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The Systems Librarian

by Terry Ballard

Going to the Source for Information

Direct links to articles could change the face of the reference desk

This may well be the golden age of the Web. Just when we think we've totally spoiled our users, we give them something else that makes things even better. We were at the American Library Association conference in Washington, DC, this summer, and there was one trend among the vendors that caught my eye: direct links to articles and to journal runs.

Database providers used to require searchers to access articles by first going to the main screen, and then calling up the article. This meant that you could not set up any systematic links to articles in the commercial databases in your library screens. The locations that showed up at the top of the browser included session information that timed out—not a consistent link to the thing you were searching. However, this is changing with vendors such as UMI, Ovid Technologies, and Project Muse.

Eliminating the step of going to the initial screen and initiating a session seems pretty simple—you just save a keystroke. This also opens an awesome array of possibilities for creative systems librarians.

Electronic Course Reserves

First of all, it will allow librarians to spread out the work of those embattled people at the reserve desk. In the past, professors who wanted to assign course readings only had two real choices. First, they could have the readings photocopied and then sold to the students at the campus copy centers. Otherwise, the readings could be sent to the library where staff could copy them and check them out to students. Either way, professors would have to check for copyright clearance before assigning the reading. Electronic course reserves will allow for a third option that should make everybody happier. There will always be a need for a paper copy of a course reading in the library, but these electronic solutions will eliminate the need for multiple paper copies being manually checked out. Even the copyright owners are happy, because the cost is covered in the site license to the vendor.

The students will be happier because they can get what they want wherever they are. An early leader in electronic course reserves was Harvard Law School. In a presentation at ALA in July, Melissa Shaffer, the head of information technology there, reported that they adopted a motto of "Full information at any time, from any place." They set up a template for professors to use in creating a course reserves Web page, and gave them ftp accounts so they could transfer their own data. She implied that the only problem with the service was its popularity—her office was swamped with requests from faculty members.

I checked with one of my college's business professors last week to see what he would think of putting his course readings on the business school Web page. He just said, "Wow!" In a few weeks, we'll find out what the students say. However, when we offer them access to course readings from their dorm rooms or even from home, we aren't bracing ourselves for a lot of complaints.

Linking Through MARC Records

Direct linking will also help catalogers who want to extend the possibilities of online catalogs. Using the 856 marc fields, some libraries are adding Web links at the end of records to allow users to go into the electronic version of a journal. The librarians at Dartmouth have started an ambitious program to create records in their online catalog that link to free Web journals for all users, and to paid Web subscriptions for their own clientele. They were a beta test site for the new UMI SiteBuilder software, and they have also created links to some of the JSTOR journals that they pay for. It's well worth a visit at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/online.html. Once you are in the catalog, make a keyword search for "electronic journal" and you will get a rich selection of online journals. Many of them are free for the looking, and those are worth bookmarking.

Jennifer Merrill at Dartmouth told me that they hide the actual addresses of electronic journal issues in CGI scripts—this saves space on the MARC record.

The Outer Limits of Applications

The potential for creative use of this technology is being emphasized by UMI as the company included SiteBuilder software with its new release of ProQuest Direct 2.0 this summer. This supplies templates for applications such as links to current tables of contents, course reserves, and even customized screens for searching ProQuest Direct. People there tell me that the options will include course reserves with unique passwords for remote patron verification, which are timed to expire at the end of a semester.

While I am always happy to get technology advances that make the library look good, I wonder where it will all end. Maybe we'll have artificial intelligence programs that take all of the data and write research papers. In his presentation at ALA, Steve Coffman, director of FYI, the Professional Research and Rapid Information Delivery Service of the Los Angeles County Public Library, is using this kind of technology to produce a virtual library so complete that it will almost eliminate the need for human support. He said that there will always be a button to push to contact a librarian, but they will study that as a system error. I'm not sure that virtual libraries can ever be that virtual, but I'll be interested to see what they produce.

Terry Ballard is the automation librarian at Quinnipiac College in Hamden, Connecticut. He can be reached at ballard@quinnipiac.edu, or through his Web page at http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/3632.

WLN Brings PMSC to the Web, Joins DRA to Form Library Intranet

WLN has announced the upcoming Web hosting of A/V ACCESS PLUS, the new audiovisual database from Professional Media Service Corp. WebLN, a WLN-developed Web interface, eliminates special hook-ups, sign-up, or software, requiring only a standard internal Web browser. The PMSC database of quality MARC records is easily accessed using WebLN technology. Designed for novice or advanced users, WebLN software provides sophisticated search logic (including Boolean) to facilitate highly productive searching. Through conscientiously managed Web access, downloading MARC records from the A/V ACCESS PLUS database via WebLN technology provides quick, affordable record retrieval.

In a separate release, WLN and Data Research Associates, Inc. (DRA) have announced the establishment of a private data exchange point, or "peering," on the Internet for the purpose of building a "library intranet"—a libraries-only electronic network that speeds electronic traffic among libraries and their information resources and suppliers by minimizing the distance between them. The peering is achieved using a dedicated frame-relay connection. Rather than routing randomly across the Internet, with potentially many intermediate points, or "hops," in between, this new peering arrangement means that WLN users will be a single hop away from DRA libraries and databases, and DRA Net user libraries will be a single hop away from WLN libraries and databases.

Source: WLN, Lacey, WA, 800/342-5956, 360/923-4000; http://www.wln.com.

COMPanion Corporation Announces Alexandria Executive for Special and Corporate Libraries

COMPanion Corporation has announced the release of Alexandria Executive to the corporate and special library marketplace. The company now offers the power of a 32-bit Windows library automation system to special libraries seeking a simple, cost-effective information system.

After strengthening its hold in the school library market with the release of Alexandria for Windows in April 1997, COMPanion is now sharing some of its focus with corporate and special libraries. COMPanion built upon the strengths of the school Windows product, tailoring the package to meet the needs of libraries requiring a more specialized library system.

"A corporate library asked why the product wasn't available to special libraries. We looked into requirements necessary to offer an outstanding product to a new market, made required changes to the Windows automation system, and COMPanion now offers a product tailored to meet the demands of corporate, medical, law, and other special libraries," said Patrick Hansen, director of sales and marketing at COMPanion Corporation.

Alexandria Executive is a comprehensive system that includes all of the standard library modules, such as cataloging, circulation, and patron/item management. The system also offers advanced features for periodicals, Web capabilities, and advanced bookings.

Under periodicals, libraries have the ability to fully track, manage, and catalog subscriptions and articles within a publication. Alexandria Executive's journal indexing module allows librarians to enter article information into journal indexing, then catalog the information, making it easy for patrons to search for current articles, according to the company.

Searching can be performed at Alexandria Executive's OPAC, or patrons can search the library's collection from a Web-based OPAC. This gives patrons access to the collection from remote locations or other rooms in a building. Specific Web pages can also be cataloged into the collection and then easily accessed from the OPAC. Alexandria Executive also gives patrons and librarians access to the Web from the OPAC.

Libraries can distribute book resources and other shared items with Alexandria Executive's Advanced Bookings, which will be released this fall. The system accounts for delivery and return times when scheduling item delivery and also prints packing and delivery slips for media aides or drivers.

Alexandria Executive offers a full range of automation components in one comprehensive package. The system is 32-bit native with Full-MARC record compliance and multi-lingual capabilities.

Source: COMPanion Corp., Salt Lake City, UT, 800/347-6439, 801/943-7277; http://www.companioncorp.com.

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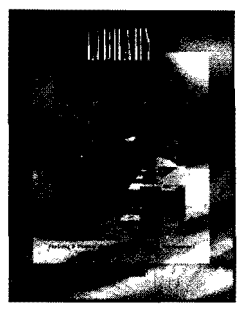

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