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Systems Librarian: The Rest of the Story

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The Systems Librarian

by Terry Ballard

Systems Librarian: The Rest of the Story

After 3 years, or about 16 columns, some of my predictions still stand

When I first started as a systems librarian in 1990, I remember feeling sorry for the person that I had been 2 months before because I felt that I had learned so much in the meantime. As I write this, it has been 3 years since I started this column, so it seemed like a good time to look back on the 16 or so columns I have done to see how embarrassed I get.

The Internet Invasion

In my first column ("Library Systems—No Longer an Oxymoron," *Information Today*, February 1996, p. 42), I looked back on my previous 30 years in the library field. I concluded: "... the rate of change is accelerating every day. That means that the next five years will be very exciting for library systems people ...," although I justify this statement by mentioning DVD more

than the World Wide Web. As I look back from my 33-year perspective, I see the World Wide Web as the greatest communications revolution since the invention of the printing press, and it is guaranteed to make that final 2 years of that prediction an awesome experience for systems librarians.

The full impact of the Internet communications revolution started to hit me in 1997, when our college library was using

the Web as the prime delivery method for full-text and indexed information ("Internet Reference: Just the Good Stuff," December 1997, p. 51). I started by describing the Internet as a fabulous repository of information as well as a cultural garbage dump of monumental proportions. A year later, it is more of both. The greatest challenge for researchers in the 21st century will be differentiating between good and bad information. A special issue of *Choice*, published last summer, made a significant contribution in steering us to the good sites.

Networked Information

Early in my days at NYU Law, I got my first taste of designing a Web interface for an OPAC ("O What a Tangled Web We Weave," November 1996, p. 35). I wrote that I was surprised one day to get an e-mail message telling me that we had a functioning Web OPAC—we could now improve it any way we wanted. We spent weeks improving it, followed by months of tinkering with it. The second time around, I found my experience

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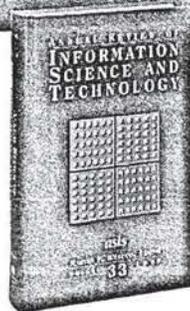
in Web OPAC design to be an exciting team effort between two campus libraries. I was disappointed that in-house usage for the Web version was slow to catch on, so I made the following prediction cautiously: "The jury is still out on the Web interface as a replacement for the old-fashioned OPAC, but I'll step out on a limb here.... this is my prediction for the year 2000: Web screens will be providing almost all library services that are now being handled by text OPACs." At Quinnipiac, the Web OPAC now accounts for 70 percent of public searches, so my prediction didn't turn out to be at all far-fetched. Recently, I've heard that some vendors are planning to eliminate their text-based OPACs altogether.

Whether text or Web, OPACs have to be constantly checked for data problems such as incorrect indicators in the MARC fields or typographical errors ("OPACs and Typographical (Sic) Errors," May 1997, p. 67). In this article, I returned to a topic that made me nearly famous in the early 1990s—the fact that OPACs can be full of misspelled words imported from bibliographic utilities. I found this out by manually cruising the entire keyword index of my library's online catalog. The only solution to this problem is to patrol for the more likely ones and clean them out periodically. In the column, I wrote that HotBot showed 19,000 hits for "commercial" and a staggering 37,000 hits for "information," which seems to be the most misspelled word on the Internet. In Alta-Vista today that number was 115,250 and

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343,771, respectively. A complete list of the errors I found was published later that year in *The Cybrarian's Manual*, ALA Editions, 1997. I keep a list of the most likely typos on my Web page at <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/3632/typos.htm>.

By April 1998 ("Online Catalogs: Finding the Weakest Link," p. 56), the Web was starting to find its way into every aspect of the systems librarian's job, as the initiation of the 856 field in the MARC record allowed online catalogs to include links to URLs. I wrote, "The potential that this creates for smoothly delivering information is staggering." I still stand by that statement. When I wrote that column, our online catalog had only five records with 856 fields, and now there are more than 300. To see how it works in practice, go to [\[qcat.quinnipiac.edu\]\(http://qcat.quinnipiac.edu\) and look at the record for *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.](http://</p>
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I recently wrote about our program that makes databases available to validated users from remote sites over the Web ("Moving a CD-ROM Network to the Web," November 1998, p. 52). I wrote, "... our users have had access for 1 month, and we have had nearly 900 successful connections. We can't wait to see what happens on the week that term papers are due." What did happen was that one night there were more than 300 connections. At other times, there is steady usage, and the total number of connections recently passed the 4,000 mark. When I heard about problems from AOL users, I got an AOL test account myself to confirm that AOL could be used as an Internet service provider in con-

junction with Netscape or Microsoft Internet Explorer to allow access to the databases.

Y2K Concerns

Early in 1997, my editor David Hoffman suggested that I write about the Y2K problem from a systems librarian's perspective ("Librarians Can Party Like It's 1999," March 1997, p. 45). I wrote about putting my own PC through the Y2K test by changing the date—it failed because it was still running Windows 3.1. Since then, I have seen nothing to make me think that UNIX-based OPACs will have a problem next January. On our system, I have renewed patrons up to 2005 and checked out books past the year 2000. I recently heard that some systems librarians are being pressured by campus information

systems departments to reset the system time clocks to January 1 to see if they can take it. My article may have been ahead of its time because I didn't get much feedback then. But yesterday, as I was writing this column, I got a call from a library director who invited me to a conference of law librarians in Knoxville, Tennessee, to give a talk about Y2K.

In this line of work, our words can always come back to haunt us.

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EOS International

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the Q Series, is now available on Sun Microsystems, Inc.'s robust Solaris operating environment and a range of powerful Sun Enterprise servers and Sun StorEdge products. EOS is offering Sun's UNIX-based server in addition to the Windows NT Server operating system on which the Q Series currently runs.

The Q Series is a full-featured MARC-based library management system that provides sophisticated information retrieval with advanced searching options that overcome the limitations of Boolean searching. Patrons may use natural language querying by simply entering a phrase or question. The Q Series Concept Searching technology offers automatic synonym searching as well as antonyms and related and contrasting terms. Search results are returned in ranked order of relevancy, and the patron may conduct a "more like this" search.

The Q Series was nominated for the 1998 Computerworld Smithsonian Award for its innovative use of information technology and its ability to make information more manageable and accessible to users.

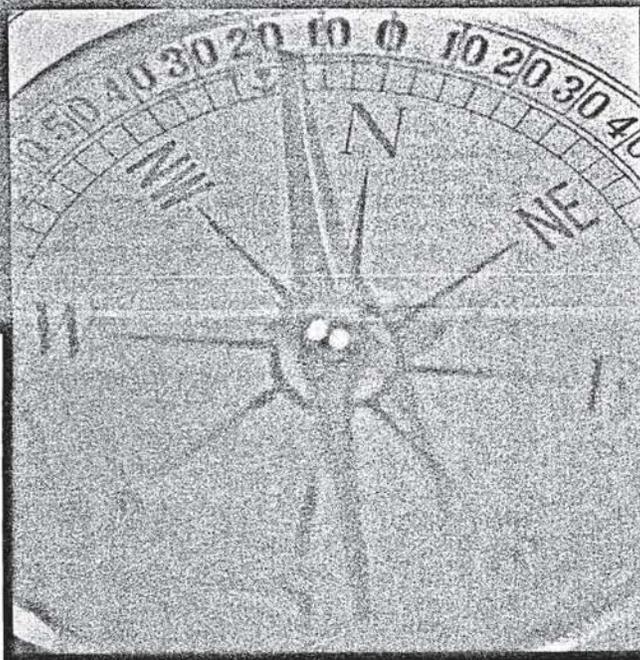
The Q Series system on the Sun platform provides an industrial-strength solution that can easily and cost-effectively expand to accommodate terabytes of data and thousands of users as needed, according to EOS International.

"The Q Series client/server architecture, combined with its ability to run on Sun's Solaris operating environment and Sun Enterprise products, enables the Q Series to support much larger libraries than ever before," said Cheatham. "EOS now offers a high-end open solution, providing increased capability to meet the current and future technology needs of libraries of all sizes."

Sun Microsystems works with over 800 major academic and research libraries in 40 countries. Sun's vision, "The Network Is The Computer," has become a reality in the library community, as libraries network together to leverage their resources to offer their patrons the best services available, while reducing their overall costs, according to the announcement.

Source: EOS International, Carlsbad, CA, 800/876-5484, 760/431-8400; <http://www.eosintl.com>.

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