

Search and Discovery I

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To compare and critique three different interfaces— UIUC Classic Catalogue, UIUC, VuFind Catalogue, and Amazon—I have searched for two books. The first book is non-fiction, Joseph Ketner’s *Witness to Phenomenon: Group Zero and the Development of New Media in Postwar European Art*, and the second book is fiction, Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation and Earth*.

Book 1: Joseph Ketner’s *Witness to Phenomenon*

First, in UIUC Classic Catalogue, I used the Quick Search feature. I entered “Witness to Phenomenon: Group Zero and the Development of New Media in Postwar European Art” in Search For, and limited the search by selecting Search By > Start of Title. The Catalogue responded “The library catalog was not able to find any matches to your search.” I tried searching again with only the first part of the book’s title, “Witness to Phenomenon,” and received the same response from the catalogue. Then I tried Search For > “Ketner, Joseph”, Search By > Author. The Catalogue retrieved three separate listings options for this author. I selected the first Author, recognized that there were seven titles retrieved that were ordered alphabetically, and found the book I was searching for (and then discovered that the title is in the Catalogue incorrectly as “Witness of Phenomenon”). The Item Record page default to the Full View option, where there is a Cover Image ; and links to “Click for more information on this title”; the Catalogue’s search results for the Author’s name, the Catalogue’s search results for the Series, the Catalogue’s search for the Call Number (which display’s a shelf list!); and Carli I-Share (which could be helpful, because UI-UC’s copy is currently checked out until June, but because the title is incorrect the only copy that comes up is UI-UC’s “version” which no other I-Share Libraries have). The “Click for more information on this title” has a hyperlinks to an external Syndetics Page (with Description, TOC, and a Cover Image). Links to additional related materials are limited but available: The Author has twelve total entries at UI-UC (if we total all from the three Author records), the Series has nine entries which all seem relevant; the Call Number page is a little surprising given the content of the work (how did it up nowhere near other books with similar subjects?... which draws my attention to notice that this item has no

Subject lists attached to the item record!). There are also Brief View, More Like This, and Staff (MARC) View options available. Brief View and More Like This offer only edited versions of Full View (the same information, but less of it); Staff View retrieves a MARC record (which actually has the correct title and a Description!... why isn't this what the Catalogue searches and why isn't the Description available in Full View?) The design seems like basic HTML, the pages are informative, using basic text styles and paragraph breaks for clarity.

In UIUC VuFind Catalog I enter "Witness to Phenomenon: Group Zero and the Development of New Media in Postwar European Art" in the Search Bar, selecting Title > Find, and the catalogue immediately recommends the correct book (VuFind has the "out-of-box" benefit of a spellcheck/suggestor, yet the record in VuFind is also incorrect, because "it is solely reliant upon the index of the vendor system to yield the proper results").¹ All of the same options are available here as were in the Classic Catalogue, yet the Description (cited to Syndetics) is available on the default Item Record page. The design is much more minimal, "cosmetically arrange[d]" or "more attractive"² which it achieves by uses separate pages and frames for each type of information; this is not exactly an advantage though because it is mostly repetitive and requires the user to navigate across more click-throughs to search and find the item's basic details.

In Amazon I enter "Witness to Phenomenon: Group Zero and the Development of New Media in Postwar European Art" in the Search Bar, and am presented immediately with the correct book. (Plus, woah, a paperback edition is scheduled for June 2019!) I can click on the author's name and find only two other titles (one by Joseph Ketner, but I'm not sure why the but the other book is not by Joseph Ketner... Furthermore, where are his 11 other publications that the UIUC catalogue's presented me with?). There is "back cover" information, two brief editorial reviews, basic information about the book's publisher, pages, etc. There is no hyperlink that provides a direct link other titles in this publisher's Series. There is information regarding the book's dimensions, weight, and the rank # that it has on Amazon (with links to Amazon's top sellers in "Art History (Books)," "Film & Television," and another "Art History (Books)" (I later found that this 2nd Art History version is provides best sellers in the Book's subcategory of

¹ Brink-Drescher, J, (2014). VuFind: A next generation overlay. *The Charleston Advisor* 16(2): 46-54. [e-journal] [Locate full text from <https://sfx.carli.illinois.edu/sfxuiiu/az>]

² Brink-Drescher, J, (2014). VuFind.

Textbooks where the 1st version provides best sellers in the Book's subcategory Arts & Photography). This is awesome and highly unusual: Amazon has no recommendations for this title! There are no customer's reviews either (which doesn't surprise me given its price, recent release date, and specialized content.) There are also no "Customers who bought this item also bought" or "Customers who viewed this item also viewed." In this particular case Amazon potentially fails in both its reputation to be "conducive to research" and its being "designed to improve sales."³

Book 2: Isaac Asimov's *Foundation and Earth*

In UIUC'S Classic Catalogue, I entered "Foundation and Earth" in Quick Search/Search For and selected Search By/Start of Title. The catalogue responded with three titles; Isaac Asimov's *Foundation and Earth* is in first place, and the two others are off-subject (but have the phrase "Foundation and Earth" within their titles). I selected my book's title and was directed to the item's record. The "Click for more information" hyperlink on this title pulls up a page: "Additional information is currently unavailable for this title." No image is available for the book cover; Author's name pulls up 542 records (and only one spelling variation of the author's name!); these links are followed by the book's basic information including Title, Edition, Published, Physical Description, Summary, ISBN, and LC Card Number. There is no Subject data on this item either. The Dewey Call Number takes me to a shelf list, which shows that this book is heavily surrounded by other books from this same author.

The "Foundation and Earth" Title search in VuFind pulls up 44 titles, some of these titles do not even have my search's words in their title (such as one simply titled "Ocean"), luckily though my book is at the top. From the Item Record's page, VuFind offers the same information as the Classic Catalogue, yet (as we learned with the first book's search) the information is spread out through multiple frames/clicks.

³ De Fino, M. (2012). Amazon for technical services librarians: Making order of the jungle. *Technical Services Quarterly* 29(4): 280-291. [e-journal] [Locate full text from <https://sfx.carli.illinois.edu/sfxuiu/az>]. This detail may be subject to Amazon's lack to track me on the IP address I was using for this research. As De Fino states, "By tracking users' search history, Amazon is able to remind customers of items they have recently viewed and make recommendations based on their apparent interests;" If Amazon cannot track my behaviors (steal my user data) it has less to advertise to me... which exemplifies an interesting facet of its limited offerings on the items themselves.

On Amazon, the search offers “over 8,000” results, prioritized by “Featured”; Luckily my book is only 2nd in the list (after the sponsored “ad” item, of course, which is for a collection titled *Foundation, Foundation and Empire, Second Foundation...* that includes three of the five books of Isaac Asimov’s “Foundation Series” but *not* the title I am searching for). I select my book’s title and note that this item is a 2004 edition and not the 1986 edition. By selecting this item, I am given a home page for this book, which has a cover image with a “Look Inside this Book” feature, with many of the Kindle book’s pages available to view. Under the title is the Author’s name, where I can open the Author Page which displays a picture of the author, a short biography, a list of other recent editions of the author’s books, recommendations “Customers Also Bought Items By” [11 other related authors—Arthur C. Clarke, Frank Herbert, Ray Bradbury, Larry Niven, Dan Simmons, Philip K. Dick, Greg Bear, William Gibson, Gregory Benford, Ursula K. Le Guin, David Brin], and 86 pages of lists of books by this author. There are 274 Customer Reviews. Below that I am informed that this is “Book 7 of 10 in the Second Foundation Trilogy Series” (and a hyperlink takes me to a page that features the 10 books from the series). There are 32 formats & editions of this work available to buy (including one paperback from 1747, *available in New condition*, wow!). There’s “back cover” info, recommendations to buy this title with 2 other suggested titles for a deal; 20 pages of titles in the “Customers who bought this item also bought” (mostly other books by this author, but also a few by the 11 other authors Amazon recommended on the Author Page. There’s a special offer for 90 DAYS FREE of Amazon Music Unlimited offered with purchase of this book. Then in the “Editorial Reviews” there is copy from the “inside flap” and “about the author” ... Amazon Best Sellers Rank: provides links to top sellers in Hard Science Fiction (Books), Contemporary Literature & Fiction, and Space Operas. A More About the Author” section rephrases information provided in two other sections earlier, with another link to Amazon’s Author Page for Isaac Asimov, and a Beta version of Amazon Author Rank which offers Subject ranks #22 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Classics , and #63 in Books > Science Fiction & Fantasy > Science Fiction , with hyperlinks on each section which links to *another* (different) Best Sellers page that is updated every hour. It is “a veritable jungle of information... cluttered, full of advertisements meant to distract the user and entice them into making a purchase.”⁴ Largely inefficient.

⁴ De Fino, M. (2012). Amazon for technical services librarians.

Response:

I selected these two titles because they are books that I am familiar with and I was particularly curious to see what the results and suggestions of the titles would be. I was also confident that since I had read these books that I could better perceive a wide range of possible relationships that the interfaces might suggest, due to my familiarity to its subject matter.

In particular, I was very curious to see how the recall & precision and recommendation features would work out on Joseph Ketner's book, because this book's content is closely related to the book that I am currently writing (in my "free" time). I was also curious to see if I might serendipitously discover not-yet known titles. The subject matter is not widely-known in the U.S. and am concerned how this book might be recalled and even possibly "discovered," especially soon after the author's recent death. So, I am of course disappointed that the initial search drew a Miss because the book is actually mis-entered! Like many academic publications, this book is most likely only known to those who are already involved in the subject matter and have some professional contact with the author, and so users are likely to be searching for this title specifically (there are only just-over 100 copies listed on Worldcat.org in library holdings), it is troubling then to see that an exact search in the Classic Catalogue for the title does not draw a Hit, even when the book is at UI-UC. This error does draw attention to a previously unconsidered advantage of "auto-correct" features though, because VuFind did successfully make a Hit on the exact title search. And of course errors happen, so we could say that VuFind is *forgiving* of probably a wide-range of potential errors caused by any number of causes, human and digital, which is fantastic (for achieving Hits and for retrieving relevant information) and I hadn't considered the advantages of (because autocorrect frequently introduces errors in my searches and redirects me from my goal instead of towards it; But not this time!). None of the interfaces searched had good recommendations on *Witness to Phenomenon*, the best results were UI-UC's option to search by Author's name (despite the three different versions entered) and the option to search by the publisher's Series (which I hadn't explored before). If the book had Subject metadata on its record that would help *significantly*. Since Amazon doesn't pull up suggested titles either (outside of the relation of the book to other Art Books or Art Textbooks), perhaps the lack of Subject data is a fault on the publisher? I'd be curious to know. (And also to

learn why its place on the shelf is what it is, why it has that particular Call Number.) As De Fino describes,

While it is true that Amazon provides a large quantity of metadata in its database, the quality, search capability, and organization of bibliographic information important to researchers is lacking... There is much more overall information available in an Amazon record than a library bibliographic record, but some of the metadata that best serves researchers in a library record is lacking. Subject access is limited to what the publisher or other customers have chosen to provide.⁵

None of the interfaces' designs were particularly helpful, but if I had to pick one that was most efficient and relevant I would chose UIUC'S Classic Catalogue because it had the most Hits and least Noise; It had more relevant information located in one place, less click-throughs required to glean basic publication information, and less cluttered with irrelevant information. I was a little joyed with the Amazon search, both because I learned of a scheduled upcoming paperback edition(!) and because the lack of the book's popularity gave me the most pleasant Amazon experience and I learned that it is actually *possible* for some books to Dodge irrelevant information on Amazon!

I selected Isaac Asimov's *Foundation and Earth* because I recently finished reading this book, and found it fascinating, and was curious what recommendations would pop up. Before this book I hadn't really read much Science Fiction, but most people I mention this book to have heard of or read it (unlike *Witness to Phenomenon*) so I was also confident that it was popular enough to retrieve both Hits and Noise, which it did. Both of UI-UC's catalogues immediately pulled a direct Hit for this book, yet I was a little shocked that the item record was so sparse and that the searches did not lead me to discover related books, which is a little disappointing and I think connected to the lack of any Subject data on the record—I mean, that is, unless I only wanted more books by this same Author (which would admittedly keep me busy, *542 Titles!*). Amazon's prioritization of the most recent edition is a result of its priorities as commercial website rather than an information resource. If I wanted Amazon to tell me when this book was first published I would have to *dig*; Though earlier editions are available, the content available on earlier editions appears to be mostly user populated and Noise-y. There was no edition of the title published in 1747. As De Fino describes, "Edition statements and variations between

⁵ De Fino, M. (2012). Amazon for technical services librarians.

publications are absent or misleading.”⁶ Though Amazon gave me a lot of information—a lot of *irrelevant* information, and *too much* ads/Noise, and too many *vague* recommendations—recalling Professor Lancaster’s explanation that if searches are broadened to achieve better Recall, Precision will decrease.⁷ Yet, Amazon also provided me with the most relevant information that I desired, a specific recommendation based on (potential) relevancy. At the beginning of the second paragraph of the About Isaac Asimov section I am informed that “Asimov wrote hard science fiction and, along with Robert A. Heinlein and Arthur C. Clarke, he was considered one of the ‘Big Three’ science fiction writers during his lifetime.” Though this information is uncited and uncredited, it does actually give me a specific place to start in regards to Recommendations, and makes Amazon actually my preferred interface for this search—Robert A. Heinlein, maybe the first one that comes up after the “sponsored” title *Red Planet: A Colonial Boy on Mars*. Cool.

⁶ De Fino, M. (2012). Amazon for technical services librarians.

⁷ Lancaster, F. W. (2017). Precision and recall [ELIS classic]. Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences, 4th ed., 3708-3713. [ebook] [Locate full text from: <http://www.library.illinois.edu/infosci/research/#encyclopedias>]