

Press Release www.TheEuropeanLibrary.org

Will users use library portals?

During May/June of 2005, [The European Library](http://www.TheEuropeanLibrary.org) commissioned [IRN Research](http://www.irn-research.com) to undertake a web-based survey of some users of The European Library portal. The survey was designed to analyse how they used the site and their satisfaction with the site's search facilities, processes, and content. Responses were received from 193 users in Europe, North America, and the rest of the world. The European Library gave 400 euros to Book Aid International, against the promised 2 euros donated for every completed survey. The research was undertaken on the newly launched Beta site, to determine, before further development, what works for the user and where their priorities lie.

General results suggest overall satisfaction with and enthusiasm for the portal. There were some variations in use between users from different countries and between the academic versus the occasional user. While most respondents found the search results either very useful or useful, many users were critical of the search facilities and ease of searching. This finding bears out the publisher's concerns over the site, where portals are not 'understood' by the majority of users.

Only a quarter of respondents found the search facilities easy to use while almost three-quarters had problems with the search process.

There was also a feeling amongst a significant number of users that they were not finding content that should be there and that the search process was having an impact here.

The research showed that it was the academic users (researchers and lecturers) who used the portal correctly by selecting which collections to search in before entering their query. Other user groups – students, librarians, private individuals and users in government and private industry – were more likely to only use the simple search and not try harder to get the information contained in the site.

Portals, such as The European Library, provide a service by offering the user the opportunity to search across a selection of remote databases, simultaneously. However all portals are limited in the number of databases they can search in at once to return results in a reasonable time. Whereas, if the data contained in these databases is crawled and harvested into a central database the search is launched using only this central database. This is effectively the case for Google and Yahoo. The European Library was born from a need to access non-harvestable databases in the National Libraries of Europe and search across them. For The European Library the option of pulling all the information accessible at these libraries into one central database is not currently feasible for both technical and political reasons.

The most effective way to use such portals is to search for and select relevant collections and then specify a search query. It is therefore significant that the majority of users in the survey did not do this and hoped to get the results they were looking for from a simple search covering just 12 remote databases. As there are 115 searchable collections available in The European Library, by selecting the simple search, these users are missing out on almost 90% of the collections available to choose from. In usability tests on the prototype it seemed clear that we had to entice people into the site before 'teaching' them to use it. And this is why there is a simple search. The survey results reinforce this impression, but highlight the need for much more 'behind-the-scenes' work to give these users Amazon type responses, such as: 'you searched in these databases but we searched in these ones for you.....'

Despite the search problems identified above, over three-quarters of users see the portal as a useful resource and expect to use it again. However, user expectations are high when visiting the site: a majority of respondents expected to find all the content from participating libraries accessible on the portal. The European Library is therefore looking to step up the access to content held in the National Libraries of Europe and is fully behind the need to digitise more which is the fundament of the European Digital Library.

For more details on the survey please contact:

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