Does the Primo Research Assistant meet the information needs of a university library?

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Initial Situation

- **Master's Program in Library and Information Science at Humboldt University Berlin**
  - Two years program (Oct 2023 – Sept 2025)
  - in addition to my day job as a systems librarian for Primo at Freie Universität Berlin

- **Master Thesis:**
  - *The Primo research assistant – an exploratory study of application scenarios at university libraries*
  - Case study with two consecutive focus groups at Freie Universität Berlin (Feb 2025 – June 2025)

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What is it all about?

What added value can Primo Research Assistant offer for typical information needs (and interaction scenarios) at a university library (here: as a case study at FU Berlin)?

Methodological Approach

- Why Focus Groups?

  - Resource efficient method

  - Exploratory research approach

  - Expert group available at FU Berlin
    - Reference librarians from FU Berlin
    - PRA evaluation working group members

  - New Topic requiring first insights

Two sequential focus groups with qualitative inductive coding analysis

Information Needs – the Foundation

What information needs do users have, particularly with regard to a resource discovery system?

Focus Group 1: Information Needs Assesment

Goal & Setup:

- **Goal:** Identify user information needs at a reference desk

- **Participants:** 4 reference librarians

- **Duration:** 60+ minutes

Unexpected Findings

- Scope much broader than anticipated

- Beyond resource discovery systems

- Complex service expectations

"I am a poor old man, I have never done this before, can you please help me?"
Recurring user approach that illustrates expectation patterns

Complex Information Landscape

Unknown Library Terminology:

- Magazin (closed stacks)

- Signatur (call number)

- Freihand (open access)

- Monografie vs. Articles

Access Challenges:

Electronic vs. Physical availability

VPN access requirement

Status group limitations

Loan conditions complexity

"The difference between a real book and an independently published article - these are things that no one deals with in normal life"

Key Findings:
Information Needs Beyond Discovery

Service Mentality:

- Users expect comprehensive support, from simple queries to complete research assistance

Help-to-Self-Help Principle:

- Librarians focus on enabling independent research rather than just providing answers

Problem Solvers:

- Reference staff think holistically - from initial query to final resource access

"I can gladly go through the first three titles with you, show you how it works, and you can try the rest yourself and ask anytime"

The Reality Check

What types of information needs can be met by Primo Research Assistant (PRA) and how, and how does its effectiveness compare to a resource discovery system?

Focus Group 2: PRA Effectiveness Testing

Method:

- **Objective:** Testing identified information needs against PRA capabilities

- **Participants:** Same 4 participants with extensive PRA experience

- **Approach:** Live testing during focus group

- **Process:** Systematic evaluation of different query types

Clear Verdict: PRA ≠ Service Chatbot

Why PRA Cannot Replace Traditional Reference Support:

- **No library-specific information** in CDI

- Cannot answer institutional questions (VPN, opening hours)

- **Content-focused, not access-focused**

- No connection to local collections

- Missing: "Where is the bathroom?"

Fundamental Limitations:

- **Known-item searches fail:** Cannot find specific titles/authors reliably

- **Cannot process literature lists:** No batch processing

- **No physical collection access:** CDI only covers electronic resources

- **No institutional knowledge:** Policies, procedures, local services

PRA's Actual Strengths

Content Summarization:

- **Textual summaries** based on abstracts and metadata

- **"Summary of summaries"** - combines multiple abstract information

- Quality assessment: **"As good as student seminar papers"**

- **Good for topic introduction**, not comprehensive research

PRA's Actual Strengths

Natural Language Processing:

- Helps users who **struggle with precise search terms**

- Converts natural language to search strategies

- **Broader accessibility** for inexperienced searchers

- Generates **"related research questions"** for refinement

Limitations:

- **Limited to abstracts** - no full-text analysis

- **Missing temporal context** in statistical data

- **Cannot distinguish primary from secondary literature** effectively

- No guarantee of resource accessibility

Key Insights

The Pragmatic Bottom Line

Arguments For Implementation:

- **Cost-benefit:** Free tool that adds some value

- **User expectations:** People already use AI systems

- **Library positioning:** Provide better alternative than general AI

- **Learning opportunity:** Train critical AI evaluation

- **Entry barrier reduction:** Help users find *something* rather than nothing

The Pragmatic Bottom Line

Arguments Against:

- **Quality concerns** - incomplete, sometimes misleading answers

- **Training burden** - extensive user education needed

- **Expectation management** - risk of being seen as comprehensive solution

Final Assessment:

"Better than users going to ChatGPT with library questions"

Added Value: Specific Use Cases Identified

Lower-Semester Students

- **Topic introduction and orientation**

- **Entry point for academic research**

- **Scaffold for developing search skills**

- **Caution needed: Critical evaluation training required**

General Public

- Entry point for AI literacy

- Introduction to academic resources

- Safe environment for AI experimentation

- Potential USP for university libraries

Training and Education Tool

- Teaching critical evaluation of AI-generated content

- Demonstrating AI limitations in controlled environment

- Information literacy component: Understanding AI vs. human expertise

- Example of responsible AI implementation

Complement to Traditional Search

- Not replacement but useful addition

- Bridge for users intimidated by traditional search
-
"Helps with finding" - better than finding nothing

- Starting point for more sophisticated research

Does the Primo Research Assistant meet the information needs of a university library?

Partially, but not comprehensively.

- **YES** for content discovery and topic introduction

- **YES** for specific user groups (lower-semester students, general public)

- **YES** as training tool for AI literacy

- **NO** for comprehensive reference support

- **NO** for known-item searches and resource access

- **NO** as replacement for traditional services

The added value lies in COMPLEMENTING existing services, not replacing them.

Thank you for your attention!

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