

Introduction:

Academic information can be found and accessed increasingly through the WWW, while information in physical documents and library services remain important.

One of the functions of academic librarians has become evaluating, selecting, offering and recommending information discovery services on the WWW to their clients.

Searching for images on the WWW has become an attractive starting point to find relevant information sources, in particular in fields where visual information is relatively important besides textual information.

Problem statement:

How useful and efficient is WWW image searching nowadays to discover information sources, besides other discovery services offered by academic libraries? More concretely:

1. How high is the precision of results from search systems with reasonable queries?
2. Is the danger of misinformation an issue (beyond the presence of neutral irrelevant search results that lower the precision)?
3. Does WWW image searching reveal specific html documents with images, which have been placed on an academic library WWW site by the investigator/author?

Methods:

The test subject domain is one in which images are important: classical, ethnic African art.

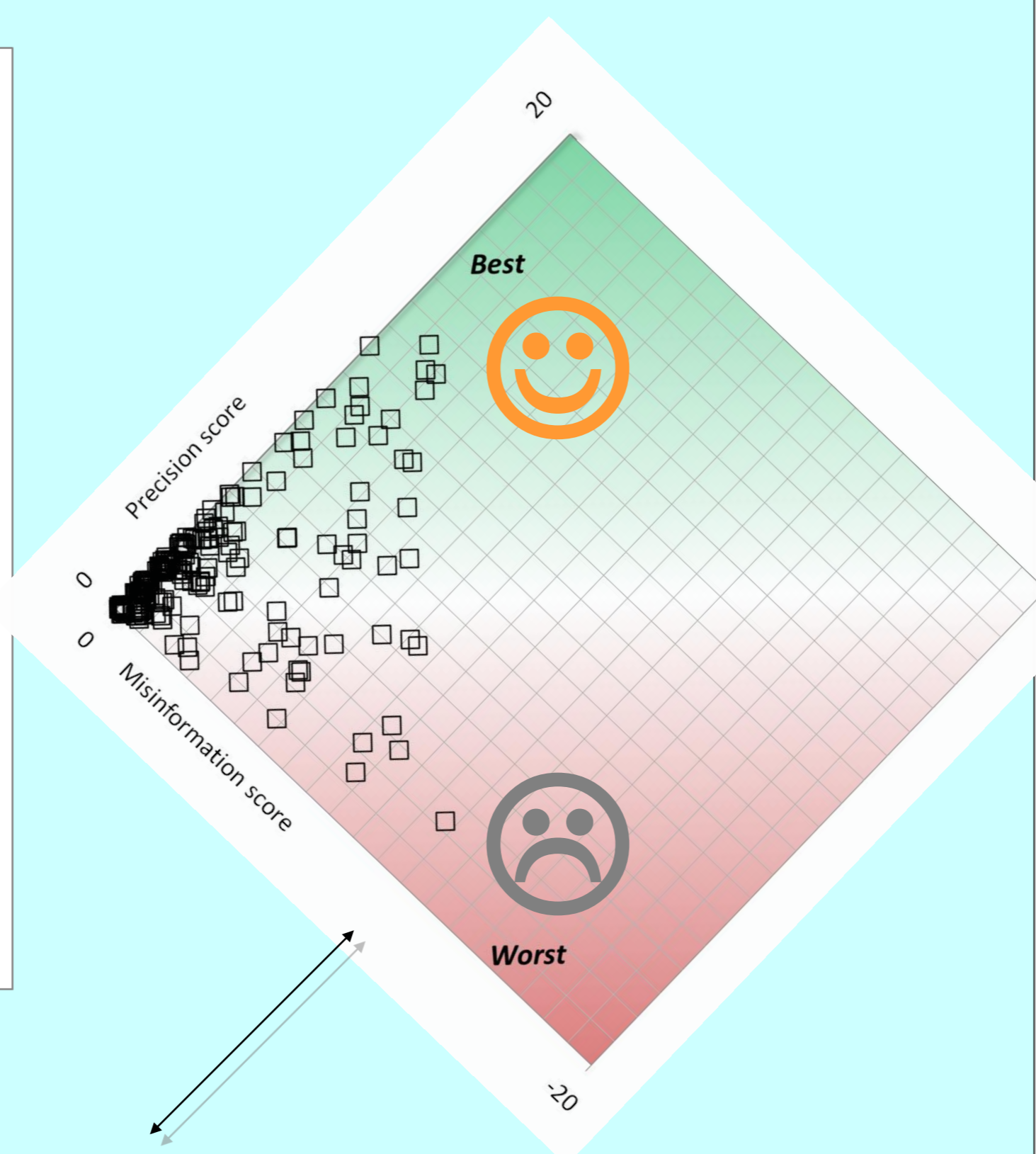
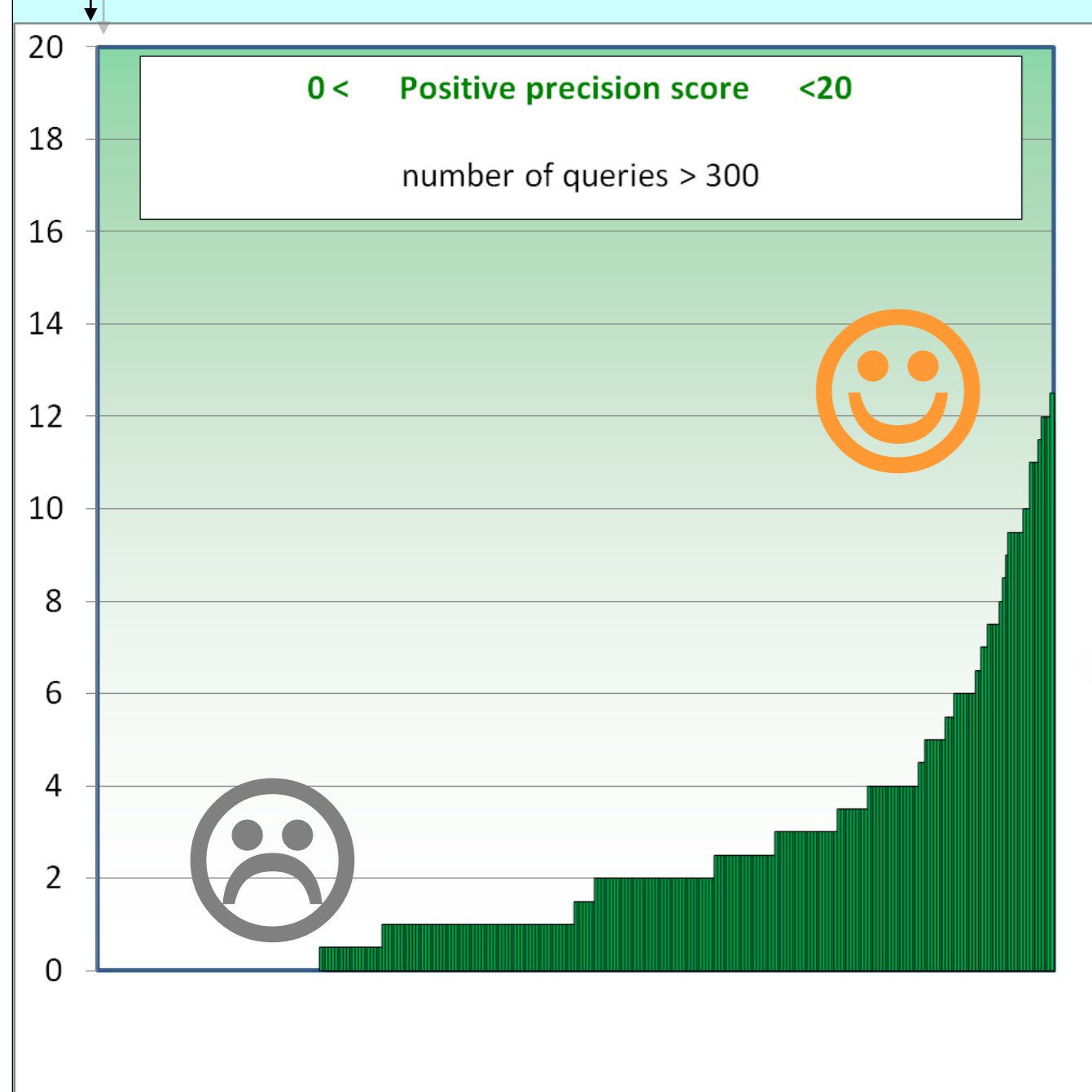
Queries were submitted to public access WWW image search engines and for each query the 20 individual results that were ranked highest have been evaluated quantitatively.

For each search, the scoring method leads to a positive score related to precision between 0 and 20 and to a negative score related to misinformation between 0 and minus 20.

Data were collected, analyzed and plotted, using a spreadsheet program on computer.

Results:

1. Most positive scores related to retrieval precision were much lower than the ideal maximum, even though the queries contained very specific words and names as formulated by a user familiar with the subject domain, and the query syntax was simple and correct.



2. Beyond irrelevant, neutral results that lower the precision of a search, a significant number of search results may even mislead users who are unfamiliar with the selected subject domain.
3. WWW image searching functioned well for specific HTML documents with images, which have been placed on an academic library WWW site by the investigator / author.

Conclusions & recommendations:

1. Information retrieval from the WWW through image searching is attractive, simple and fast, but far from perfect. Image searching deserves a place in the offerings of academic libraries and in particular in those domains where visual information is important.
2. Misinformation in WWW searching cannot be neglected. Therefore libraries should include this problem in their efforts to increase the level of information literacy of their users.
3. Libraries can create digital information sources and the chance that these can be retrieved with current general WWW search engines is high. Of course they should pay attention to those aspects of their procedures that influence the chance that the information source is found through WWW searching and more particularly through image searching.

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WWW image searching delivers high precision and no misinformation: reality or ideal?

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