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ONLINE DATABASES

Web Widgets Help Searchers

By Carol Tenopir

WIDGETS ARE INTERACTIVE, single-purpose applications for displaying and/or updating information. They can bring newsfeeds, weather forecasts, and more to a desktop or mobile web platform. Variants known as “web widgets” (or sometimes modules or badges), with fragments of code, have become popular, for example, in delivering data to social networking sites. Now libraries are getting into the act.

Building widgets

Libraries and others in a subscribing institution can now build custom ProQuest search widgets from a template and incorporate them directly into any web page. The ProQuest Search Widget Creator, a form fill-in tool, allows creators to designate which ProQuest databases their widget will search, whether a search should be limited to full-text or scholarly journals, and any predefined terms to be automatically included. Individualized search tools like this can be especially useful, directing students to class-specific resources or narrowing search criteria according to any individual faculty member’s research interest.

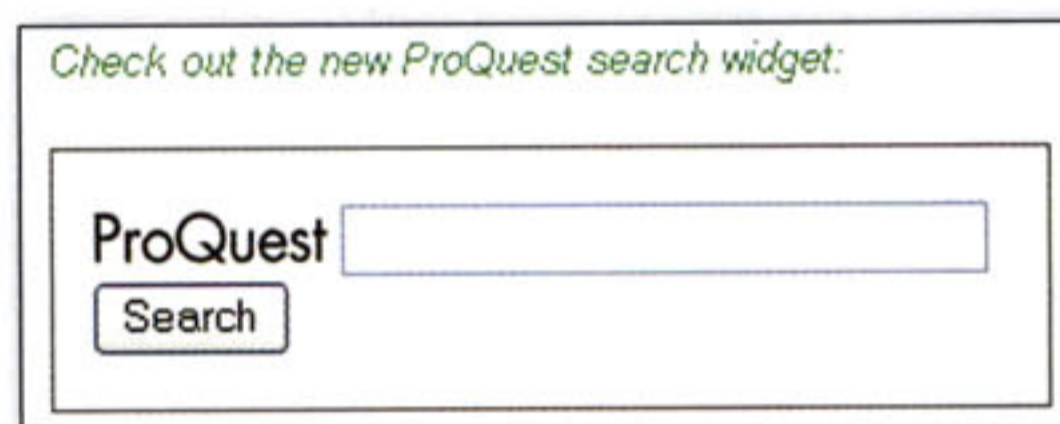
Still, with all of the preliminary work done by librarians, these ProQuest widgets can’t do it all: users still must enter their own search terms into the box. These terms are then sent to the ProQuest databases identified by the widget’s creator, as well as further routed through the ProQuest Smart Search feature, which suggests alternate or additional terms from the databases’ controlled vocabularies.

When I entered “global warming” into one widget, I got more than 11,000 hits in the three databases designated by the widget’s creators. The system offered me several clickable refinements to my search. By clicking on “global warming AND climate change,” I pared my search results down to 400 hits, with the option to narrow the search further. The widget took me to the ProQuest database access page via my own library’s subscription authorization, so I also could add other

databases we subscribe to, or read and download abstracts of full-text articles even after starting from a widget search designed by another library.

Make the database obvious

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the group responsible for setting online technology standards, describes



web widgets as “small self-contained applications for displaying and updating remote data.” According to this definition, web widgets can function either on their own or as code embedded in existing web pages. ProQuest’s search widget is the latter, distributed as customized code snippets easily pasted into the body of any web page. A well-designed widget makes certain functions easier and more accessible, lowering the barrier between user and targeted information.

John Law, director of Strategic Alliances and Platform Development for ProQuest, conducts research on user search behavior in online systems. Law said his research “clearly indicated that students highly value library databases over web search engines for [school-related] research” and showed that students were locating “relevant, scholarly material more quickly than when using

web search engines such as Google.”

ProQuest observed what many of us have noticed: students are uncertain about where and how to find the right database for their tasks. “Those who were fortunate (or enlightened) enough to find their way to the list of databases on the library web site,” Law noted, “were overwhelmed or perplexed by the number (and seeming obscurity) of choices.” The Friedsam Memorial Library of St. Bonaventure University, NY, put the widget right on the homepage (see graphic). The presence of widgets on library sites likely will grow.

Widgets for all occasions

The ProQuest search widget appears as a simple dialog box and search button, with the library or other users determining not only where it is placed but what ProQuest databases are searched.

Currently, ProQuest search widgets can be linked to more than 50 ProQuest databases but not to all of them; a list is available through the ProQuest search widget creator site. Even limited to currently supported databases, other potential applications come to mind that reach beyond the library or classroom web page: a Dissertations & Theses widget from the Graduate Thesis office, an advertising widget from the marketing department, and regional news coverage from the student services page.

ProQuest also suggests a number of possible uses, such as a departmental widget that searches business databases on the business department web site, for example, or a current topics widget that searches newspaper databases.

As widgets become more common, look for more widget tool kits from other companies to help users get their searches done easily and efficiently, with a little help from librarians.

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LINK LIST

ProQuest supported databases
PQwidgets.notlong.com

ProQuest Widgets
PQwidgethome.notlong.com

St. Bonaventure Library
web.sbu.edu/friedsam

W3C on Widgets
www.w3.org/tr/wapf-req