

Viewfinder

Case Study

Evaluating AI features in licensed library resources

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Project page for Viewfinder:
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Abstract

This case study explores how Viewfinder was used to consider ways to evaluate artificial intelligence (AI) features that are becoming increasingly embedded within licensed library electronic resources and discovery platforms, including AI-powered search tools, summaries, recommendations, and chatbots. As publishers and vendors continue introducing these features, libraries must determine how they align with institutional priorities and library values. Viewfinder was used to consider different stakeholder perspectives and values when evaluating AI features including privacy, trust and transparency, and fiscal responsibility, and how those values can guide decisions about AI within licensed library resources. One outcome of the exercise was the development of a set of questions that libraries can use to assess AI features to support more transparent and values-based decision-making.

Project details and background

As the Electronic Resources & Discovery Services (ERDS) Librarian at Montana State University (MSU) Library, I manage all aspects of electronic resources and discovery services, negotiate license agreements, and work closely with library vendors and academic publishers. As these companies develop and release AI features and enhancements such as AI-generated summaries, recommendation tools, AI-enhanced searches, natural language searching, and chatbot-style research assistance into their products, I am often primarily responsible for evaluating them and making implementation decisions without always having a clear understanding of they work or how they may impact users.

Recent examples include EBSCO's AI insights, the Ebook Central Research Assistant, and ProQuest's AI-powered research companion (Montana State University Library, 2026). While some features can be turned on or off by the library, others are automatically enabled with limited input from users. Either way, it is important to understand how they work, how they align with local values, and how to communicate about them to users. Unlike standalone AI tools that users choose to use, these features are being added to library resources that users are already familiar with, changing how they interact with those resources.

I used Viewfinder to examine how libraries, and electronic resources librarians in particular, can make values-based decisions about the growing number of AI

features being added to library electronic resources and discovery platforms. I began the project without specific takeaways in mind, and instead, allowed the Viewfinder exercise to shape potential outcomes. As AI capabilities continue to reshape how users search for, discover, and access information, libraries need clear ways to consider issues such as privacy, fiscal responsibility, transparency, staff impact, information literacy, and trust to make informed decisions about AI. Ideally, this project will provide a practical way to evaluate AI features within licensed third-party products.

Viewfinder exercise

Rather than focusing on a single AI product, I used Viewfinder to broadly explore how to evaluate AI features that are increasingly being added to licensed library resources. To complete the Viewfinder exercise, I created a custom scenario centered on a question I regularly face in my work as an ERDS Librarian: how can libraries fairly and consistently evaluate AI features across vendors and platforms?

Several values stood out to me as I worked through the exercise. The first was privacy and consent. This included questions about user choice, data collection, and data protection. As many AI tools rely on user data and interactions to improve AI models and services, I considered whether users understand how their data is being used, and whether both users and libraries have control over how AI features are utilized. The second value I focused on was trust. This included transparency, visible sources, clear explanations of how AI is being used, accuracy of AI-generated information, and intellectual property concerns. Our users expect library resources to be trustworthy and reliable. AI-generated summaries or recommendations could create confusion if users do not understand where the information comes from or how it was generated. Because of this, transparency about how AI features work and what limitations they have is an important consideration for libraries. The third value I considered was fiscal responsibility. This included budget concerns and staff impact. AI features may require additional staff time for testing, troubleshooting, instruction, or policy development. Some features may also increase subscription costs requiring libraries to weigh the benefits against existing collection priorities and budgets.

I completed the exercise from the perspective of each stakeholder I identified as relevant to this project: faculty, students, vendors, librarians and archivists, library staff, IT professionals, and administrators. Faculty may want AI-generated information to be accurate, trustworthy, and appropriate for academic work. Students may benefit from AI features but may also need help understanding the limits of AI-generated content. Librarians and library staff may be responsible for implementing and explaining AI tools to users. IT professionals may focus more on security and data management, while administrators may focus on budgets and institutional priorities. Vendors also play an important role because they design and control many of the AI features libraries are being asked to adopt for their users.

A key part of the exercise was comparing where stakeholder values were similar and where they differed. Privacy, transparency, and trust appeared across many stakeholder groups, showing broad agreement about their importance. However, some values differed depending on a person's role and perspective. For example, I initially approached the exercise from a budget, technical, and administrative perspective and did not focus as much on the end-user experience. An instructional librarian or faculty member, however, is going to place greater importance on information literacy and helping students critically evaluate AI-generated information.

The final compare & reflect prompt encouraged thinking more broadly about my values as compared to the values of each stakeholder and what actions I can take to support all values and different perspectives. The comparison prompt highlighted the importance of considering broader views to make more well-rounded decisions when deciding whether optional AI features should be enabled. Another takeaway was to maintain transparency by clearly communicating to users when AI tools are known to be used within library platforms and being prepared to explain why certain AI features were enabled or disabled.

However, the reflection prompts also highlighted that not every decision about an AI feature will align with the values of all stakeholders. Libraries must do their best to make decisions they believe will benefit the majority. As for the longer-term effects of this specific project, the decision to use AI within library features may reshape how librarians teach information literacy, especially as AI changes how users search for and interact with library resources. It is already changing traditional electronic resource usage statistics as users increasingly rely on AI-

generated summaries, for example, rather than accessing full-text content (COUNTER Metrics, 2026).

Discussion and outcomes

The Viewfinder exercise reshaped how I think about AI features within library licensed resources. The visual layout of values encouraged me to consider multiple stakeholder perspectives. The exercise created space to slow down and think more carefully about how AI tools and features may impact different users. As publishers and vendors roll out new AI products, there can be pressure for libraries to adopt these technologies quickly. The exercise reinforced the importance of making space to consider the impacts of these features, both good and bad.

As I worked through the exercise, I realized there was no clear right or wrong way to determine the usefulness of an AI feature. Instead, the different values and stakeholder perspectives led to several questions (Appendix A) that can help libraries think through these decisions. While these questions may not apply to every AI feature or work for every library, they are intended to encourage thoughtful decision-making rather than producing a single answer. For example, when evaluating EBSCO AI Insights (EBSCO Information Services, n.d.), the questions encourage librarians to consider how the feature is presented to users, what is the point of the feature, can users access the original article or source easily, and if users need guidance on using the feature.

One of the most valuable parts of Viewfinder was that it encouraged me to think beyond my own role as an ERDS Librarian. My initial focus was mainly on fiscal, technical implementation, and platform management. However, the exercise helped me think more broadly about how these decisions may affect faculty, students, instructional librarians, and other library end-users. This broader perspective made the evaluation process feel more collaborative and user-focused without needing to conduct extensive user outreach, which can be time-consuming. Another lesson from the exercise was that it is okay to pause and reflect before implementing AI features. AI development is moving quickly, especially among academic publishers and library vendors, but adopting tools quickly does not always lead to the best long-term outcomes. Taking time to consider issues such as privacy, transparency, education, and user trust can help libraries make more grounded and responsible decisions.

The exercise also highlighted topics related to vendors and AI that still need to be addressed by the profession. Vendors are not always transparent about how their AI systems are trained, what user data is collected, or how AI-generated outputs are created. Some vendors clearly communicate when AI features are introduced and allow libraries or end-users to choose whether to use them. Others integrate AI features directly into their platforms with little notice or limited local control. This can make it difficult for libraries to consistently evaluate and understand AI features across platforms and make users aware of them.

For libraries or ERDS Librarians doing similar work, I would recommend using Viewfinder to create their own questions, modify the ones created from this exercise (Appendix A), or develop a framework or rubric that reflects their local library, institutional, and stakeholder values. Identifying what your values are early in the process will lead to more consistent decision-making across platforms. I would also recommend taking the time to complete multiple stakeholder perspectives during the Viewfinder exercise, including librarians, IT staff, administrators, faculty, students, and other relevant users of a specific library. Finally, libraries should continue to prioritize transparency by doing their best to clearly communicate when AI tools are known to be in use, how they work, and why certain decisions were made.

Although this project focused on AI features within licensed library resources, the decisions libraries make today will shape how users search for, evaluate, and use licensed scholarly information in the future. As AI becomes increasingly common within licensed library resources, taking time to make values-driven decisions will become an important part of the role of an ERDS Librarian or those managing electronic resources.

References

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EBSCO Information Services. (n.d.). AI Insights. <https://about.ebsco.com/artificial-intelligence/products/ai-insights>

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Appendix A: Evaluating AI features within licensed library resources

The following questions were inspired by Viewfinder and are intended to encourage a values-based decision-making process rather than give a single "right" answer.

Name of Vendor/Publisher: _____

Description of Feature: _____

1. Understand what it is.

Before evaluating an AI feature, understand what it is and why it exists.

- What does it do?
- Is its purpose clearly explained?
- Is it a standalone feature or embedded within an existing interface?
- How does it improve the user experience?
- Does it address an actual need?

2. Evaluate trust and transparency.

Determine whether the library and its users can understand and trust the feature.

- Is it clear when AI is being used?
- Does the vendor explain how the feature works and its limitations?
- Can users easily verify the original source(s)?

3. Consider privacy and user rights.

Think about how the feature handles user information and choices.

- What user data is collected, retained, or shared?
- Can users opt in to use the feature?
- Does the feature require users to create an account to use it?

4. Consider user impact.

Think about how different users may experience the feature.

- Will users understand the feature or is additional instruction needed?
- How will it change the current search experience of the product?

5. Implementation.

Determine whether the feature is practical for your library.

- Can the feature be enabled or disabled locally?
- Will staff need additional training or support?
- Are there any additional costs?
- Does it require a separate license or addendum?

6. Evaluate the vendor.

Consider how well the vendor communicates about its use of AI.

- Is the vendor transparent about its AI practices?
- Do they provide documentation or policies?
- Did the vendor communicate about the feature before releasing it?
- How will they share the usage of the feature?

7. Make a decision.

Step back and consider the whole picture.

- Does it align with library and institutional values?
- Should the feature be enabled (if given a choice)?
- If it was automatically added, should the library request to have it disabled?
- Are there any questions that need to be sent to the vendor?
- How will the library make users aware of the feature?