Back Talk — The Disintegrated Library System

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.8289
**Back Talk — The Disintegrated Library System**

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I'm as nostalgic for the old card catalog as anyone, but you have to admit it had its drawbacks. You don't bump into strange backides any more, you don't rise from a crouch only to crack your skull on a drawer somebody else left open, and you don't look on a set of drawers for an author like Cicero or Shakespeare and shake your head in despair at the confusing welter of information. Sing Ho! for the Integrated Library System (ILS) that rescued us from that world!

But ... is it time for a little disintegration? Let me try a theory here.

Fifty years ago we had several “systems” side by side. One was the set of files for orders and invoices and the tiny catalog-fitting order slips that were among the cards until the book showed up. Another was the separate set of files for tracking and checking in serials — and I doubt anybody misses serials check-in as a way of life. Another was the card catalog itself: the ultimate warehouse-management system, with a master card for everything and every card in its place. The shelf list was the king of that domain, usually hidden away somewhere from grubby-fingered students, and the public catalog offered its Paper User Interface (PUI). And there was a circulation system kept separately. I’m too young to be sure (and I love having an excuse to write the words “I’m too young” for any purpose!), but I think circulation systems were the first to computerize. Certainly when ASU's Hayden Library opened in 1966, part of the hype was the proud display of the punch card-based system then in use.

The deep insight underlying the ILS was that all these could be as one. From selector’s recommendation to user’s return of a book, all in one system. Yes, the transition was sticky. Where I was, the real problem (apart from incomprehension and nostalgia) of the new ILS was that we had “machine-readable” (there are other people too young to know that phrase) records for only some (the more recent acquisition), of our collections, and for about five years we had to chirvy our students to remember that the online catalog was such a miracle wasn’t the only source of information about our books. But most places did catalog recon and even that drawback went away. Brave new world.

But here’s where I begin to wonder about the place we’ve gotten to. Nobody under the age of — shall we say 35? — has any meaningful experience of the traditional catalog. I don’t want to have to explain to a bright undergrad just what the difference is between a “one search” interface and “the catalog.”

So where is the ILS today? We still have it, though we’re trying to school ourselves to call it our LSP (Library Services Platform), but it still quacks and waddles a lot like an ILS. But now we’ve added the “discovery layer.” Notice the metaphor: it’s a layer, a thin slice of something, added on top of something else considerably more substantial.

An important reason why we continue to speak that way is because our ILS/LSP has changed so little. The MARC record-based catalog, however supplemented, is still obsessively focused on the things we possess in a given library. It started as a warehouse management system and in its heart it still is. The surest way to get into our ILS is for us to buy something, unwrap it, put a sticker on it, and put it on a shelf.

But another thing our new users don’t care about — and will care about less and less as a greater and greater portion of what we own is in off-site shelving — is where something is located or who paid for it. Their interest in a given information resource is pretty binary: am I able to use it, yes or no? If yes, fine. If no, bummer. But we increasingly answer “yes” for a vast variety of things that our particular library doesn’t own. Start with online journals and databases and eBooks that we license but that never enter any building or computer of our own — and can disappear when the eBook vendor decides to clean out its attic! (Grumble, grumble: matter for another crotchety column.) Then add all the riches of our increasingly rapid and seamless interlibrary loan.

As user, I care about whether we have the object on a patron-facing shelf if I’m in a tearing hurry for it and there’s no e-version that I can even peek at. (In a hurry like that, my first resort is Amazon search-inside-the-book. I can usually verify that footnote, find that quotation, or get a good sense how important this book will be for me while waiting for ILL to get it to me in a couple of days.)

So let me make a suggestion, first about words, then about things. Why don’t we begin to speak of a “discovery system” and then mention, in a subordinate clause somewhere, the “catalog layer”? Isn’t it time to focus more on the wizardry that lets us find and request the thing we want — wherever it is — and stop thinking about ownership, location, and the like?

But careful about agreeing with me, because the logical conclusion of taking that approach will be that the effective discovery system does not need to be co-located with the users or their library. Who might be the one to give us an academic discovery system that knows the world of our curated information so well that we all use it in preference to anything we buy and pay for and install and configure locally? I don’t know that they’d ever be interested, but is there really anything to prevent Amazon or Google from eating the lunch of every ILS vendor going?

Just to be clear, here’s what I as user and as librarian want. I want a search tool that knows at least the universe of library-held and library-curated and library-known information. (There’s a tension here between the desire to find everything and the desire to filter what we find by some criteria of quality. “It’s in the library” has been such a criterion. Can we reproduce it in this space?) This will include things that have restrictions on access and will include things that are open

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Access. (If this tool were to exist, it would put great pressure in favor of more open access.) It will know where things are and how to get them — in the sense that it will know what is analog material available by interlibrary loan, what is analog material only available to onsite visitors, what is digital material that requires some kind of ongoing financial relationship with the provider (a subscription or a license), what is digital material that’s available for some kind of by-the-drink payment, and what is digital material that is openly accessible. And it will know what to do in order to enable the user to access and use that material — and it will do it for me. Our local delivery systems will need to integrate with the disintegrated library system well enough to perform the fulfillment function.

Doesn’t that give us a chance for the DLS — Disintegrated Library System? Run our business of buying and tracking with one system, provide access to data about the things that we happen to contribute to the global information space with another, and let the discovery system do all the hard stuff? Am I nuts? 🤔

ENDNOTES
2. https://www.mysciencework.com/
4. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_Roundabout_(Swindon)
5. https://www.wizdom.ai/
7. See https://www.cell.com/figure360
9. Features of the new website are described at NEJM.org/revitalized, where there is also a link to an editorial discussing its development.

RUMORS

BREAKING NEWS — Elsevier has signed a definitive agreement to acquire Aries Systems, a leader in scientific publication workflow solutions headquartered outside Boston, MA. Aries’ offerings are used by journals, books and other publications for manuscript submission, peer review, production tracking and eCommerce. Aries was founded by Lyndon Holmes in 1986 and has successfully developed several generations of technologies to support publications processes, including Editorial Manager, an online manuscript submission and peer-review system. Elsevier and Aries have worked closely for nearly 20 years and Elsevier already uses the Editorial Manager platform for a significant number of journals, including its high profile Cell Press portfolio and many society titles. The transaction is subject to customary conditions and regulatory consents and is expected to close in the third quarter of 2018. Scholarly Kitchen via Kent Anderson has a detailed discussion of this. See — https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/08/06/interpreting-elsevers-acquisition-aries-systems/.

Thanks to all of you who proposed sessions for the 2018 Charleston Conference! It’s going to be another great one! Have you registered yet? The early bird registration deadline is September 14! Time’s a wastin’ See you all soon! Yr. Ed.

Don’s Conference Notes

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