**Implementation**

- Implement a vended discovery product as a beta service.
Pursue Information Architecture activities (e.g., card sorting, controlled vocabularies, wireframing) to develop a holistic and simplified information architecture (IA) for our online library resources discovery environment.

Implement the new IA on the MIT Libraries home page, secondary page navigation, and on entry points of existing electronic resource content repositories.

**Assessment and Evaluation**

- Develop a strategy for assessing the use of the discovery environment on an ongoing basis; this should involve a mix of qualitative user research and quantitative methods.
- Implement one or more web site analytics tools (e.g., Google Analytics) to yield data points for future assessment.

**Related Initiatives**

**Discovery Plus**

The Discovery Plus group has been evaluating several vendor-based “Discovery Tools”, specifically ProQuest Summon, Ebsco Discovery Service, and Ex Libris Primo. If the MIT Libraries moves forward on the implementation of one of these tools, there are many decisions to be made about how the tool is deployed. What content should be included in the discovery tool? How should the tool be integrated in our online discovery environment? How do we present the tool to our users? What impact would this new tool have on our existing information resource discovery tools (both locally developed and locally managed)? The implementation of a discovery tool should be framed by a broader consideration of our online discovery environment.

**Homepage Tabbed Search Box Redesign**

In December 2011, the User Interface Group conducted “guerilla” paper prototype testing of the Libraries’ home page tabbed search section, in order to incorporate user feedback in relabeling the tab names. This testing was the result of recommendations from the Discovery Promotion group to combine the searches for Barton and MIT’s WorldCat and to create a search for ebooks in the tabbed-search section. The results from this usability testing showed that our users prefer simplified tab labels that show only formats on the tabs (e.g., Books + Media, E-books, etc.), rather than the brand name of the tools (e.g., Barton, MIT’s WorldCat, Vera).

This work will need to be updated as we move forward into working with a new discovery tool. Similar methods can be used to test with users and get feedback on the most intuitive choices.

**Criteria**

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<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Does this objective contribute to MIT initiatives?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td>2. Does this objective act on knowledge gained from user input?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Will this objective benefit our users?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td>4. Will this objective improve our workflows?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>5. Will this objective enhance our staff skills, or show us as innovative?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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6. If staff resources must be redirected, can the impacted activities be reduced to allow for the objective to be carried out?

7. Are there additional resources (staff or financial) available to support the objective?

8. Is this objective part of a current project? Are there already plans for that project to carry forward with this objective in FY13?

Comments

1. While this doesn’t directly support any specific MIT initiative, e.g., Environment, Cancer, it will support electronic resource discovery in all of them.

6. This is outside the scope of the knowledge of our subgroup, since we don’t represent all units that would be involved.

7. This decision will be made at the Steering Committee Level.

*Prepared by Millicent Gaskell, Nicole Hennig, and Tito Sierra*