Usability of Four University LibGuides
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Background

Data Observation Network for Earth (DataONE) project:
• funded by the National Science Foundation
• has worked to “ensure the preservation, access, use and reuse of multi-scale, multi-discipline, and multi-national science data via three primary cyberinfrastructure elements and a broad education and outreach program”
("What is DataONE?", n.d.)

As part of that mission, a usability eye tracking study was conducted to examine how users interact with university LibGuides to find scientific data resources.

Does a high referral rate to DataONE indicate that referring LibGuides are more usable?

Tasks

1. You are a student in earth and environmental sciences. Your professor has asked you to write a paper about rainfall in Chile. Find a link to an environmental data source (database or repository)
2. You are a student studying environmental science and management/environmental engineering. Your professor has asked you to find more information about a data repository called DataONE. Find a link to DataONE. Once you have found DataONE or wish to end the task, close the browser.

Findings, continued

Our Participants:
• ...did not seem to have a clear understanding of a repository.
• ...did not seem to understand the distinction between data and articles.
• ...ran into university firewalls where they had to enter username and password to access the linked source before they could determine if the source fit their needs.
• ...were able to find DataONE on the UCSB and Georgia Tech LibGuides
• ...ran into several UI issues, including:
  • DataONE not listed in the A-Z Database index on Georgia Tech’s site.
  • LibGuides are text-heavy which makes it harder to quickly scan.

The websites with higher DataONE referrals (University of Michigan and Florida State University) did not indicate a more usable website.

Conclusions

With people leaning more towards images than text, the idea of people preferring scanning to reading seems to be outdated thinking. Instead, people want to look at as little text as possible. Their attention drifts to images and search boxes on the page. Rather than scan, they will just search!

Blending website design to match people's preference for images over text, while still conveying your message is becoming increasingly important. LibGuides are stuck in a text-heavy interface. Design features such as collapsible boxes and using images to break up text blocks could be configured to help LibGuides become more modern to match the textless Internet that people seemingly prefer.