Comparison of Public Library OPACs

Missoula Public Library & Enid Public Library

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LIS 5043 Organization of Information

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March 8, 2020

To better understand the user experience with public library websites two public libraries in towns of relatively comparable size were chosen. As of July 1, 2018, Missoula, Montana has a population of approximately 74,000 and Enid, OK is home to about 50,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Missoula and Enid both provide services to smaller towns and rural areas that surround each city. The U.S. Census Bureau reports both cities having primarily white populations with 2% of both cities' populations identifying as indigenous. Enid is slightly more diverse with a significant Hispanic or Latino population (n.d.) Unlike Enid, Missoula is home to a major state university, the University of Montana. Enid is home to 2 branches of Oklahoma state colleges.

The Enid Public Library (EPL) has their physical location listed at the bottom of their home page. They also have the address for the city offices listed, slightly more prominent which could be confusing for those who are not familiar with the area. In contrast, the physical address for the main branch of the Missoula Public Library (MPL) is listed in a drop-down tab on the navigation bar. MPL also has listing for branch locations, including maps and contact information, available on a separate page accessible through a hyperlink on the drop-down tab. There is an additional branch located in one of the area high schools and several branches in smaller towns surrounding Missoula. MPL has a mobile computer lab location, the W.O.W. (Web on Wheels) Bus. There is a separate page with locations, dates, and times easily accessible via a hyperlink.

Searching for a book at MPL's webpage is incredibly easy. There is a quick search box (fig. 1) on the home page that searches the MPL catalog and includes other libraries in the Montana Shared Catalog. The search opens results in a new page where you can then limit your search.

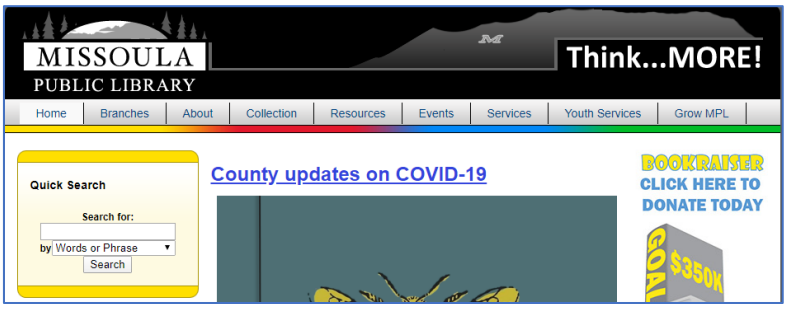

Figure 1

Figure 2

EPL has a tool bar across the top of the home page that includes a tab titled “Find Books & More” (fig 2). The library catalog is clearly titled in the drop-down menu. It opens into a new tab for searching.

For the purpose of testing the OPAC at each site I chose The Ocean at the End of the Lane by Neil Gaiman. Both OPACs contained the book, which could be found by title, author, and subject- memory-fiction. Using a book by such a prolific author turned out more difficult through MPL because they list approximately 12 items per page. Each item lists all the branches or partner libraries where the item is available. While it is very helpful to be able to find all the locations an item is held by, searching for works by Neil Gaiman returns more than 200 results. The search for works by Neil Gaiman returned 19 pages of results requiring the user to move to subsequent pages until the item is found. The Ocean at the End of the Lane is on page 7. EPL returns all items on one page of results. The user must scroll but new pages do not have to load. When searching by memory and limiting the results to fiction, The Ocean at the End of the Lane is the 10th book listed in the EPL OPAC. There are 80 results. The same search parameters at MPL returns 314 results on 27 pages. The Ocean at the End of the Lane is entry 151 and is found on page 13. While all three searches ultimately located the book in question, searching for a specific fiction book by subject yields a lot of results to sift through. If a user found a book that interested them and wanted

books with similar subjects this search would be helpful. Both OPACs contained hyperlinks to facilitate subject searches and allowed for narrowing searching by such parameters as author and audience. MPL offers more refining parameters and allows the user to exclude or include specific results.

Both OPACs not only presented various information packages in the search results but also allow the user to limit their search to a particular information package. If, for example, a user really enjoyed reading The Ocean at the End of the Lane but wanted to find an audio book with a similar theme they could listen to during their daily commute, the search could be limited to only those results that were audio recordings.

For those users who are not familiar with online searching in general, or the particular OPAC, each library offers online help. The help button is prominent in the upper left-hand corner of the EPL OPAC (fig. 3). There are some basic search terms and examples in a pop-up window. There are also links for detailed PDFs, that include pictures, for both the user's online account and how to use to the OPAC. There is a small help button on MPL's webpage in the right-hand corner of the menu bar. The same help section is available through a larger icon on the OPAC homepage (fig. 4). This help section provides text only information on a variety of subjects throughout the library system, including

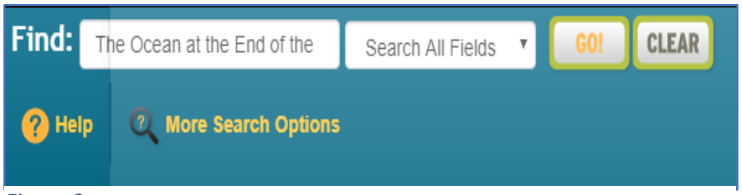

Figure 3

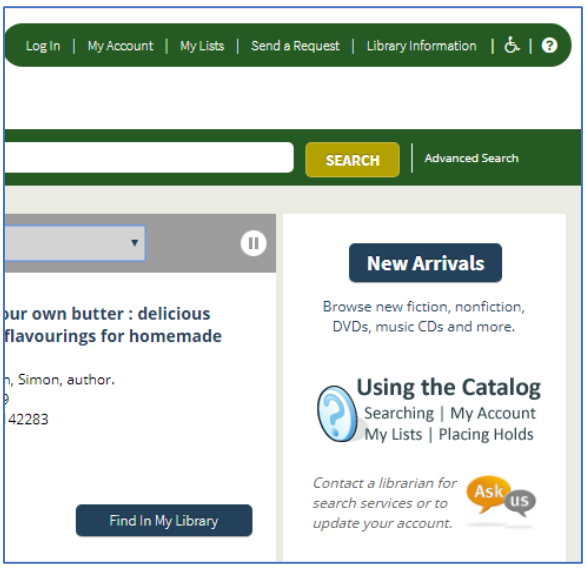

Figure 4

using the OPAC. There is also a link to contact the library for further assistance with searching or account information.

Overall, both OPACs functioned well. All the required search and advanced search options are available at each site. Both OPACs had a clean look without extra distractions and were

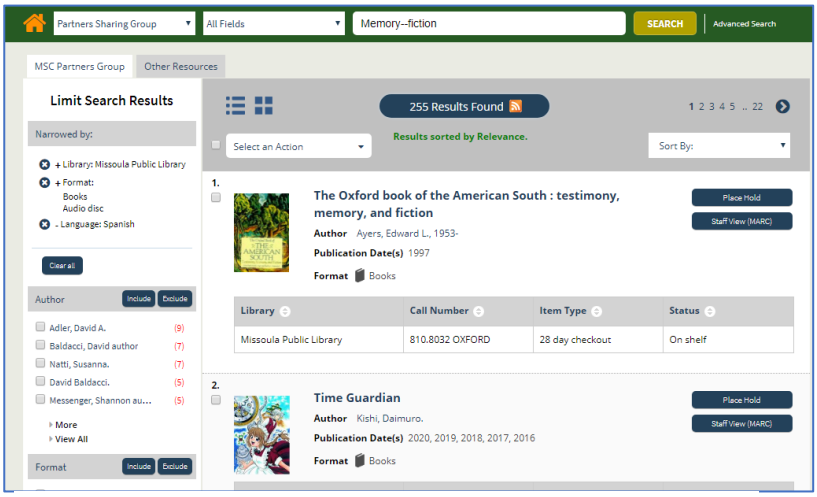

Figure 5

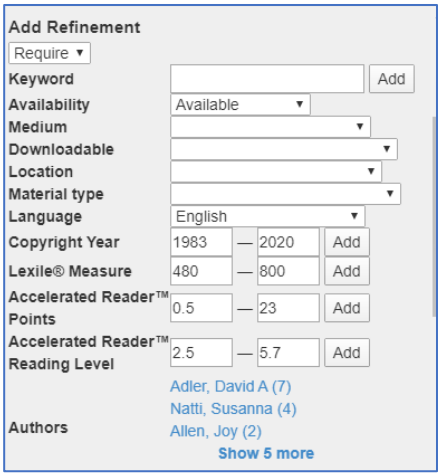

Figure 6

interesting to look at. Both OPACs were user friendly. MPL's OPAC included search parameters of exclusion (fig. 5) allowing the user to remove items from the returned list. EPL has options of adding reading level criteria to the search parameters. If I were to make changes to either OPAC it would be to include both refinement options. I would also add more items per page on the MPL OPAC to reduce the number of new pages users needed to navigate.

CONCLUSION

Both the EPL and MPL OPACs seem to be examples of good information retrieval systems as described in the lectures and readings. Both systems function to allow users to access information with efficiency and effectiveness. The systems are accessible at no immediate cost to the user; there is no monetary cost at the time of the query. They are also low effort for most users and assistance is available should the user find themselves expending effort to retrieve information. The information requested is also returned quickly. Further, the OPAC systems

follow Cutter's Objects of a Catalog by allowing users to discover whether the library has an item by title, author, or subject as well as finding materials by a particular author or on a particular subject. The OPAC systems also assist with the selection of an item by providing additional information on each item. Exploring these systems demonstrates Cloonan and Dove's (2010) updates to Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science. Not only are books on the shelves for readers to use, but those services that can be online and accessible to remote users are available when and where a library user might need them. The OPACs are easy for novice or lay users to use effectively. The use of online services, including the OPACs make the library and its services available at any time, even when the physical library is not open.

References

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