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The Library Catalog as Experimental Sandbox

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For centuries libraries have made use of catalogs in one form or another as a register of the bibliographic entities found in a particular library (New World Encyclopedia contributors 2008). The modern online public access catalog (OPAC) has expanded this concept somewhat to include not only items owned by the library, but also items freely available via the Internet that have been deemed by library staff to be of value to their patrons. The modern OPAC also improves on older types of catalogs in that it has enhanced search capabilities and can be accessed from any computer with an Internet connection, meaning that the patron no longer has to actually enter the library to access the catalog.

The recent advent of concepts such as “Web 2.0” and “Library 2.0,” though still somewhat nebulous, nevertheless rest on the fact that users no longer think of the library as their only, or even their primary, source of information. As pointed out by Coyle (2007a), “The question today is not how do we get users into the library, but how can we take the library to the users. The answer will necessarily involve a transformation of the library catalog.” Users now rarely start their information searches in the library catalog, tending more often to start searching the Web using one of the popular search engines such as Google. The question becomes not one of what resources can be found in the library but rather one of what resources are available anywhere and how can one obtain them (Coyle 2007b). Consequently methods are being developed to pass Internet searches on to a library catalog when appropriate. At the same time, new services are being developed in library catalogs to send a user’s search beyond the local catalog into the catalogs of other libraries, into electronic databases, into digital repositories, or even into the Web. In addition, services are being developed that allow users provide value-added content in the form of tags, reviews, etc., thus making the catalog more interactive.

A number of such “next generation” catalogs are being developed, all of which show great promise, and none of which is entirely without flaws. One interesting family of new catalog interfaces is those that are being put out by OCLC based on the WorldCat union catalog. OCLC’s WorldCat database contains over 125 million bibliographic records with the holdings of over 10,000 libraries around the world. OCLC has developed in recent years three new interfaces to this database. WorldCat.org provides an interface to the WorldCat database that displays the search results in such a way that it guides users first to the nearest library that holds the item in question, then to progressively more distant libraries, thus allowing the user

to find the quickest way of obtaining the item from a library. Furthermore, certain Web services (e.g., Google Books) allow the user to pass their Web search on to WorldCat.org if one is interested in finding a copy of the item in question at a nearby library.

WorldCat® Local is similar to WorldCat.org with the added feature of local branding. The holdings of the local library are displayed first, followed by the holdings of other libraries in the local library's consortium, followed by other WorldCat libraries. For many purposes, WorldCat Local can serve as the primary interface to the local library's collections (as opposed to the local library's own Web OPAC) with the added feature that the holdings of other libraries are also displayed. This feature is useful if the local copy is unavailable or does not exist.

WorldCat Navigator is another new interface that is being developed for Summit, the union catalog of the Orbis Cascade Alliance. It is similar to WorldCat Local with the difference that it is branded for Summit rather than the local library and also with the difference that it displays the holdings of Alliance libraries first followed by the holdings of other WorldCat libraries. WorldCat Navigator also differs from WorldCat Local in that it allows patrons to borrow items directly from the other libraries in the consortium.

None of these new interfaces is without certain problems. For example, due to the fact that the bibliographic records that display in WorldCat.org, WorldCat Local, and WorldCat Navigator are based on the OCLC master record, any local notes (as well as certain other fields) that may appear in a library's local records will not appear, nor will they be searchable, in any of the WorldCat displays. This is particularly troublesome for those libraries with extensive special collections since these fields are often crucial for identifying unique copies of rare materials. (See, e.g., Allison-Bunnell et al. 2008) Furthermore, any authority work that one does in the local catalog is potentially lost in WorldCat unless OCLC has also done such authority work on their master record. As is well known, there are many records in WorldCat for which such authority work is sorely lacking. OCLC is aware of many of these problems, however, and hopefully they will find solutions to them.

The highly networked nature of our current world of information resources, and the decreased need for users to be within close proximity of those resources, have led some to wonder why libraries even need their own bibliographic database and user interface (Coyle 2007b). Certainly it seems rather redundant to have a library's holdings represented both in WorldCat and in the local database, and this sometimes also entails a certain amount of duplicated effort. While future improvements in the various WorldCat interfaces or others may make it possible for libraries to abandon their local catalogs and rely solely on a union catalog, this does not appear to be totally

feasible at the present time. This is in part due to problems such as those mentioned above, and also due to the fact that many libraries choose to use their local catalogs to inventory items such as study room keys, laptops, their dark archives, and other items that are not really appropriate for a world-wide union catalog and in some cases items (e.g., those in dark archives) that should not even be visible to anyone other than library staff.

There is yet another reason why at least some libraries might want to maintain a local catalog. At Portland State University, we have a history of experimenting with our catalog in an effort to develop new services for our patrons. One of our more successful experiments involved exploiting the capabilities of the Electronic Resources Management module from Innovative Interfaces, Inc., to batch-load MARC records for one of our digital archival collections into our database and then to allow our patrons to navigate through the various hierarchical levels of the collection. Details of this project can be found in Brenner, Larsen, and Weston (2006). This system mimics some of the hierarchical characteristics of a finding aid, yet it consists of sets of linked MARC records which can be searched in our catalog by author, title, subject, etc., together with all the other bibliographic records in our catalog. The records for the actual digital objects also contain links to the digital objects themselves. This system has greatly improved access to this collection. The important point here, however, is that this experiment would have been impossible to do if we had no local catalog to do it in. There is no way that we could have provided this service to our patrons through WorldCat.

Another experiment we performed in our local catalog involved the inclusion of non-Roman scripts in our authority records. Some years ago we began adding Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Arabic, and Hebrew script headings to bibliographic records for items in those languages. At a later time, we had Innovative Interfaces, Inc. set up indexing for these five scripts so that our patrons could search for these materials in the vernacular scripts. Knowing that the Library of Congress was planning at some future date to start including the non-Roman script forms of names in their authority records, we began to experiment with them ourselves to see what the implications might be for our system. We discovered that it was possible to enter non-Roman scripts into our local authority records, but in addition we were also surprised to discover that this had certain beneficial consequences for searching in our catalog. We knew that searches performed in the vernacular script were quite literal. If one searched for a name using, for example, Chinese characters, then the search only retrieved records that contained those exact characters. It did not retrieve records that had the same name only in the Romanized form. However, we discovered that when the vernacular script form of a name was entered into a 4XX or 5XX field in the appropriate authority record, and then if a search were performed using the vernacular script, the search retrieved not only the records with the

vernacular form of the name, but through the cross references it also provided access to those records that contained the name only in Romanized form.

This functionality would be of great benefit to our patrons, so we decided that we needed to add the vernacular script forms of the names to our local authority file as soon as possible. In order to do so, we developed a method of harvesting these forms from the bibliographic records that contained them and inserting them into our local authority records in an automated way. This latter project, however, became moot recently when the Library of Congress began including vernacular scripts in their authority records, and these records began appearing in the OCLC authority file. (Interestingly, much in the same way we were doing it, these vernacular script headings are being harvested from bibliographic records.) Thus, this project was never carried through to completion; however, the point here is that we would have never been able to even explore the possibilities if we did not have a local catalog in which to explore them. At this point, even though OCLC authority records are now starting to include non-Roman scripts, it does not appear to be possible in WorldCat to retrieve Roman-script-only records when searching using the vernacular script. Consequently, this type of search still works best in our local catalog.

These are exciting times, and it will be interesting to see what future developments will happen in the world of library catalogs and other information discovery systems. Nevertheless, for reasons that I hope have been made clear above, we are not quite ready to abandon our local catalog. At this particular point in time we don't want to throw the proverbial baby out with the proverbial bathwater. On the other hand, though, as the baby grows up, it would do well to be wary.

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