MLIS 7550 Library Systems and Automation

AquaBrowser for Public Libraries

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Abstract

AquaBrowser for Public Libraries provides an easy and economical way for public libraries to provide their patrons a single interface for search, discovery, and faceted navigation. AquaBrowser is a bolt-on product that does not require a library to adopt a new integrated library system. MediaLab Solutions, an Amsterdam-based company owned now by R.R. Bowker, created AquaBrowser and has expanded their company to North America. Furthermore, AquaBrowser provides a familiar and updated interface for users, a way to search all a library's catalog from one location, a way to bring Library 2.0 social capacity to a library, and fast implementation.

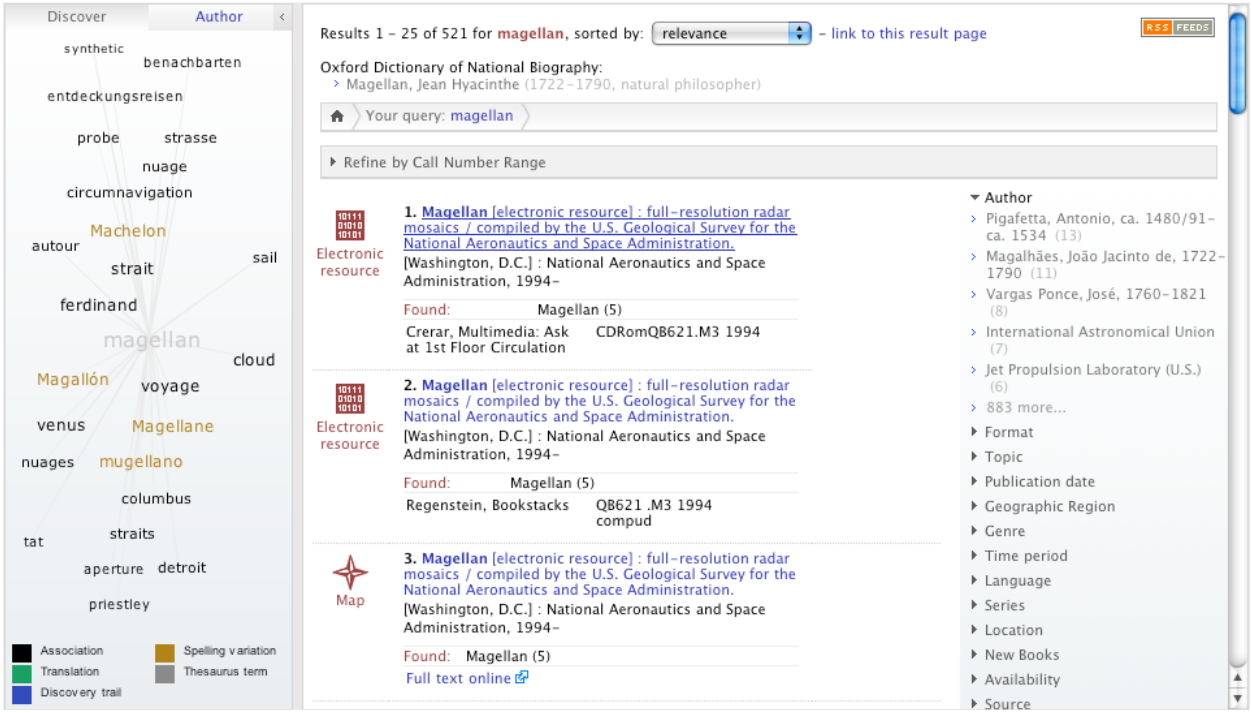
The first and currently top-ranked next gen OPAC finding its way into our North American public libraries is AquaBrowser. With all its features, AquaBrowser is being called a "next gen" discovery system or search engine (Wisniewski). One of the features that makes AquaBrowser so appealing is that it does not replace a library's integrated library system (ILS), but is a bolt-on product which was first introduced commercially by an Amsterdam-based company called MediaLab Solutions. AquaBrowser is currently used worldwide with a particularly heavy presence in the Netherlands where it originated. In 2007, AquaBrowser expanded into North America with New York-based sales and support teams after MediaLab Solutions was purchased by R.R. Bowker, a bibliographic information company out of New Jersey.

AquaBrowser is quick and easy to set up with very little effort from librarians. It is integrated with WebFeat and Serials Solutions® 360 federated search services. AquaBrowser's interface can be integrated anywhere on your institution's web site, including on library and departmental home pages.

AquaBrowser addresses the desire for libraries to provide an intuitive interface for users that does not require user instruction, an interface that adapts to misspellings, translations, and free associations, a way to expose more of their traditional and non-traditional collection, a way to integrate various silos of information housed in their current system(s) into one search front-end, and is fully customizable (Wisniewski).

The search page of AquaBrowser is set up for a three-pronged approach to searches: search; discover; refine. The patron can search a word, term, or phrase in a typical "Google" or

"Amazon" style search bar at the top of the page that can be sorted by relevancy, author, title, ISBN, and other fields that a library may choose to add/customize. The search will bring up a page such as this one found at www.serialsolutions.com:



The word cloud is the "discover" feature for patrons that may need suggestions in order to find what they need. The right hand side of the screen is the "refine" feature offered by Aqua Browser that allows a patron to drill down the search to a more specific need.

What I found to be of interest in the AquaBrowser software was its advanced search capacity and how the search engine engages in a conversation with the user. This is possible because of the advanced programming that has gone into stemming (other forms of a searched word): compound terms, spelling variants, and word completion are used to provide an advanced search for the end-user. The results are processed by relevancy, so the best results will be listed

first. The algorithms governing these are quite sophisticated, can be configured via an XML file, and allows for access by the library staff (www.serialsolutions.com).

Why should public libraries consider using AquaBrowser? Eighty-percent of the patrons don't know exactly what they are looking for so the traditional catalog only helps them when they are specific when searching, patrons expect search engines similar to Google or Amazon, and although the traditional library catalog is rich in its metadata and tools to describe and retrieve information – authority, controlled vocabulary, etc. – but the patron usually doesn't know how to use these tools (Velig).

The Queens Public Library conducted a survey of its patrons with the help of a group of visiting Michigan State students. They found conclusively that patrons were able to find significantly more resources much more quickly with AquaBrowser than with their traditional OPAC. They also noted that patrons felt more satisfaction, comfortable, and familiar with the "look and feel" of AquaBrowser. After implementation, AquaBrowser was able to produce reports that showed the increase in search results and the decrease in orphan searches. It was noted that the traditional OPAC provided a very linear search that did not access all the library's resources and AquaBrowser was able to cast a wide net in its searches, not leaving out any resources, but still organizing them in a useable and relevant manner (Fishel).

AquaBrowser provides integrated dictionaries and subject trees, integrated thesauruses, on-the-spot preview of contents, a customizable front end, complete use of the available catalog, same interface inside and outside the library, integrated dictionaries included (English, Spanish, Dutch and German), with options for others (www.aquabrowser.com). It is also Unicode compliant for support of many character sets.

Library systems managers will like that AquaBrowser easily integrates with other information sources, has a powerful cross-source category creation, multilingual interface, cross-platform client that runs on PC, Mac, and Linux systems, and installs and configures in days, not months (www.serialsolutions.com).

In 2007, AquaBrowser partnered with LibraryThing to bring their My Discoveries to customers. With LibraryThing content and its over 21 million user-generated tags and user lists, public libraries can offer Web 2.0 platforms to their patrons. My Discoveries brings a comprehensive Library 2.0 social experience to the table as public tags from LibraryThing provide what is needed to implement a social library platform at a library almost immediately. Tags, reviews and ratings are consolidated and hosted in a central location to be shared with the community. Plus, the tags used in your library's catalog can be controlled for content, language, library standards, etc. Ultimately, search results can be navigated using tags listed in the refine pane. In July, 2008, AquaBrowser added the ability for patrons to create reviews, ratings, and view personal tags. The goal is to create a global community for library users worldwide (www.aquabrowser.com).

Now, the real point of AquaBrowser is to open up the resources of a library to the patron in a more thorough and much easier manner – one-stop shopping. Librarians will like that AquaBrowser is intuitive for the patron to use, so that very little time or resources are used in training the patron. Patrons will like that AquaBrowser frees them up to search more independently, gives them access to all the library's resources in one location, and allows them to enter into a web 2.0 experience with My Discoveries if they wish to.

Since expanding to North America in 2007, AquaBrowser has gained in use and popularity in the public library system. According to the latest information available on their website, AquaBrowser is used in three-hundred and ninety-five libraries total worldwide and in one-hundred and forty-two public libraries in the United States. They recently published a press release stating that twenty-four U.S. libraries have started using AquaBrowser since September 2008, six of which are public libraries. A complete list of libraries that have adopted AquaBrowser can be found at http://www.aquabrowser.com/customers/.

A plus to adopting AquaBrowser is that it does not replace a library's ILS as it is only a search overlay. This is a very attractive feature as it is not nearly as expensive as replacing a system, does not require migration, does not require integration of AquaBrowser with the existing system as AquaBrowser runs from its own server, and allows libraries to add the AquaBrowser service quickly.

AquaBrowser makes all content available through a single query, reveals all types and formats of content through a single interface, increases success rates to improve patron satisfaction, encourages exploration and discovery, increases usage of all resources, overcomes the limits of traditional OPACs, enhances, extends, or replaces the traditional OPAC, offers context to help users find the right search terms and facets for navigation (www.serialsolutions.com).

AquaBrowser's My Discoveries feature allows a public library to truly bring a Web 2.0 experience to their patrons, can help the library develop user-generated reviews of their resources, and can connect the library and its patrons to the global community. The fact that the

library can control the language used in the tags and reviews in order to comply with their policies is a plus, also.

Southeastern Libraries Cooperating/Southeast Library System with the lead of Donovan Lambright, Automation Librarian, conducted a comparison/contrast study of the three main discovery systems available to libraries in September 2008: Endeca; Masterkey; AquaBrowser. Committees were formed to conduct patron testing. The results were interesting in that Endeca was preferred overall, but was deemed too expensive and not that much better than AquaBrowser to justify the cost. Masterkey was "…seen as lackluster…" by all patrons. Patrons either really liked or really disliked AquaBrowser with very little middle ground and most of the feedback revolved around the exploration option or word cloud (Lambright). An option that libraries have is to keep their traditional OPAC for patrons to use as well if they do not want to use AquaBrowser.

A negative to adopting AquaBrowser is that a library would need part of their already stretched budget to purchase AquaBrowser and support, plus dedicate a server just for the product. This is an added cost on top of whatever ILS a library uses.

If a library is not satisfied with their current ILS, AquaBrowser does not replace it. AquaBrowser may provide front-end solutions for the patron and increase patron satisfaction, but it will not update the back-end capabilities of a library's ILS.

In many of the blogs that I've read, the word cloud is the main complaint. Many state that it does not help "refine" searches. However, I do not believe that is the intention of the word cloud at all. With AquaBrowser's "search, discover, refine" options, patrons can refine from the

right hand side of the screen and ignore the discovery option of the word cloud altogether if they so wish.

Mr. Frank Fishel of Queens Public Library concurred that some patrons do not like the word cloud and has suggested to AquaBrowser to modify future versions to allow patrons to "click-off" the word cloud feature if they so wish. He also concurred that many librarians and serious researchers prefer to not use AquaBrowser, so they have left their traditional OPAC available for more specific searches.

As AquaBrowser has grown exponentially in North America, so have the demands on its support staff. As intuitive as AquaBrowser is, the response time for technical support has slowed. According to Mr. Fishel, the response time has slowed from an approximate six to twelve hour wait to a twenty-four to forty-eight hour wait. He has a team of forty IT specialists, so they are able to maintain and fix many of the problems. However, he stated that a smaller library without its own IT staff may find the technical support wait time more of a problem than they do.

Mr. Fishel also made a point that the nightly extraction process that AquaBrowser performs in order to keep the catalog updated and fresh is not fool-proof. He has found that new acquisitions have a lag time before they are extracted. He also mentioned that AquaBrowser is fast, but it does not perform in "real-time" as it is communicating back and forth with their ILS. Thus, sometimes an item will show as available when it is not or vice versa. He said that even in their big library, this does not occur often, but that it is something to expect at times.

For smaller libraries that are part of a consortia or have multiple ILS's it is important to point out that these are not supported by AquaBrowser Online, which is a more cost-effective option for smaller libraries with catalogs up to 300,000.

Overall, AquaBrowser is a smart option for libraries that need to update their user interface, provide Library 2.0 experiences for their patrons, provide easier and more comprehensive access to their catalog to more patrons – even those that are not adept researchers, and want to avoid an ILS migration in order to provide updated services. With AquaBrowser's expansion into North America and growing customer base, a library should feel secure in investing in this technology. Furthermore, smaller libraries could greatly benefit with less expense from AquaBrowser online.

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