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The Systems Librarian

by Terry Ballard

Library OPACs Were Handed a Disservice

This columnist rankles at a writer's disregard of the online benefits

Novelist Nicholson Baker wrote an article for *The New Yorker* back in 1994 that still irritates me when I think about it. The article ("Discards," *The New Yorker*, April 4, 1994, pp. 64-70) praised the card catalog and questioned the value of online library catalogs.

While he had a number of excellent points, such as the value of touching a catalog card that might have a famous author's fingerprints on it, there was one point that particularly rankled me. Baker could see no use in using one's computer to log in to a distant card catalog other than finding out the cute nicknames that they assign to these machines. In the spirit of helpfulness, I will explain some of the advantages to be gained by visiting other catalogs through the Internet that Baker overlooked.

Making Our Lives Easier

The first example that comes to mind is purely practical. My wife Donna works in collection development at the East Meadow Public Library. One of her jobs is suggesting Dewey numbers for new titles. In the book, she can sometimes get them from OCLC records. If they are not in OCLC, she can get them from other libraries by logging in to their online catalogs.

She told me of another instance when she used publicly accessible OPACs to help with a project in which she needed to get books on the subject of Southwest design. For ideas, she logged into libraries in our home state of Arizona and examined their online catalogs to find out what they had on that particular topic.

Why There Were Card Catalogs

The main function of the card catalog is to keep a list of the books that the library owns. Keeping this function in mind, consider another practical example. I live in Long Island, but I might be interested in a book owned by a library in New

Jersey. Now, I might drive to New Jersey, go to the library, look up the book by thumbing through catalog cards (which, for all I know, might have been handled by Phil Rizzuto as a boy) and still be faced with the prospect that the book is checked out. The obvious benefit of utilizing an online catalog is that most of them will tell you whether a book is checked out, saving you several bridge tolls.

More than bridge tolls is involved if you are doing international research: I

expense. By searching library catalogs on the Internet, I can conveniently confirm which libraries—in Hong Kong and Australia, for instance—have bought my book.

The Advantages of Web Versions

By logging in to COPAC (<http://copac.ac.uk/copac>), the Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov>), OhioLINK (<http://olc1.ohiolink.edu/search>), and the MELVYL system (<http://www.melvyl.ucop.edu>), the user has access to tens of

differences between text OPACs, depending on which system is being used. However, the Web versions tend to be more similar, so the user has to spend less time learning new search protocols with each visit to an OPAC. Finally, I expect telnet access to completely disappear in favor of Web access within the next year or two. For a comprehensive list of library catalogs available on the Web, check out the Hywebcat list, compiled by Peter Scott and Doug Macdonald, at <http://library.usask.ca/hywebcat>.

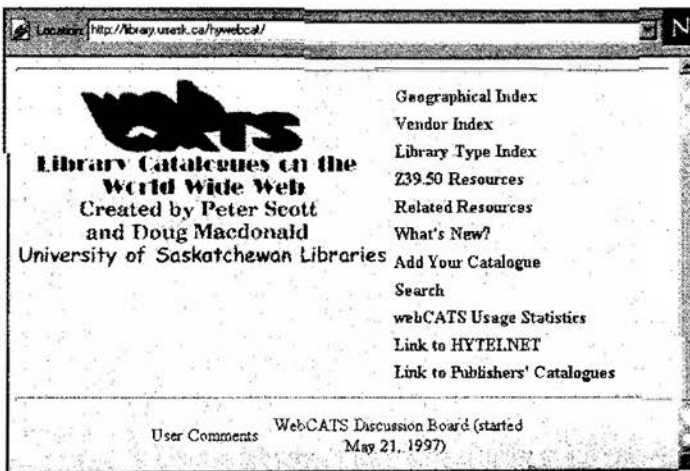
When card catalogs were invented, they were the most flexible way to disseminate information about a library's holdings. They were expandable as new books came in, and they could serve multiple users simultaneously. They replaced giant log books in which new acquisitions were patiently entered by hand in the order that they came in.

OPACs can do everything that card catalogs can do, plus several things they cannot do. While the card catalog can serve many users simultaneously, all of those people have to be physically present in the library. The online catalog serves information to people who can't come to your library—either because of disability or because they live thousands of miles away.

What to Do with Card Catalogs

Baker is right about one thing, though. Card catalogs can be a thing of beauty with their bright labels and varnished drawers. Perhaps OCLC might be persuaded to spend some of their millions to inaugurate a card catalog museum near its headquarters in Dublin, Ohio. This would properly celebrate a bygone era in library science, and it would be appropriate because OCLC has done as much as anybody to move us into the OPAC Age.

That would leave the rest of us free to spread information to people who need it in the most efficient way possible.



The Hywebcat site provides a comprehensive list of library catalogs available on the Web.

know a professor who is planning a trip to Britain to do scholarly research (and probably to eat a lot of fish and chips). He can now call up the British COPAC system on the Web and find out the holdings of Oxford, Cambridge, and more than a dozen other British research libraries using a single search. He can then use this information to plan his trip more efficiently.

As an author, I found another feature of OPAC access to be particularly useful in saving international telephone or travel

millions of records—representing virtually every book published in the Western world. In their Web versions, all of these systems allow you to download selected records in a simplified format and save them to your hard disk—which, with a little editing, becomes a bibliography.

When Baker's article was written, the primary method of accessing OPACs was through telnet. Here, I gave Web directions to these catalogs for several reasons. First, it is more direct—there are no passwords to deal with. Second, there are big

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