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The Sound of Microforms Disappearing

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The Systems Librarian *by Terry Ballard*

The Sound of Microforms Disappearing

More and more information resources are being offered online

I recently returned from a whirlwind 3-day trip to Chicago for the American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference. It was an opportunity to visit old friends, eat more meat and potatoes than I normally would, and catch up with trends in the field. By Saturday morning, the most exciting thing I had done was watch a particularly good firefly display in the Oak Park backyard of my old friends. However, the excitement picked up a bit when I checked my e-mail in the conference's Internet Cafe and discovered an interesting piece of information from a most unlikely source.

Library Genealogy Research

I subscribe to a listserv of genealogical researchers for the name "Ballard." A posting from an Australian member of that list mentioned that a company called Heritage Quest had digitized the entire U.S. census from 1790 to 1920, was about to make it available online, and was going to be demonstrating the product at the ALA conference. If true, this would be the biggest thing to hit library genealogy research since the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints put its Mormon database online last year. I went upstairs to await the opening of the exhibits so I could see this firsthand. I had no trouble finding Heritage Quest's booth, but I didn't see any computers there. The salesman told me that the technical people were at a hotel showing off the service and that I should come back later.

By the end of the next day, it was clear that they wouldn't be demonstrating the census database at the booth. However, I was able to look at samples of the cleaned-up images that can be seen on Heritage Quest's Web page. (See Figure 1.) The salesman told me that the entire set was already available in CD-ROM format, but that the online version wouldn't be rolled out until the fall—hopefully in September. He wouldn't give me any specifics for pricing, but he did admit that it would first be sold to libraries on a site-license basis, with the price depending on the size of the library's user base. Later, subscriptions would be available to individual researchers.

The sheer scope of this census project is incredible to consider. The file size is 3.5 terabytes, or nearly one-fourth the size of the entire Internet 1 year ago. Naturally, users need an index to make this volume of data easy to navigate. According to Heritage Quest, the company is re-indexing all of the images and adding many thousands of names that were missing or mis-transcribed in past indexes. However, not all of the indexing will be in place when the image file is launched this fall. In the meantime, Heritage Quest is moving ahead with the digitization of other kinds of genealogical data such as land deeds, vital records, and court records.

Since this service may be available by the time you read this, you might want to visit Heritage Quest's Web site at http://www.genealogydatabase.com.

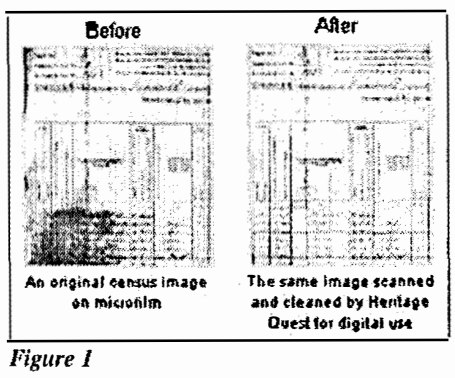

Figure 1

> *"I remain concerned about the long-term future of electronic library services."*

Online Services Get an Education

Also at ALA, I found out that ERIC, the Educational Resources Information Center, had begun to make its documents available online on a subscription basis. These are the documents published directly by ERIC, rather than in journals. The introduction of this product, which ERIC calls E*Subscribe, was exciting for me because I had been predicting it for some time. Anyone who has worked at a university library that owns nearly a half-million ERIC microfiche cards knows what it's like when one of them turns up missing. In the past few years, a limited number of the ERIC documents were available in electronic format. The problem was that you needed to order them on an individual basis from ERIC, rather than through a site license. Initially, the availability is for most of the documents published between 1996 and the present (by ERIC's estimate, some 8 percent of the material consists of abstracts of book chapters and is not available in microfiche or online). Optionally, the 3 previous years were available as individual purchases.

At our library, we anticipated that the pricing would be low because this project was being conducted by the government. We were wrong, for several reasons. First of all, the ERIC Document Reproduction Service is an independent entity—more like the postal service than a government agency. Second, the cost is pretty much in line with what we're paying for commercial services. The pricing is based on the size of the institution, with IP (Internet protocol) recognition of passwords for three to five simultaneous users. That worked well for us as a medium-sized university. However, by the time you added the optional years and special ERIC Clearinghouse modules, such as Educational Management, Vocational Education, or Information Technology, the price rose past $5,000 per year. (But I'm speculating that that money is used to convert the entire collection.) Once that's done, I suspect there will be one subscription price for the entire set. It'll clearly take some years to find out if I was right. In the meantime, ERIC is giving libraries a break if they buy as part of a consortium. By my rough estimate, we would save about $1,000 if we bought everything that looked interesting.

E*Subscribe was quietly inaugurated this spring, so there are already some reports from real-world users. So far, many of those who've tried this service have been very happy with it. An acquaintance at the Pace University Library told me that her users are delighted with the service and are buying as much of it as they can. One important feature is that the documents are in Adobe PDF image format. This means, as in the case of JSTOR, that you receive pictures of pages rather than searchable text documents. The only negative comment I've heard about E*Subscribe was from a librarian who had students hit the print button for a 40-page document and then decide they didn't really want it. To be fair, that problem didn't start with ERIC, but it does give ammunition to library administrators who want to charge students for printing, or at least give them a page allotment.

If you want to find out all of the details, just visit http://www.edrs.com/esubscribe.htm. The site has a PDF order form, full pricing details, and a request form for a 2-week free trial.

What Does It All Mean?

As good as trends like this are, I remain concerned about the long-term future of electronic library services. The move from CD-ROM, paper, and microform to the Web has come during 8 years of economic growth. But, the day is coming when the economy will pack its bags and head south. When that day comes, those of us who provide these services to our users will be very glad for databases like JSTOR, which we purchased mainly with upfront money followed by a small maintenance fee. In the meantime, we'll be paying a lot of attention to usage reports. However, products like the online census are, necessarily, a one-way street in the information map. Once libraries purchase these products and redesign their workflow to accommodate them, they can't go back to doing things the old way. Genealogical libraries are now providing U.S. census information in microfilm reading areas. When this information is online, that will necessarily change what goes on at those libraries, and there's no going back. This is all for the best, I think. Perhaps it was most aptly said years ago by Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter: "Keep an eye to the future, an ear to the past, but after thinking it over, notice nothing much lasts."

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OCLC's WebExpress, CORC

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WebExpress an evolving, ongoing service linking the library and OCLC via the Web and distributed technology," said Hermes.

The OCLC WebExpress service comprises two components: the OCLC WebExpress Service Center, which includes demonstrations, ordering information, documentation, training materials, and a repository of Z39.50 configurations from OCLC; and the integration software, which is stored on the library's Linux or Solaris server and includes the administrative module that allows the librarian to customize the user interface, select and add Z39.50 resources, and set up various levels of user authentication and profiling.

CORC

OCLC's CORC is now available as a regular service. Built cooperatively with nearly 500 libraries over the past 18 months, CORC is a Web-based system for building bibliographic records and pathfinders (subject bibliographies) for electronic resources.

CORC lets librarians work together to target the Web resources that fit local needs, leveraging a cooperative model to minimize duplication of effort and maximizing knowledge sharing with other libraries. CORC gives libraries the ability to make local resources available to patrons worldwide and to make quality global resources available to local library users.

"With its bridge between traditional and new forms of metadata, CORC is an important tool that libraries can use to facilitate access to the Web and so maximize the usefulness of their online catalogs," said Kathleen L. Wells, senior catalog librarian at the University of Southern Mississippi.

"CORC is one of the most exciting services that I have seen introduced during my 26 years at OCLC," said Gary R. Houk, vice president of OCLC Services. "In addition to helping libraries manage access to electronic resources, the CORC service will play a major role in OCLC's future product strategy. Future releases of the CORC service will support cataloging of all materials, vernacular languages, and a database architecture that will virtually extend WorldCat to additional resource descriptions such as reviews, biographies, and tables of contents. This extended WorldCat is a key element to an integrated suite of Web-based services that are planned, including selection and ordering of content from other third-party providers."

CORC offers a toolkit, based on technology developed at OCLC, that supports automated record creation, authority control, URL maintenance, and pathfinder creation. Libraries using CORC have the option of subscribing to the WebDewey service for access to the latest version of the enhanced Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) database (updated quarterly) and use of an automatic classification tool to generate candidate DDC numbers during record creation. A special feature of the WebDewey service is its inclusion of selected Library of Congress (LC) subject headings—linked to the LC authority files—that have been intellectually mapped to Dewey numbers by the DDC editors and statistically mapped to Dewey numbers in OCLC's WorldCat database.

Source: OCLC, Dublin, OH, 614/764-6000; http://www.oclc.org.