

User Centred Interactive Search in the Humanities

Claire Warwick, Jon Rimmer
School of Library, Archive and Information Studies
University College London
London WC1E 7BT
+44 20 7679 2548
C.Warwick@ucl.ac.uk

Ann Blandford, George Buchanan
UCL Interaction Centre
University College London
Remax House, 31-32 Alfred Place
London WC1E 7BT, UK.
{A.Blandford; G.Buchanan}@ucl.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This poster describes research on the needs and behaviours of Humanities users of both digital libraries and more traditional information environments.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.1.2 [User/Machine Systems]: *Human Factors*. H.3.7 [Digital Libraries] *User issues*.

General Terms

Human Factors.

Keywords

Libraries; digital libraries; HCI; usability, humanities users

1. INTRODUCTION

To realise their potential, digital libraries (DLs) must be usable and useful by a range of users, in different situations, supporting a variety of information tasks. Yet DLs pose substantial user difficulties: searches are frequently time-consuming and unsuccessful [1] and the reasons for success or failure remain mysterious to most users. Within the broader task, information acquisition is an evolving, highly interactive activity.

Creating effective search criteria to achieve an information goal is a demanding task, particularly for less experienced users, or when the goal is under-defined. Users face numerous problems, from selecting search fields and query terms to understanding syntactic peculiarities of a system [1]. Unlike the web, where the document text is the only target for a search, users of DLs can make a wider range of selections (classification, author, publication date, etc.). Effective searching relies on the careful selection and use of words, syntactic commands, fields and information sources.

2. HUMANITIES USE IN CONTEXT

Surprisingly little work on information seeking has set it within the context of broader information work. While this may be valid when considering work in physical libraries, where the information seeking task is often delineated by arrival at and departure from the library building, it is less so for information

sources that can be accessed from the user's workplace, removing the transitions between information seeking and other activities.

Humanities researchers are a user group with substantial, sophisticated information needs. Yet they typically have little technical knowledge, and may not have a clear idea of what they are looking for (but will usually recognise it when they find it). Humanities researchers are a challenging population to design for, and solutions that work for them are likely to also suit others.

They require an unusually wide range of resources; they may need material which is older than that used by researchers in other disciplines and may use manuscripts or early printed books even if digital surrogates are available [2]. Relatively low levels of use of digital resources have been blamed on these particular needs, and on a lack of knowledge about the potential uses of DLs. Warwick [2] argues that humanities users may find it difficult to adapt search behaviour from a traditional to a digital library setting, and thus become discouraged by failed attempts to locate appropriate resources. This may be because of poor fit between the searches users wish to perform, which are often relatively broad and reliant on serendipitous discoveries, and the current capabilities of DLs.

3. THE UCIS PROJECT

The User Centred Interactive Search (UCIS) project will study the use of information in context, focusing on Humanities researchers. Qualitative data (from interviews, observations, diary studies, etc.) will be used to investigate both how researchers work with DLs and how they integrate use of electronic and paper resources within the broader task context. The project will also develop and test novel interaction styles. These are intended to help people to acquire skills to find information within the context of their ongoing work, starting from their current understanding of how search works, how documents are organized and how digital libraries may be explored.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research is funded by EPSRC grant GR/S84798.

5. REFERENCES

- [1] Blandford, A., Stelmaszewska, H. & Bryan-Kinns, N. (2001) Use of multiple digital libraries: a case study. In *Proc. JCSDL 2001*. 179-188. ACM Press.
- [2] Warwick C and Carty, C. (2001) Only Connect, a Study of the Problems caused by platform specificity and researcher isolation in humanities computing. In Arved Hubler, Peter Linde and John W.T. Smith, (eds.) *Electronic Publishing 01, 2001 in the digital Publishing Odyssey. Proceedings of the 5th International ICC/IFIP Conference on Electronic Publishing*. 36-47

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

Conference '04, Month 1-2, 2004, City, State, Country.
Copyright 2004 ACM 1-58113-000-0/00/0004...\$5.00.