Module 1: Introduction to the Information Ecosystem

Video Script

This video will help you understand the information ecosystem, and how your academic library organizes articles, books, databases - the information that you’ll need for your research. But first, let’s look at the information that’s not organized by your library: Everything that’s available on the Open Web.

Most of us use the open web daily, whether it’s for finding an address, getting directions, booking an appointment, or ordering a pizza. But, you may not be as familiar with the way information is organized at your institution.

Most academic libraries make information findable with three key tools: a catalogue, databases, and a discovery layer, which is a massively multidisciplinary search tool.

First, the catalogue. You can search your library’s catalogue to find materials like books, ebooks, theses, films, and maps. You’ll also find journals and e-journals, but you won’t be able to search the catalogue for individual articles.

If you’re looking for articles, you can browse specific journals or you can search a database. In addition to articles, you may find things like streaming video, book reviews, images, newspaper articles, and other materials in databases too. Your institution likely subscribes to many databases. Some are subject-specific (like ERIC, PsycInfo, or Sociological Abstracts), others are multidisciplinary (such as JSTOR or Scopus).

Often universities will subscribe to groups of databases from a particular vendor such as OVID, EBSCO, or ProQuest.

Institutions can choose to subscribe to one or more databases from different vendors. These are often bundled much in the same way you would buy a cable package. Subscribing to larger bundles means that sometimes an institution ends up licensing the same database twice. As you can see, a particular database, such as PsycINFO, may be available from more than one vendor. While the interface might be different, the content is the same.
Your academic library will likely also provide what we call a “discovery layer” - a massive multidisciplinary search tool such as Summon, Primo, or EDS. This search tool lets you simultaneously search for books, articles, and open access resources, as well as collections in your library. The scope of materials in discovery layers will vary from institution to institution.

It’s worth noting that most of the materials in your institution’s catalogue, databases, and discovery layer are only accessible to the students, staff, and faculty members affiliated with your institution. In other words, the materials that your institution has purchased or licensed can only be used by those with access.

Of course, there are also many important research resources freely and openly available on the web: open access journals, open institutional repositories (which preserve and make openly available the scholarly output from your institutions, including theses, dissertations, and faculty publications), they can include grey literature which includes things like government documents, and reports from NGOs, and the Internet Archive which is a non-profit digital library offering free access to 475 billion archived web pages, books, music, movies, and more. These are just a few of the many resources available through the open web. Many of these overlap with your institution’s library holdings and can also be found through your library’s “discovery layer” or catalogue.

The information ecosystem at each institution will have its own idiosyncrasies and complexities. But don’t worry. The librarians at your institution are available to help you understand how information is organized at your academic library, and to support you with your research needs.