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Are Limits More Important than Results? Collecting Usability Data for a Facets-on-the-Right Library Discovery Layer Design

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Introduction & Background

The research process is a means to an end. And the means for which library patrons find materials has transformed considerably in recent years. Physical card catalogs have given way to OPACs and now integrated resource discovery layers, which function more like search engines than traditional telnet-based and command-line interfaces. There has also been a parallel evolution from the use of Boolean operators and search query construction to an environment featuring a more keyword-based search process, accompanied with results refinements offered via post-search delimiters or facets.

The University of Wisconsin System is in the process of implementing a new interface for our library resource discovery layer, Primo. The modified design ("New Primo UI") features a change in the default placement of facets, which have been moved to the right side of the results screen. Substantial discussion has taken place over the purported usability improvement—or detriment—to this change. Ex Libris, the Israeli creator of Primo, has conducted various studies pertaining to their development work[1], and has informed us, "designing Primo this way was a Product Management decision based on a long review process." However, details on the rationale for this specific change remain unclear.

The literature also contains conflicting information on how library patrons may view search results. A seminal work on eye tracking regarding the classic F-shape pattern is now over a decade old[2], while more recent studies, conducted since facets became prevalent, have called those conclusions into question (e.g., "The strict F pattern style we saw before is, quite frankly, no more."[3]).

Method & Results

Visitors to the UW–Milwaukee Golda Meir Library lobby were asked: **"Do you have a minute to answer two questions about our website?"**

Roughly half of volunteers were shown a mockup of the new Primo site with facets on the left, while the other half was shown a version with facets on the right.
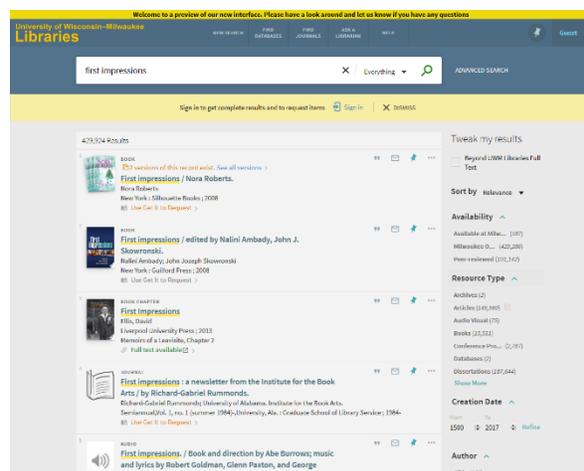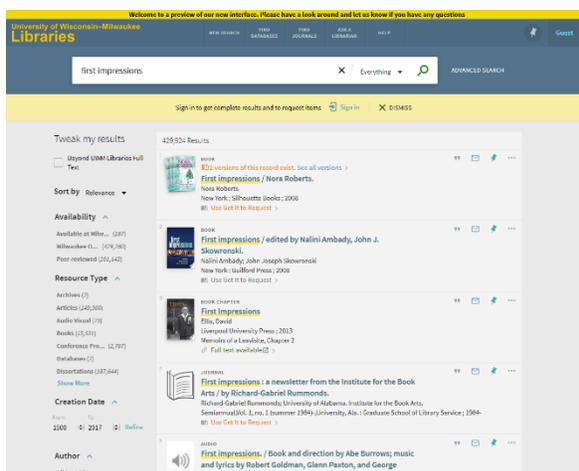
The screenshots used were from a typical browser with a standard screen size and aspect ratio, based on our analytics data. The mobile version of the Primo display, which places the search limits at the bottom of the screen, was not tested. The vendor has assured us the design is accessible to screen readers and the like.

People were asked: **"This is a screenshot of our new search engine we're working on. From this page, do you see a way to limit your search results?"**

Subjects reporting awareness of facets
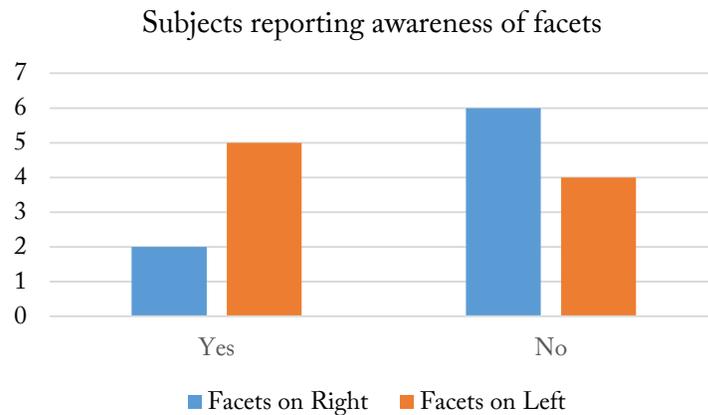
We then asked a follow-up question: **"One option we have in configuring the interface is to move these limits to the other side of the page.** [show other screenshot] **Which of these two arrangements do you like better?"**

Facet preference by initial screen

Overall facet preference
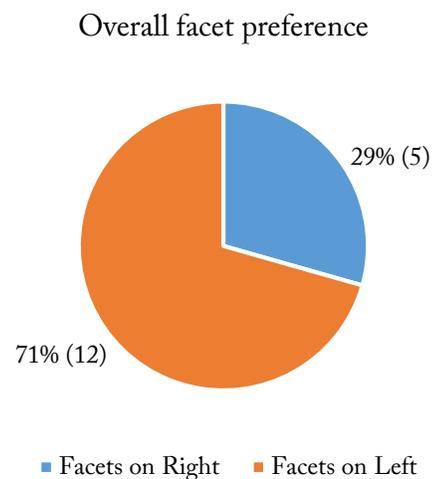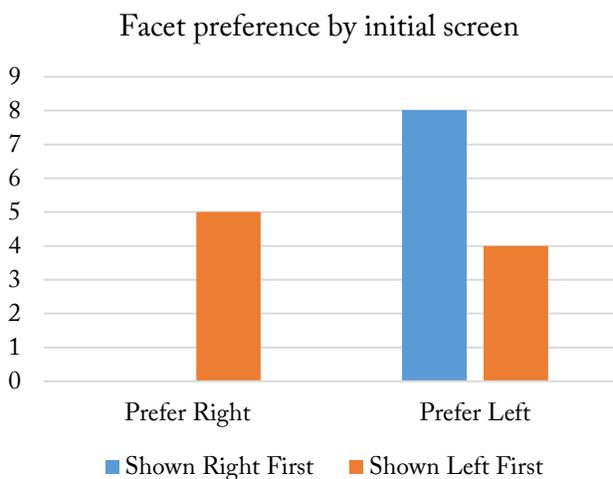
Volunteers were finally thanked for their time and informally debriefed on the study's purpose.

Discussion

Inherent in the position that facets need to be on the left part of a results screen are the implicit assumptions that (1) the left side is a significantly more noticeable location; (2) having facets on the

left is the arrangement which patrons prefer; and (3) facet limits deserve to be highlighted ahead of search results.

(1) Although not necessary generalizable, our data show a tendency for facets on the left side of the screen to be more readily noticed by library visitors.
(2) As for end user preferences, results indicate a trend towards favoring having facets on the left, predominately in populations first shown facets on the right.
(3) This is a more subjective and philosophical issue. Librarians accustomed to focusing on the search process in and of itself may be more intent on using and promoting advanced search features than our constituents. Usage statistics on our existing Primo site show approximately 23% of searches used facets to limit search results. Whether or not this is a good thing is not a question which we can or even should answer. We mustn't overlook the distinction between the needs and desires of librarian users compared to those of our patrons.[4]

Any customization of a rapidly-evolving system should be done with caution. At least one display issue has been reported by other Primo clients who moved the facets to the left side of the screen.[5] Furthermore, as customers, libraries pay vendors to test and develop products which should afford maximum usability by default. Adherence to universal design and consistency with other and legacy interfaces is another consideration, however, any progress would be impossible without at times making changes. We need to be prepared to make adjustments which will improve the overall and long-term usability of our services, even if doing so creates initial opposition. In the words of John F. Kennedy, "Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future."

Notes

1. http://knowledge.exlibrisgroup.com/Primo/Product_Materials/Overview_Materials
Product Materials, User Experience & White Papers and Studies, Ex Libris, Various dates.

2. https://www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content/
F-Shaped Pattern For Reading Web Content, Jakob Nielsen, 2006-04-17.

3. https://conversionxl.com/how-people-view-search-results/
F-Patterns No More, CXL Institute, 2016-03-02.

4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZeXyVJC-Jg
Designers are not users, Jakob Nielsen, 2016-11-11.

5. https://exlibrisusers.org/private/primo/2016-December/thread.html
"Primo New UI: Search result display issues on ipads," Ex Libris (Primo-L), 2016-12-23.