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Finding Through Clouds at Corvallis-Benton County Public Library

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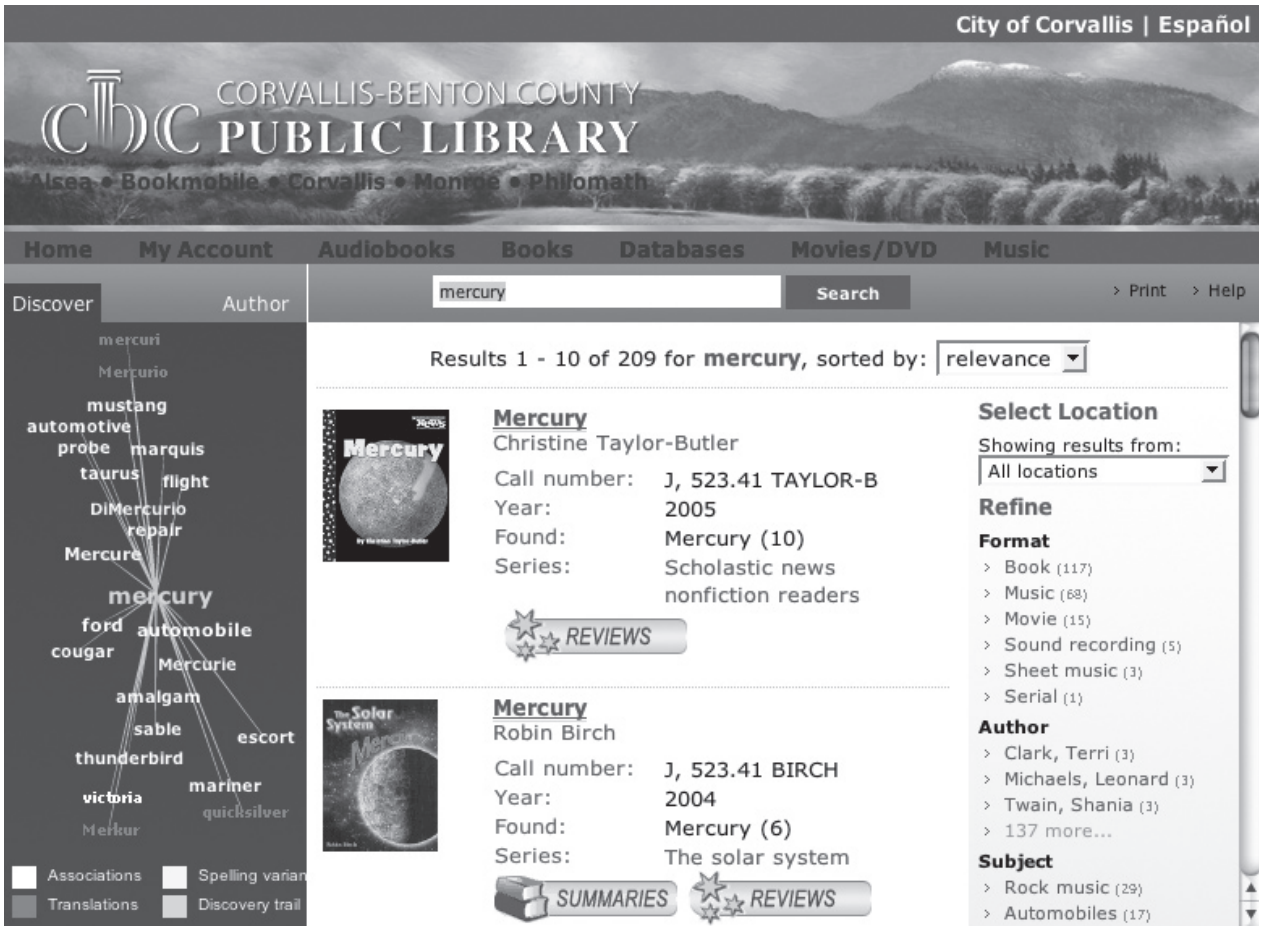
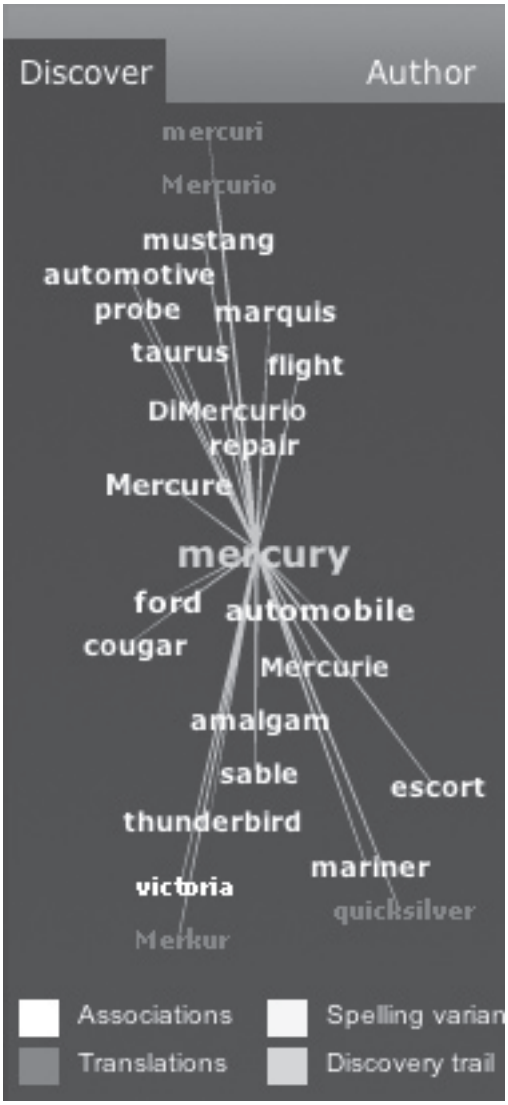
The general reaction to AquaBrowser, the library search tool most known for its "word cloud" is one of extremes: people, patrons and staff alike, tend to love it or they hate it. It's either fun, intuitive, and serendipitous or too busy, dumbed-down, and commercial. Regardless of how you feel about it, and whatever its drawbacks, AquaBrowser is a supplement to the traditional Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC), and that's a good thing.

AquaBrowser presents the searcher with three main tools: search, discover, and refine. To initiate a search, the user enters keyword(s) in the search box, with results appearing in the middle pane of the screen in standard OPAC format. To the left of the middle pane is the spiderweb-like word cloud, allowing the user to click on related terms, with each click generating a new result set. To the right is the refine menu, an in-context limits list allowing the user to click on results grouped by format, author, subject, language, and series.

A quick way to experience these AquaBrowser tools is to search for a term that has many different meanings such as the word "mercury." This search in the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library implementation of AquaBrowser retrieves 212 titles. To the left, the search term sits in the center of the word cloud with various associations branching from it: some, such as "automobile," "flight," and "ford" and more informative than others.



On the other side is a list of links which indicate, among other things, that there are 117 books matching this term, that 30 matching items also had the subject heading Rock music, and that 16 matching items are in the Chilton's total car care series.



Depending on your searching expertise, your information need, and your patience with extraneous information, these results can determine whether you are in the love it or hate it group.

If, as searcher (or a librarian), you knew that the library owned a collection of Chilton's repair books and you were looking for Mercury the car, this would be a very convoluted method of getting what you needed. Instead, you might be better served with the standard OPAC interface where you can do a keyword search for "mercury Chilton." This retrieves 16 matches, all Chilton repair manuals covering Mercury.

On the other hand, if you only had a vague sense of what you were looking for, the AquaBrowser's word cloud might be more appealing. By clicking your way from "Mercury" to "flight" to "space," each with a new set of results and related terms, you might happily discover items you didn't know existed, without ever having to learn the database syntax.

Approaching the standard OPAC with this same vague sense will result in a very different perception of results. The search retrieves the same number of hits, 212, but requires far more cognitive work. The first three items are 101 horsekeeping tips ("mercury thermometer" is in the contents note), *Best of Dusty Springfield* (published by Mercury Records), and *The astronauts: the story of Project Mercury.* A searcher would have to be fairly knowledgeable about the database infrastructure to know that clicking on the title record, then on the subject heading Project Mercury (U.S.) would retrieve highly relevant results, and that each of those results would then have additional subjects on which to click. AquaBrowser makes this discovery process transparent.

It is very easy and entirely understandable to get frustrated with the standard OPAC results, and many people do, librarians and patrons alike. But there is one very important thing to keep in mind—the search conducted above was keyword. Many people conduct keyword searches on standard OPACs and then throw up their

hands in frustration at the results, saying the OPAC doesn't work. The OPAC is working, but the translation between the searcher's intent and the resulting display is nearly nonexistent. That's where supplemental discovery tools such as AquaBrowser (Endeca and VuFind are others) step in.

I am not in favor of throwing out the traditional OPAC and starting all over. Instead, I think that various tools need to supplement the standard online catalog, at least until a dynamic combination of searching and discovering is created. As a cataloger, my passion has been the maintenance and refinement of our authority database and I have profound respect for the robust structure of the MARC record format. Whether we consciously admit to it or not, the library world tends to believe we are stuck with the standard OPAC, a conviction perpetuated by hesitant ILS vendors, lack of time and money, and the unfortunate assumption that MARC records and authority files are just too difficult to manipulate. Unlike online bookstores and search engines, we have a powerful infrastructure from which to build. Our problem is we have done very little to mask this infrastructure with a public interface.

One way to think of this issue is the online bookstore arena. The employee of a huge online bookstore is going to use an interface conducive to finding and retrieving an item that has been ordered. This is probably not the same interface the customer used in order to find, or discover, the item in the first place. The two information needs are different, with different cognitive forces behind them, but they are equally important and need a solid, shared foundation. The MARC and authority-controlled database is as important as it ever was, but just as important is creating state-of-the-art interfaces that push data out to the same extent that they organize it internally.

The era of libraries as the sole providers of information has passed, but that does not mean we should step aside. We have a much longer history behind us than any Web site or search engine out there, and we have every reason to be proud of and use that history. We know how to organize information, how to retrieve it, and how to help people find it. What we need to work on is allowing our patrons to do all these things for themselves, while we work behind the scenes to facilitate their information retrieval. With our knowledge and passion driving such things as relevance ranking strategies, natural language conversion methods, and in-context readers' advisory, the possibilities of new online catalogs and discovery tools are exciting. This also means dedicating time and staff, jumping early and lightly onto emerging Web technologies, and recognizing that one interface is probably not going to be all things to all people.

It is easy to get caught up in the idea that these new technologies are too commercial or frivolous, but I like to respond to this argument (within myself and to others) with the title of a blog entry by Stephen J. Dubner: "If public libraries didn't exist, could you start one today?" (2007). I believe we could and that the online public interface would look a lot like Amazon, eBay, and AquaBrowser.

References

Dubner, S.J. Freakonomics blog, New York Times online, comment posted July 10, 2007