November 2006

Innovations Affecting Us -- The "Next Generation" of Library Access

Kristen DeVoe

College of Charleston, devoek@cofc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DeVoe, Kristen (2006) "Innovations Affecting Us -- The "Next Generation" of Library Access," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 18: Iss. 5, Article 36.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5036>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Innovations Affecting Us — The “Next Generation” of Library Access

by **Kristen DeVoe** (Electronic Resources Librarian, College of Charleston)
<devoek@cofc.edu>

In a 2003 report to the **Library of Congress** on improving user access to library catalog and portal information, **Marcia Bates** notes that “people do not just use information that is easy to find; they even use information that they know to be of poor quality and less reliable — so long as it requires little effort to find...”¹ Certainly librarians have noticed that the library catalog and resources have become less than popular points of primary research for users. It is becoming apparent that users prefer to begin to look for information using well-liked and easy to use search engines such as **Google**, **Yahoo!**, and **Amazon's A9**. These resources have defined the playing field when it comes to resource and information discovery, and libraries and library software vendors have decided that it's high time to catch up to “the competition” and offer users a new experience in finding information using library resources.

The library systems and automation market has recently seen the proliferation of a new range of products that rely on the wealth of modern technologies that users have come to expect based on their experiences searching on the Web. If the current range of tools in development by some major ILS vendors and libraries are any indication, the next generation of library users may not need to understand how to navigate a traditional **OPAC (Online Public Access Catalog)** in order to find the information that they are seeking; instead the information will be found and presented to users à la **Google**, **Amazon**, and **Yahoo!** among others. These new or “next generation” (as they are sometimes referred to) library systems utilize some of the most talked about technologies that can be found on the Web today including interactivity (commenting, tagging, leaving reviews, etc.), **Ajax** implementation, faceted browsing (the ability to narrow results by combining categories until a desired item/record is found) vs. hierarchical browsing, relevancy ranking, and **RSS** feeds. Compared to what's available on the Web in terms of content and functionality, the library online catalog offers a less than desirable experience for users. The products and tools currently in development may offer us a glimpse into the future of the online catalog and user access to resources.

Do We Need to Change the Catalog?

There are many online blogs, listservs, forums, and conference presentations where one can find an increasingly long list of problems with the **OPAC** today. Some aired complaints about current **OPACs** include the lack of good relevancy ranking, no spell corrections, the limited variety of resources that can be searched by the online catalog, the user interface, the lack of interactivity, etc. As Web technologies further develop to offer users wide reaching access to information in a desirable interface, the **OPAC** and the separate library resources such

as databases, the e-journals page, the subject guide pages begin to stand out less and less as the best place to search.

Local Approaches to a New OPAC

Frustrated by the limitations of the traditional **OPAC**, some libraries have taken it upon themselves to re-design the functionality of the **OPAC** and begin to look at ways to incorporate multiple collections into a single search. Two well received and much talked about tools are **WPopac** at **Plymouth State University**, and **North Carolina State University's** new catalog.

WPopac

Under development by **Casey Bisson** at **Plymouth State University**, **WPopac** (<http://www.plymouth.edu/library/opac/>) is a prototype of a plug-in for **WordPress** (<http://wordpress.org/>), the popular blog management application, that functions as a public interface allowing for data to be pulled from multiple sources and provides many opportunities for user interaction — two things that most library online catalogs lack. As a **WordPress** plug-in, **WPopac** offers popular interactive features such as the ability to leave comments, trackbacks, and tags. Additionally **WPopac** offers relevancy ranking, a search inside the book feature via **Amazon**, holdings, book jacket, and review information displayed using **Ajax**, a sidebar with information for recent searches, the most popular records, and records that have been recently commented on. **WPopac** also has the ability to refine the search based on subject keyword, subject, author, etc., links to add the record to **del.icio.us**, to find the item in **WorldCat Libraries**, and to “find more like this.” Permalinks are created for every record, allowing content to be indexed by search engines.

North Carolina State University Libraries

The much talked and blogged about **OPAC** at **North Carolina State University's Libraries** (<http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/catalog/>) also takes the user beyond the traditional **OPAC** experience and into the familiarity and comfort of searching on the Web. Powered by **Endeca's ProFind** software, the new keyword search was added to the catalog and offers users the flexibility and speed that they've come to expect from searching and browsing for information on the Web. Current features of the new catalog at **NCSU** include relevance ranking, “breadcrumbs” for users to follow to backtrack their search, ranking by popularity, spelling correction, a thesaurus, and a “did you mean...” functionality similar to **Google's**. Users can also browse the results by **Library of Congress** classification; limit the search to currently available items, to narrow their results by topic, genre, region, era, language, author, format, and library (location). Additionally users can browse

the library's collections by subject if they want to. Many of these features are already visible across the Web, and their incorporation into a library's catalog search reflects a move to offer users a feature and content rich experience while using the online catalog. In the future **NCSU** plans to add to the functionality of this new tool by adding a shopping cart feature, **RSS** and Web services functionality, and an incorporation of **FRBR (functional requirements for bibliographic records)** to display expressions of the same work in one display.

The Vendor Approach

Information, as many libraries present it today, is often said to exist in “silos” that a user must navigate to and search separately in order to find a variety of resources. Library silos can include databases, A-Z e-journal portals, the **OPAC**, subject guide pages, Websites, and search engines among others. Library software vendors are getting in tune with the difficulties that this can cause for the modern library patron who is familiar with search engines that return a list of relevancy ranked results in a variety of formats — all from only one search point! **SirsiDynix's Enterprise Portal Solution** (<http://www.sirsi.com/Solutions/Prodserv/Products/eps.html>) **Innovative Interfaces' Encore** (http://www.iii.com/news/pr_template.php?id=290), and **Ex Libris' Primo** (<http://primo.exlibris-usa.com/>) are among the recent products that strive to re-integrate the library's “silos” of information while offering innovative features straight from the user's experience on the World Wide Web. These products serve as a platform (**Primo** will work with many major integrated library systems) for users to access all of the information resources that are available to an institution from a single search interface including the **OPAC**, databases, e-journals, digital archives, and more. In addition to the ability to locate resources from a variety of collections with one search, some of these new tools offer newer technologies already popular with users such as the ability to tag, comment on, or review resources, faceted browsing, “breadcrumbs” that detail the progress of a search, **RSS** feeds, browseable collections, the use of **Ajax** for a dynamic interface, and relevance ranking. Users see and use these features all over the Web, why not at the library too?

For libraries, these developments in library systems and automation offer exciting possibilities to improve the user experience and enhance access to the library's collections, both digital and print, like we never have before. The catalog as we know it today is undergoing a strong

continued on page 68

ATG Interviews Chris Warnock

CEO, ebrary

by **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *There has been a lot of buzz lately about eBooks. Do you think that the time has finally arrived for success in the academic marketplace?*

CW: I think the time has arrived for electronic content in the academic marketplace. If each book is an investment, then from the perspective of an investment, I have a difficult time speculating as to why a library would choose to buy a physical book over its electronic counterpart. If the information is the same, more people can more easily access the content, it doesn't take any shelf space, there is no re-shelving cost, and if MARC records come with the electronic version for free, then the library stands to gain in every respect.

We had one customer tell us that he had the pleasure of walking around the library, telling his colleagues that he just added 30,000 titles to the library's collection — in one day. If you look at the role libraries play, there is an opportunity before us to enable libraries to organize and optimize their information for their patrons' use, at a scale and rate that they could not ever dream of achieving with physical information. Plus, libraries should also be able to build their collections much more cost effectively through electronic content.

From a researcher's perspective, the title of an electronic book is immediately available, and can be searched as well as navigated much more easily than the physical book. The user can highlight and annotate text electronically, and if they want to cite a section, the copied text includes a customizable citation with link and copyright attribution linking to the page it copied.

Even from the publisher's perspective, distributing the electronic version represents the potential for greater profits, so much so, that it

is conceivable for the publisher to make significantly more money, charging libraries less money, for accessing their content.

There are a lot of issues that warrant discussion regarding the purchase of electronic titles, archive-ability, ownership, access rights, etc... I do not mean to belittle any of these issues, or suggest that they are not important, but from the economic and efficiency benefit to a library, and its patron base, actually from almost every perspective, the benefits of purchasing or licensing the information electronically, significantly out-performs the print equivalent.

The only thing that prevents this from being one of the greatest periods of time in the history of publishers and libraries is the rate in which they adapt to new opportunities and technologies. For libraries to be able to continue to provide information for free to their patron bases, both publishers and libraries need to adapt the way that they think about their products and how they sell or purchase those products.

One of the issues before us is the role that electronic journals can play as a model for other forms of electronic content. The issue here is that libraries are forced to subscribe to multiple collections, whether they want multiple collections or not. This is done at the consortia level in order to increase their purchasing power. In fact, this practice may actually not be in the interest of either the publisher or the library. There are economic models that suggest that libraries purchasing individually can increase their purchasing power 10 to 1, and the publishers can still make more money.

The reason I bring up this last point, is in part it seems as though libraries and publishers have begun to settle on what acceptable business models should be for eBooks, and guess

what? It looks an awful lot like the status quo — which is fine — but the status quo, in the case of the economics for libraries, is a slippery slope in the wrong direction. The academic monograph, it could be argued, is on the endangered species list, as is, in some cases, many of the smaller university presses.

Electronic distribution should offer a solution that allows publishers and libraries to flourish. We are at the dawn of a new renaissance. The tools that we have at our disposal are amongst the most powerful in the history of the world. Libraries — historically — have provided the most unbiased and egalitarian access to published information and it is libraries that should be celebrated and promoted in this regard.

ATG: *You advertise that you have 900 customers in 100 countries. What sort of customer base is out there. ebrary has implemented many new initiatives and product clusters in a variety of subject areas. Tell us about them.*

CW: World-wide about 80% of our customer base is academic libraries, the rest is comprised of community colleges, public libraries and special libraries. About 40% of our customer base is in North America and 60% is everywhere else, and by everywhere else, I really mean everywhere else.

Our products — we call them “collections” — are designed to give our library customers the flexibility that they need to build collections efficiently and in a manner that works for them and for the publisher. In every case each collection or initiative has been asked for by a customer, we add it because we can, and we add it in addition to the other services or collections that preceded it.

We offer libraries the ability to choose how they acquire electronic content. They may subscribe to information for a yearly fee, or they may purchase titles and own them. We license our technology to libraries, publishers and aggregators to build databases of their own content for their own use, and we enable them to do this all under their own brand.

For the last five years we have been gathering statistics and developing models of usage patterns with content accessible under multiple business models. The results of this research enables us to provide our library customers with the ability to purchase or lease content under a business model that fits their needs. All of these business models offer content that is accessible from a single platform. We think this gives libraries a great foundation to build their electronic collections. With data that we have collected, we will be optimizing our collections to provide the libraries with more choices that will better serve their patrons' needs.

One of the most exciting things that we have been doing is working with libraries to provide

continued on page 70

Innovations Affecting Us from page 66

re-evaluation and the results of this may be far-reaching and beneficial for libraries and their users. Perhaps the quality and strength of a library's print and electronic collections can be successfully combined with the usability and richness of popular Web interfaces which will prompt users to suggest, “why don't you just library it?” instead of “why don't you just Google it!”

Endnotes

1. Bates, Marcia J. 2003, “Task Force Recommendation 2.3 Research and Design Review: Improving User Access to Library Catalog and Portal Information.” Available online <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/bibcontrol/2.3BatesReport6-03.doc.pdf>.

Drinking from the Firehose from page 64

neous assessment possible. But this assumes you carry your laptop or other device around, which many of us do not. Perhaps we all will someday, but we're not there yet.

I will continue to think about this and maybe I'll find the time to read some of this stuff. And who knows, maybe “Drinking From the Firehose” and other *ATG* columns will transform themselves into the blogosphere somehow someday!

Many thanks to **Georgie Donovan** and **Glenn Ellen Starr-Stilling** for sharing their blog-reading habits with me; to **Allan Scherlen** for ideas about columns vs. blogs; and to **T. Scott Plutchak**, whose blog was the first I ever read!