

RESEARCH ESSAY

Search Results and Silent Canons: Algorithmic Discovery in the Humanities

Annetta Alexandridis^{1,*}

¹Department of History of Art and Visual Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, United States

Correspondence: alexandridis@cornell.edu

A search box appears to offer a neutral entrance to the humanities, yet every result has passed through cataloguing, digitization, ranking, and the prediction of relevance. What cannot be searched easily can become what is not taught. How do discovery systems reproduce a canon without ever publishing a list of canonical works? Algorithmic discovery creates silent canons by converting uneven metadata, availability, and prior attention into apparently self-evident relevance. The issue is easy to misdescribe if attention stops at result order, missing records, metadata fields, query reformulations, recommendation logs, and digitization priorities. The more revealing unit is the tie between technical findability and curricular legitimacy, because that link explains why similar objects can produce divergent obligations.

A student searching for labor poetry receives frequently cited English-language texts with rich records. Poems held in small collections rank poorly because titles vary, authors lack authority files, and scans have unreliable transcription. The diagnostic gain comes from following impact rather than symbolism. A feature becomes central because it changes what someone can perceive, do, remember, or contest. In that sense, the case supplies an operational account of the link between technical findability and curricular legitimacy and establishes a standard against which the second scene can disagree.

Authority is distributed unevenly across the scene. Some actors can define the vocabulary, others can alter form, and still others appear mainly through results recorded in result order, missing records, metadata fields, query reformulations, recommendation logs, and digitization priorities. The assessment of the link between technical findability and curricular legitimacy must keep those powers distinct. Its boundary is whether a system

reveals uncertainty and offers meaningful routes beyond popularity and metadata richness, which stops visibility from being mistaken automatically for influence.

Recommendation panels deepen the pattern by using previous clicks as evidence of intellectual affinity. A momentary assignment becomes a durable profile that narrows later encounters. Placed beside the first instance, this case alters the argument's scale. The relevant difference is not medium alone but the distribution of choice. It demonstrates that the relation between technical findability and curricular legitimacy cannot be inferred from appearance; it must be traced through the impacts of participation and the limits placed on revision.

A workable inquiry combines repeatable query audits paired with archival analysis into how records were created and excluded with a ledger of result order, missing records, metadata fields, query reformulations, recommendation logs, and digitization priorities. The ledger separates direct observation, member explanation, technical condition, and later reading. Case alignment then turns on whether a system reveals uncertainty and offers meaningful routes beyond popularity and metadata richness. This procedure leaves room for ambiguity while preventing ambiguity from becoming an excuse for claims that no possible finding could weaken.

A relational account avoids both technological determinism and unlimited explanation. Repeatable query audits paired with archival analysis into how records were created and excluded shows how materials constrain action without dictating meaning. It also shows how institutions shape the alignment between technical findability and curricular legitimacy without controlling every response. The concept is strongest where the record links these levels and weakest where intention is substituted for aftermath.

No discovery tool can display every-

thing, and deliberate diversification can itself impose opaque editorial judgments. This limit guards against a familiar interpretive shortcut: turning complexity into automatic approval. Complexity can describe exploitation as readily as emancipation. The proposition therefore remains conditional on whether a system reveals uncertainty and offers meaningful routes beyond popularity and metadata richness, with dissenting evidence preserved where it changes the outcome.

Libraries and teachers should publish ranking explanations, teach query variation, create exploratory modes, and invest in metadata for neglected collections. This recommendation converts the argument into observable decisions. It assigns responsibility before the final object or event is celebrated and creates a record that later participants can question. Implementation should remain proportionate: small projects need plain procedures, while institutions with greater reach owe stronger documentation and review.

Experimental juxtaposition could alter one condition at a time: sequence, scale, interface, access route, attribution, or revision rights. Combining those trials with contributor understanding would show which changes affect the connection between technical findability and curricular legitimacy and which merely alter appearance. The goal would be an evidence-based repertoire of choices rather than a universal best work.

Scale introduces another critical demand. A decision that supports the connection between technical findability and curricular legitimacy in one encounter may change after repetition, touring, digitization, or administrative standardization. Critical work should follow selected cases beyond their exemplary moment and ask whether a system reveals uncertainty and offers meaningful routes beyond popularity and metadata richness continues to hold when new actors inherit the form without the relationships that

first sustained it.

The examples are comparative scenes, not evidence of frequency. They clarify how the association between technical findability and curricular legitimacy might operate but cannot establish how often it does. Broader claims would require purposive sampling, longitudinal follow-up, and participation by researchers positioned differently from the

present account. Until then, the framework is best used to generate precise questions and bounded understandings.

The stakes extend beyond this topic. Cultural work often gains authority by hiding the labor that organizes encounter. Making that labor legible does not dissolve expertise; it shows how expertise can become answerable to people who meet its impacts from different positions.

The result is not a formula but a sharper field of responsibility. Discovery becomes a humanities problem when convenience quietly determines the boundaries of plausible inquiry. A search result should be treated as a situated reading list whose omissions require construction, not as the natural shape of knowledge.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). Published by *Opera News: Journal of Music and Performing Arts* under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY 4.0).