

CAPITA

Our vision for Prism

CAPITA

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Introduction

"If I'd asked people what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse." – Henry Ford

A lot has been written over the last five years about what a "next generation Discovery Interface" should look like. Whilst this is an interesting debate, we believe it's asking the wrong question. We shouldn't start from the vague perspective of how a current discovery interface should be improved, but instead focus on the needs of the people and institutions that use the discovery interface.

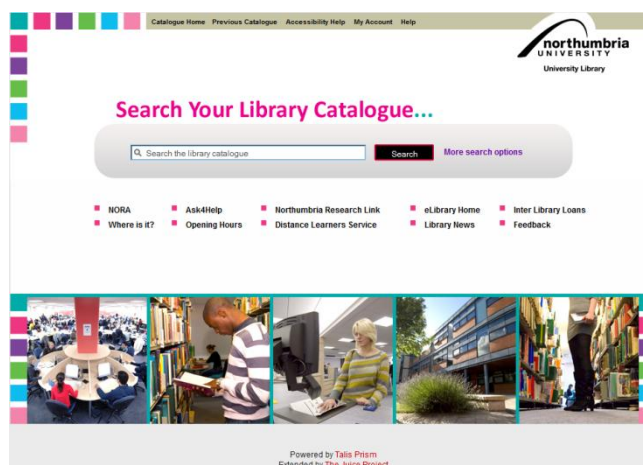
This is the philosophy we've taken during the inception and development of Prism. Wherever possible we've looked at empirical data that shows a unique need, looked at emerging market trends and investigated the type of information and data being managed by institutions. Throughout all of this, we've built a solid foundation on which to deliver a compelling next generation discovery interface.

Now that this solid foundation has been built, we have been crystallising our plans and ideas for the next phase of Prism's lifecycle.

A Social Discovery Interface

People love sharing things; they especially love sharing things they've read. We want to enable people to do that, not just in their own group of acquaintances, but with the wider group of library users in the University or Local Authority. We want to make Prism a place that people can visit and find out what other people think about the content they are interested in.

Part of this could be implementing things like Facebook "Like" buttons to let their friends know they've found something great in their library, but we'd like to go further than that and create an engaging online home for your users. Reviews about books is a great place to start; as shopping sites like Amazon have shown, sometimes the description of an item doesn't do it justice (or conversely, does it too much justice!). Having an independent review of an item, allowing us to see what other like minded people thought, can help sway our decisions about what we consume – almost like a personal recommendation.



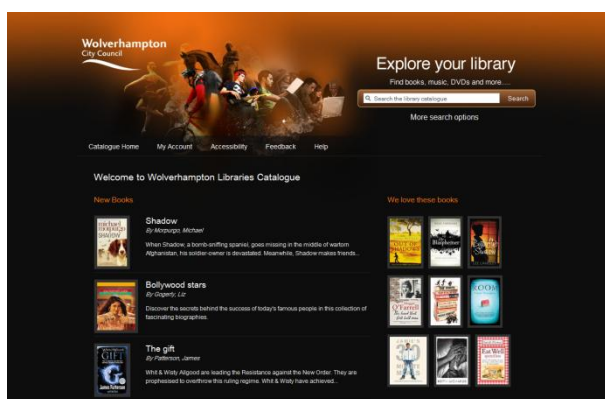
Reviews are just one small part of our plans. Information scientists have been aware of the power of crowd sourced tagging as an aid to retrieval – a concept used to great success in the delicious.com social bookmarking service. Many people, from Melville Dewey to the J. Paul Getty Trust have attempted to categorise the world (or a part of it) as a hierarchy, but this doesn't do justice to the rich and varied interconnections that make up our environment. Tagging goes some way towards this, and allows powerful connections to be made between otherwise unrelated resources.

Wish lists are a great way to make a note of books you'd like to read, but creating a reading list and then sharing it is also a great social feature. Perhaps someone has done a lot of reading around a particular subject and creates a list of useful resources; maybe another person loves fantasy novels and pulls together the ones they think are best in the library. By making these lists they are grouping items in the catalogue together, and we want to make these lists shareable. Like any other page in Prism, users will be able to copy the URL and share it however they want; email, a social network, their own website or blog – the list is almost endless.

An Open Discovery Interface

There's been a huge sea change in the way we consume data in our everyday lives and that hasn't gone unnoticed by bodies such as governments and national libraries. More and more data is being released in open formats with liberal licensing agreements. Sites like data.gov.uk have sought to bring this information into the hands of people who can use it in novel and interesting ways that the originators may never have dreamt up themselves.

The British Library is embarking on an ambitious project to open up the British National Bibliography as linked data. As this is the same type of technology that Prism is built upon, we can start leveraging that data, linking to it, incorporating it into catalogues. Projects such as the Virtual International Authority File (VIAF) can also play an important part, by providing strong identifiers so that it's easy to see if we're talking about the same person or subject.



By linking to these data sets we can make Prism part of the linked open data ecosystem and that brings benefits, for example, people can start pointing to your data and using it in novel ways – perhaps by creating a useful ancillary service that complements the traditional library catalogue. Many library services are struggling with ways of making their data open. With Prism this isn't necessary; your data is already open as a core part of the product philosophy, with care and attention paid to the representation and data model chosen.

A Helpful Discovery Interface

A central tenet of modern web based systems is that they don't require you to undergo lengthy training or read voluminous help pages to start using them – they work in an expected and consistent way (we call this the "Principle of Least Astonishment"). They follow the mental models of those who use them, not expecting a user to understand your processes behind the scenes. They also offer some form of "hand holding" to get you up to speed and suggest new things, or different searches you could try.

We are working hard to improve how people interact with Prism with many threads of research and development.

An important feature of any repository with lots of data is providing recommendations. This is a very powerful way of introducing people to items in your catalogue that they might otherwise have overlooked. At the most basic level these offer a set of recommendations along the lines of “people who borrowed this, also borrowed these” but we’re aiming to go a step further and try to derive results based on similarity – how similar is this item to another? Providing a personalised landing page with suggestions taken by analysing a person’s previous borrowing history would be a powerful way of increasing circulation.

Improving the advanced search interface in Prism is also an important development; we want to replace the current, form-heavy, page with a much more useful tool that allows people to build advanced queries and provide cues on how to perform those searches in the future. Our aim is that people will learn how to construct powerful queries, removing the need to use the built in help or advanced search interface.



Improving the experience when no results are returned is also important to us. People can get frustrated when their searches return no results. Sometimes this is due to mistakes in syntax, sometimes it’s due to misspellings – in both cases we want to flag that up to the user and give people routes they can take to find the content they are searching for. Taking spelling suggestions from actual catalogue data is one idea we are experimenting with; this would catch common misspellings as well as author names, subjects, obscure titles etc. If searches continue to yield no results we want to detect that state and offer alternative sources that the person could try searching - perhaps Copac, the British Library, or a nearby library.

Offering an alternative to the traditional search techniques used on discovery interfaces is also very important. Sometimes we don’t know exactly what we are looking for, but will know when we see it. Much like taking a stroll through a library or museum, sometimes we want to make the decision about what to look at not by consulting a guide, but instead by browsing until something piques our interest.

Offering this type of interface, giving multiple points in to your collections – through subject browsing and author browsing – offers this kind of experience, allowing people to explore and discover through their own path.

An Integrated Discovery Interface

Many institutions now have several different content repositories. Universities may have a thesis collection, a subscription to e-resources and perhaps a digital image archive. Local authorities often have a records and archives collection stored in specialised systems such as CALM, or details of local events and groups in a community information system.

At the moment, these repositories often have very different user interfaces and search syntax which presents a very disjointed view of your data; wouldn’t it be better if there was a single place to go for all of this content?

Our plans for Prism make it that single entry point for discovering all of the content you wish to make discoverable. We believe that Prism is the system best suited to this type of integration as it provides excellent search capabilities, including the now familiar single search box, and is often the most frequently visited of the content repositories at a given institution. By opening up the potential audience for this content the returns on what is often a considerable investment can be increased.

Imagine entering “Samba” into a search box and getting not only books about it, but links to local dance classes and events; researching a topic or event and seeing archival content or articles about it; searching for records by a band and seeing that they are playing a concert at a local civic hall soon. The power of linking all of these resources together is helping people find things they may not have known about, or been able to find otherwise.

The Linked Data API plays a core part of this integration strategy. Content and data will be sent directly to Prism which will store and index it ready for searching, without requiring extensive configuration. This is made possible by the technology underpinning Prism, which builds upon a set of standards and practices known as linked data. By facilitating this method of data aggregation we can enable institutions with custom/one-off repositories to easily surface their data.

A Shared Discovery Interface

With the current budgetary climate for libraries, both academic and public, sharing services has become more important than ever before. Creating a consortium can be time consuming and pose unique challenges to work flows, stock management and borrower accounts. Sometimes, increasing inter-library usage can be a first step into providing shared services. Opening up a collection to people from neighbouring local authorities or other local universities that complement your holdings can open up a whole new world of content for your users. Imagine a user being able to widen their search – not by changing their search terms or facet selections – but instead by widening the geographic area in which they are getting results from.

We are aiming to make Prism support both this mode of operation, as well as a traditional consortium, as a core part of our offering.

A Mobile Discovery Interface

Mobile internet usage is growing at a massive pace – last year mobile internet traffic was greater than the entire internet traffic in the year 2000. There are predictions of mobile internet usage increasing 26 fold by 2015. People are realising the amazing benefits of having a device that is always connected to the internet, from looking up train times, finding directions and soon browsing the library catalogue and renewing their books. We’re developing a version of Prism that works better in mobile browsers – tailoring the experience to the reduced screen size and input methods used on smart devices.

Choosing a browser based approach, versus a native app allows us to cover more platforms and provide regular updates as Prism evolves and grows. That’s not to say a native app isn’t possible – the Linked Data API allows systems to tap into your data and this could include smart device apps.



Conclusion

It's an exciting time to be involved in libraries. There have been many disruptive changes to technology in such a short space of time; social networks, e-resources, collective intelligence, mobile internet and more. These have all fundamentally changed not only business models but also the way that people discover and interact with content and each other. By placing itself at the forefront of these and future changes, Prism is uniquely capable of fulfilling the evolving needs of both libraries and their borrowers.