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What Library Practices Are Scaleable?

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In large part, thanks to OCLC and its development team, there has been quite a bit of buzz since the 2008 Charleston Conference on a topic which is being called Web scale. According to Lorcan Dempsey's online weblog from January 2007 [http://orweblog.oclc.org/archives/001238.html], Web scale is an idea from the e-commerce realm best described as a way of developing a computing platform that can be increased to continue to meet user expectations through a variety of applications/services. Basically, libraries would use the same "shared" hardware, services, and data instead of trying to host hardware and software locally and individually (<http://www.oclc.org/productworks/webscale.htm>).

OCLC sees this as an ideal fit for libraries given the use of WorldCat and the continued success and growth of one large bibliographic data repository. From this base, it foresees creating other services, applications, and software that can be shared among the participating OCLC libraries to provide increased visibility to and access to all library collections, a networked technical services and collection management supported by streamlined workflows, cooperative intelligence, and improved service by large-scale aggregation of data. Many of these operations are currently supported by a traditional ILS in either a local environment or as hosted services. On its Web site OCLC goes on to outline all the procedures and processes it feels are "scaleable" for any given library. These include Web-scale circulation and delivery, Web-scale print and electronic acquisitions, Web-scale licensing management, etc. OCLC has also posted an advisory council but has not yet released test/pilot participants at this time.

This seems like a logical and practical approach to the budgetary and staffing constraints now being felt in many libraries throughout the world. However, the likelihood of success is greatly diminished by a willing ignorance of libraries' roles within their current contexts. To be blunt, libraries are not Amazon, Google, or e-commerce managed entities. Libraries are themselves, services within greater organizations such as hospital complexes, universities, or communities. The funding and existence of libraries relies upon preconstructed mechanisms for management that support libraries and also support many other areas of services as well such as patient care, students, or park services. Libraries do not necessarily have control over the management structures in which they exist and are almost always forced to accept the business rules and practices of the parent institutions in which they reside. This is why ILS development has been slow and methodical for the past four decades. ILS vendors have worked closely to integrate as many general rules and regulations as possible but still allow for inherent local customizations and practices unique to any given library. Libraries can take advantage of the large scale bibliographic universe utility provided by OCLC because that is a unique practice/service for libraries. However, acquisitions and licensing of materials are bigger practices requiring adherence to rules and regulations that expand far beyond any given library within its resident environment.

The discourse and practice of Web scale has plenty of applications within the library environment. The argument is that these Web-scale operations are not the traditional set of practices and management services outlined above. Web scale is better suited to electronic resource and digital asset management outside the realms of traditional operations. Providing management services for institutional repository metadata from Open Access publishers, providing an OpenURL knowledge-base of targets and content packages, providing a suite of usage measurement standards and tools, developing digitization practices that can be shared, developing digitization practices for audiovisual and ephemera collections, and helping to develop both localized and external referencing tools for similar resources are just some of management services librarians are desperate for and have enough ownership of to truly implement outside of their parent institutions.

Furthermore, even with a commonly shared utility such as WorldCat, there are vendors/providers who refuse to allow OCLC to utilize their data and make provision through their Web services. With the advent of WorldCat Local, there have been some changes in regard to third-party MARC providers agreeing to share data with OCLC, but there are still hold-outs as well. Even in the realm of e-commerce, no one entity wants to see a diminishing return on investment. As long as there are other providers in the mix and as long as OCLC spends time and resources developing management services that cannot be utilized, then truly achieving full Web scale will remain a cumbersome and constricted service.

In conclusion, OCLC has some viable ideas regarding Web scale and library operations management, but its developers have also missed the mark on what management services libraries truly control and are capable of changing within their local environments. OCLC appears to be targeting the ILS market to compete with but at a time when ILS management is becoming even more localized and customized to libraries. It is interesting that the scope of management services impinges on traditional practice instead of envisioning the new services and management roles librarians are developing for their libraries. Web scale is achievable for libraries as long as the right tools and services are chosen to be developed. We hope the Web-scale advisory council will reach this conclusion sooner as opposed to later.

About the Author

Jill Emery is currently Head of Acquisitions at The University of Texas Libraries in Austin, Texas. In this position she oversees the acquiring and receipt of content in a myriad of formats via all purchasing models from patron driven to approval plans. She is past-president of the North American Serials Interest Group, an active member of the Electronic Resources and Libraries LLC Group, past-chair of ALA-ACTS serials section (now continuing resources section), and a member of the Society for Scholarly Publishing. ■