

"Discovery Layers"—The Library's Google

In the last issue of *Sea History*, I discussed ways of finding electronic journals, once you have an article citation. But finding those citations can be tough, especially if you are not affiliated with a large academic institution that subscribes to many electronic databases. Here, I will describe a great tool for searching large sets of data without actually having access to the journals themselves. You generally won't end up with the full text, but at least you'll know that the article exists, which I believe is more than half the battle.

As I have mentioned previously, I started a company in 2000 with my brothers and a high school friend, which helps librarians manage their electronic resources; it started with lists of journals available in full-text databases, but expanded to an expensive tool called a "discovery layer." That tool can be useful, even if you don't have access to the full discovery layer database. To be clear, I have no connection with the company anymore, and there are competing products that do the same thing. And as with the e-journal lists, the institution you are using is more important than the underlying discovery layer.

Essentially every academic library, and almost every public library, offers a list of the e-journals they can access through the databases to which they subscribe. Discovery layers are less common, however, and are also sometimes hard to identify. Generally speaking, they are presented as a large, single search box on the library's home page, which searches for books, articles, and much more. The existing discovery layers come from four companies, but libraries can and do rename them.

First, some background. Google's speed in producing results comes from its work in indexing all the data it can find. When you click "search," Google does not go out and search the Web for you. Instead, it searches its own pre-built index. Paid subscription databases generally prevent Google from indexing them, since they don't give away the content for free. The discovery layers, however, index and search the information in those subscription databases. To do so, the companies must negotiate with database vendors to gain the access they need, so they obviously don't have unlimited content. If you're in an academic library that subscribes to one of these services, then you can search the

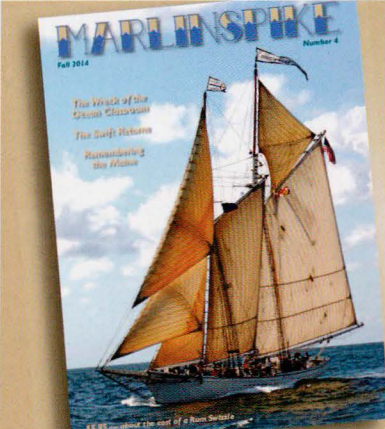
database and access much of the full text very easily. But if you're not on one of those campuses, you can still use the database—you just (usually) can't get to the full text.

As one example, explore "Virgo," the discovery layer in use at the **University of Virginia Library**, at <http://search.lib.virginia.edu>. If you enter "18th century schooner," you'll see results for books on the left. On the right are "Article Results," which is what's really worth exploring. I got 71 "Catalog Results" (for books), and 1079 "Article Results." (The only information about each book is the two dozen or so words that describe it in the online catalog. The discovery layer searches the entire text of the journal articles, however.) In my search, I found an interesting article by Daniel Vickers, from the journal *Social History*. Since I'm not associated with the University of Virginia, I can't access the actual article, but now I know it exists, and I can now check the e-journal list for the library nearest me, as described in my previous column.

At **Arizona State University**, its "Library One Search" (at <http://lib.asu.edu>) will return an enormous amount of content for the search above. You can get the complete citation by hovering over the article or book title; if you click on it, you will be asked to authenticate your affiliation with ASU. You would need to do this to get to the full-text, but you don't need to do that to see just the citation: again, learning that the article exists is hugely valuable. You can extensively customize your search, to narrow the results to just journal articles, or just dissertations, or just monographs, or just newspaper articles, or by publication date, or by language, and much more.

Not all institutions offer discovery layers. Those that do may prevent unaffiliated online visitors from accessing their discovery layer. They may not include much content in the database. The discovery layer is a subscription product, so it could disappear at any time. But if you can find one—either one of the two above, or another that also has extensive access—it can be a great way of uncovering new resources without getting out of your PJs.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at peter@shipindex.org. See <http://shipindex.org> for a free compilation of over 150,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. ⚓




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