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**Same as it Ever Was: Inventorying Student Efficacy in Questia Database Searching**

Questia is a commercial online database marketed both to academic libraries serving undergraduates and to individual users, particularly high school and college students. The service, which has grown since the publication of Hughes' and Buchanan's essay in 1991, now includes 45,000 full-text books and 25,000 articles, mostly on literature and social-sciences related topics (World's largest, 2002).

Hughes and Buchanan examined the logs of 578,358 Questia searches performed over a five-month period in 1991, in order to examine the efficacy of its users' searches. They found that many searches were too poorly worded to be successful. Of the 578,358 searches, for example, only 382 used the common Boolean "and" operator, which is supported by the database (Hughes & Buchanan, 2001, p. 371).

Problems fell into three categories:

1. Overly broad searches on terms like "psychology" or "education";
2. Searches based on "poor word choices for precise retrieval of concepts" (e.g. "Papacy Medieval Ages");
3. Searches inappropriate to the specified field (e.g. "Breast-feeding nutrition of babies infants" typed into the "title" field) (Hughes & Buchanan, 2001, p. 371).

Hughes and Buchanan were also interested in learning if certain of the 45,000 books in the Questia database were searched more frequently than others, as well as the proportion of a book's text a user would typically retrieve. Hughes and Buchanan were not surprised to find
[A] few books with a large number of page views, and a large number of books with few page views. In total, 16,851 books of the 35,000 title collection have over ten page views; 7,096 books have over 1,000 page views; three titles have over 3,000 page views, and the highest number of page views for a single title is 3,617. (2001, p. 372).

The statistics, however, do not relate the number of times a book was accessed to the number of actual users who accessed it. It is impossible to know whether one user read a thousand pages in a particular book, or if a thousand users read one page each.

Discussion

MacDonald and Dunkelberger assert that "[I]t is crucial for librarians to understand how and why users, especially novice searchers, are increasingly gravitating toward 'full-text dependency' on the World Wide Web" (as cited in Hughes & Buchanan, 1998, p.368). The "why" of their question seems straightforward: if the value of online information is perceived to be as good or nearly as good as that of similar printed material, it is much easier for a student to get the information online. The "how" is less obvious. I often give an assignment requiring my Studies in Fiction students to find a piece of literary criticism relating to a work of short fiction and then to respond to that criticism in an essay. It is the more responsible students who find their ways to Questia rather than to Google, where they often come up only with an Amazon.com reader review or a paper written for a similar beginning-level literature class.

It is difficult for me not to relate the students' inadequate searches to lack of motivation rather than to ineptitude. That students often take much more time than I would find necessary looking for their sources, however, suggests that their problems are not just related to lack of effort. For example, some of my Studies in Fiction students find their sources in a series of about forty books called Contemporary Literary Criticism but do not check the series index to find the
volume they need. Instead, they search through the books one by one until they come up with a relevant volume. It is clear that instructors need to guide students through this kind of research assignment carefully, and that designs for databases like Questia should be done with very unsophisticated searchers in mind.

In their study of the number of pages users access from individual books in the Questia database, Hughes and Buchanan do not specify whether they count a page as having been viewed when it has been printed, or if the page, to be counted, must be looked at on the screen. If a printed-out page counts as a viewed page, Hughes and Buchanan are overlooking an important point: some students are quite willing to print out the manuscript of an entire book. Although it is possible to buy a copy of *Great Expectations* for 99 cents on Amazon, doing so is hardly an option if you need to have read the book by tomorrow and it's midnight right now.

It is clear that studies of user searches with fewer variables than the Questia study would help librarians and database designers. It would be useful to be able to identify the search processes of individual users. Although Hughes and Buchanan could tell if a search for “Charles Dickens Great Expectations” had been done fifty times over the course of the five month period, they could not specify whether fifty different people did that search, or if one user did the same search fifty times. It could be useful also to know how many different searches, using slightly different search terms, the prototypical user does before being satisfied or giving up. Despite their study's limitations, however, Hughes and Buchanan have done a service both to academic librarians and to befuddled freshmen, by pointing out the difficulties inexperienced or unmotivated users frequently have with the databases meant to help them in their research.
References


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