Library Systems—No Longer an Oxymoron

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Library Systems—No Longer an Oxymoron
There was a time when computers were unthinkable as library tools.

It strikes me funny that I am being asked to do a column on library systems because when I started in the library field 30 years ago, there was no such thing as library systems. I had worked at the Phoenix Public Library for 10 years as a clerk and library assistant before the first computer made its way through the doors. It involved only a simple circulation system, but employees could search by author or title. There must have been a few more intricacies than I recall because I was soon doing training workshops for my co-workers.

Eight years later, I was working in the cataloging section when one of our dedicated OCLC terminals was replaced with an M300 microcomputer. My boss asked me to figure out how to make the thing work. He was too busy to deal with it. So I sat down with the manual and learned the basics of DOS. More importantly, however, I learned how a combination ofata files and programmable function keys could be used to eliminate a lot of repetitious typing. From that day until this, I have tried to learn something new about computers every day.

Having found my true niche in the library profession, I went back and got my library degree—something I had put off for 20 years. My library school professor, Edward Miller, encouraged me to enhance my employment prospects by writing about computers for national journals. I had been writing for years—first for science fiction fanzines and then freelance work for the local newspaper's Sunday magazine. It had not occurred to me to write about library science before then, but the combination paid off richly. The exposure helped me land my first job—systems librarian at Adelphi University in Garden City, New York.

During my years at Adelphi, I was given responsibility for ALICEAT, the library's online catalog. This INNOPAC system was a joy to manage. The database was in good condition to start with, and I was able to spend my time making it a little better every day. (You can telnet in at adelphi.edu. The login is "library." The last I saw, it looked great.)

I was also given free rein to learn everything I could about the Internet, which allowed me to be the resource person when a co-worker needed help with lycos, gopher, and the World Wide Web. I also volunteered for reference desk duty, so I could see how the system was being used in the real world. In one of my more memorable stints at the reference desk, I assisted Colin Ferguson, who later went on to fame (and incarceration) as the Long Island Railroad gunman.

Prior to that brush with fame, I made a discovery that led to my own moment in the spotlight. While browsing through the list of keywords in the online catalog one day, I found that there were a number of misspellings. Everybody knew that his or her catalogs contained a few typos, but I was surprised to discover that the word "administration" appeared 10 times in one catalog. I ended up spending three weeks examining the entire keyword file and taking more than 1,000 errors out of the online catalog. I knew I had found something useful when I started looking for the same words as I scoured other libraries' online catalogs. I could find errors in any online catalog or CD-ROM database (the three most likely typos in any English language database are "commercial," "research," and "administration").

I reported the results at the 1992 Computers in Libraries conference in Arlington, Virginia. At the end of my talk, I promised to print the entire list of errors words in a subsequent article in Computers in Libraries (June 1992). The following winter, I learned that the article was chosen as the Computers in Libraries Article of the Year. From time to time, I still hear from the occasional librarian who used my list. However, last year I was pleased to learn that somebody was inspired that chance discovery to create a database of spelling errors in online catalogs.

I have tried to learn something new every day. Some of these systems have been macroscopic. By the end of last year, I was well acquainted with Netscape and the World Wide Web. I have taught workshops on how to use this software and learned to make my own Web pages. I have also taken courses in multimedia and CD-ROMs.

The exposure helped me land my first job—systems librarian at Adelphi University in Garden City, New York. With the exceptions of a few typos, my library online catalog has been error-free since that first column of keywords.

I have had a great time working with computers in libraries. I have done a great deal of writing about them. I have even given a column to the library profession. I am sure that there is a lot more to come.
The Systems Librarian (continued from page 42)

inspired by my work to invent a program that would allow me to download data from OCLC into local online catalogs.

By the end of my time at Adelphi, I had become involved in the Web as well. Some days I would tally the number of systems and protocols I used a given day.

Starting with INNOPAC and OCLC, moving into e-mail and Usenet, web processing, CD-ROMs of various kinds, FirstSearch, LEXIS/NEXIS, gopher, ftp, Netscape, Lyceum, telnet, communications programs, and DOS. Sometimes I wonder how we manage to navigate through all of this without getting totally entangled.

The Systems Librarian

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Ameritech Library Network to Present Technology Seminars

Ameritech Library Services' 1996 satellite technology seminars, called Convergences, were introduced with a free broadcast at ALA Midwinter in San Antonio. Beginning in March, library professionals can tune in each month to the Ameritech Library Network to learn more about technology issues in the library industry. Offered to all public, school, and academic libraries, the monthly broadcasts will feature networking basics such as LANS and WANS, Internet access and network management topics, and creative fund-raising ideas.

Each broadcast can be viewed as an independent seminar; however, libraries will benefit more when they participate in the full series of broadcasts. "The training in each seminar builds on the previous one. We've organized it logically from the first to the last session," said Matthew Maddox, teleconference producer for Ameritech Library Services.

The Aneritech Library Network subscription price for the entire series of 10 programs is $1,199 per downlink site. Libraries without satellite access can receive the programs on videotape.

For more information, contact Ameritech Library Network, 800-773-9649.