EBSCO Discovery Service at Liverpool

Martin Wolf

Martin Wolf describes the main features and reviews usages of the new EBSCO Discovery Service in use at the University of Liverpool. This searching system is aimed at improving the discoverability of the full range of the university resources.

Introduction

Like all academic libraries, the University of Liverpool seeks to provide end-users with the most straightforward and effective means of using our wide range of print and online resources. Having become increasingly frustrated with our federated search resource[1], we became one of the first in the country to explore the possibilities of the new breed of discovery tools with unified indexes, taking the unusual step of becoming beta partners in the development of both ProQuest's Summon and EBSCO's EBSCO Discovery Service, or EDS (which we have branded with the name DISCOVER). After running both services in parallel for a year, we decided to commit to EDS as our discovery resource[2]. This article provides an overview of some of the key features of EDS after two years use at University of Liverpool.

EDS – the content

At the heart of EDS is a single unified index containing data from a broad range of resources. Databases with data that can be included in this single index include all the databases hosted by EBSCO, such as Business Source Premier, Academic Search Complete, Historical Abstracts etc.; non-EBSCO services, such as JSTOR and the Web of Knowledge citation indexes; and the library's own local holdings, such as the library catalogue and institutional repository[3]. In this

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[1] Federated search tools are those that take entered search terms, sends them out to external resources, extracts results from those resources, aggregates them, then provides them in a single list to the end-user.

[2] For more on this, see the *Library Journal* article "Liverpool's Discovery", available at http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/home/888965-264/liverpools_discovery.html.csp

[3] Note that a library has to be subscribing to, say, JSTOR, for its information to be included in that institution's single unified index.

way, EDS combines discovery of a library's print and online resources in a single access point – a marked improvement over federated and vertical search tools that kept the different resource types separate.

In addition to the single integrated index described above, EDS end-users can conduct federated searches across a range of databases *not* in the unified index. The end-user will typically do this after an initial search against the unified index, by selecting a checkbox next to the database(s) of their choice as displayed in the right-hand column of the search results page (see
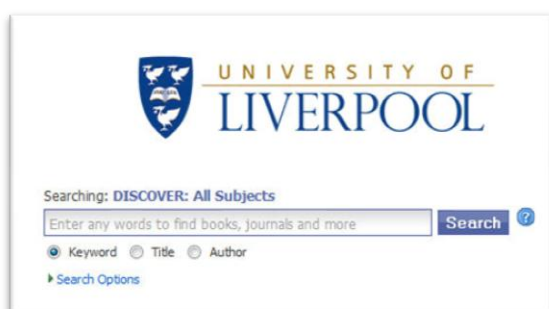

Figure 2 Main EDS search box

below).

This broadens EDS into a "shop window" onto library resources. As there will always be databases that cannot be opened to federated searching, EDS cannot completely replace other ways of providing access to the full range of resources; nevertheless, for resources that *can* be opened to federated searching, EDS can help raise their profile, and increase their usage.

The source of the results of a search are clearly visible in the "Content Providers" facet. This useful information allows users to decide whether to limit their searches within EDS just to results from specific databases, or to step out of the EDS interface and search those specific databases in their native interface.

EDS – the customisation options

EDS provides a number of customisation tools for libraries, helping to brand the service and integrate it more fully with the library's current offerings. At its simplest level this includes adding a prominent university logo to the main EDS search box (figure 1). Permanent links back to other library and / or institutional pages and services can be provided in the navigation bar at the top of the screen, providing easy access back

out of the EDS interface (figure 2).

Figure 1 Navigation bar

Customisation goes beyond these fairly simple and cosmetic features, however. For example, it is possible to set up different EDS "profiles", EDS interfaces which can be configured to search only certain specific resources. This allows the library to provide a range of resources of more specific relevance for certain users. Have a large cohort of online students who never set foot on campus? You can set up an EDS profile that will only search selected full-text sources. Have a set of Web pages through which you provide access to subject-specific information? You can set up an EDS profile that will only search selected subject resources, and ignore others (a useful feature for larger academic institutions you have large numbers of users in a wide variety of academic disciplines). This "one application / many approaches" aspect of the resource, along with the ability to create search boxes that can be embedded into any Web page (see figure 3 for an

Figure 3 Customised search box

example that gives access both to a subject-specific EDS profile and the full EDS profile – this is used on the library's subject-related LibGuides pages), means EDS gives librarians the ability to promote their online resources in a flexible range of ways.

Links to other external resources of the type you would expect from a bibliographic database are provided. For example, there is support for direct export of search results into bibliographic software packages such as RefWorks, EndNote and Citavi, while integration with OpenURL resolvers
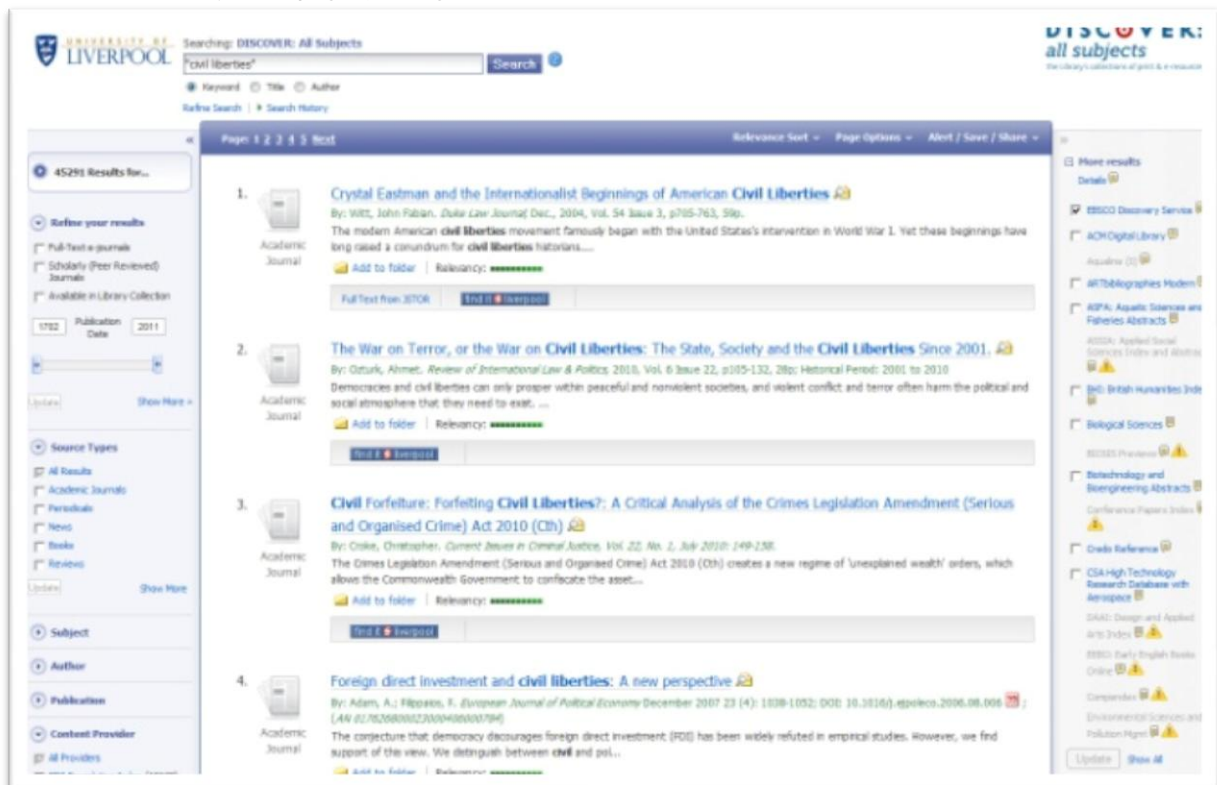

Figure 4 Simple search interface

allows for quick identification of and access to resources available in full text to end-users.

EDS – searching and results

One of the main advantages of discovery tools like EDS is the ability to provide end-users a single search box, just like Google. The design encourages the kind of simple keyword searching common when using general Web search engines – but the results will be very different.

The display of search results in EDS is one of its weaker elements, though in a sense this is a weakness born of the product's scope and complexity. Traditionally an EDS search results page will feature three columns, as shown in figure 4. The left-hand column provides options for refining a search – for example, limiting to particular resources, publication dates, and so on. The main central column provides the results themselves, accompanied by visual cues such as icons to identify particular results as being an article, book, thesis, etc., and, in the case of some full text sources, thumbnails of figures, tables and diagrams. The right hand column displays the list of external databases for which a federated search is available for the search just undertaken (if the library has enabled this option).

While providing excellent options for refining searches, there's no denying that this results page can look very cluttered, with the sheer number of different things that can be clicked proving perhaps a little too bewildering for the novice end-user, who after using such a basic search box may be surprised at the complexity on offer in the results page. This points to the dichotomy at the heart of products in the same class as EDS – they are providing simplified interfaces to resources that are, in themselves, very complex. As such, user education will still be necessary to ensure that end-users know enough about what EDS does and what it searches in order to use to its full potential.

Despite this caveat, however, the workflow encouraged by the EDS interface – broad keyword search, followed by a refining of results – mirrors closely the approach taken by many researchers to their information needs (my own experience of working with postgraduate researchers suggests that the large majority tend to work this way). This is not to say that EDS does not offer advanced search options; for example, using the "Refine Search" option it is possible to construct a complex, limited search query *before* clicking the search button. Additionally, power users who create a free account with EDS have tools at their disposal to determine the layout of the screen, the search and display defaults, and so on. However, EDS will primarily be of interest to those who wish to start with a wide search and then narrow down their results.

There is a great deal of customisation available to libraries in terms of what search options they make available and which they don't. Examples include whether to offer federated search options as standard on the search results page, and whether default searches should or shouldn't search in the full text of items as well as their metadata.

EDS – the future

EBSCO are moving EDS tentatively beyond the desktop/laptop browser and onto mobile devices. At the time of writing (August 2011) an iPhone/iPod touch app is available. Though not the focus of this review, this smartphone app provides an acceptable search experience that provides some important features such as saved searches and saved articles. As the march of smartphones and slate/tablet devices increases, we can expect EBSCO to make more developments in this area.

For the library's part, EDS now plays a central role in our provision of information, and its use is a cornerstone of our information literacy endeavours. Far from being seen as a "dumbing down" of search, as some might have feared, EDS has proven an excellent vehicle through which to introduce users to the type and range of information resources available to them – a useful tool for those new to literature searching, and a way of providing serendipitous discovery of previously unused databases for veteran researchers.

As relevance ranking technology increases, and local holdings are seen more as *one* of the collections we provide, rather than *the main* collection we provide, it is probable that a discovery tool may one day completely replace the OPAC, and become the default access point for all our resources.

In Summary

In conclusion, we have found EDS to be an excellent resource that simplifies access to our collections by bringing discovery of online and print resources together into a relatively seamless whole, and gives our end-users more straightforward access to the quality information sources they need for their studies.

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