Library Catalogs and the Current Environment: What is the Problem We're Trying to Solve?
Rev. 4/18/2007

Eric Morgan and Pascal Calarco, with Aaron Bales, Mark Dehmlow

The limitations and weaknesses of the library catalog is a topic that has been discussed and researched for over twenty years, beginning with the information retrieval community in the early 1980s. More recently, some commercial systems have been put into production that address some of these long-standing issues, beginning with the adoption of a faceted-browsing catalog interface by Endeca at North Carolina State University. The profession has written about these fairly extensively; our group is developing a select bibliography of the most important of these, which will be available shortly. These issues have come to a head with the unprecedented success of Google as a means to provide easy access to the vast information available on the World Wide Web, and its entrance into the library space with Google Scholar and Google Books initiatives. The text below briefly elaborates upon this idea.

Library catalogs have traditionally served as the inventory for the resources that an institution purchases or licenses. This leaves out much of the external content freely-available on the open Web, or held at other institutions, that may be of relevance to a scholarly community.

With the advent of the Internet, people's expectations regarding the finding and acquisition of information have evolved. Increasingly people expect simple search - enter a few words, retrieve a list of hits ranked by relevance, click on the hits, and then get the content. Google best exemplifies this expectation. Library catalogs, on the other hand, often have a multitude of search options and they often return results in chronological or alphabetical order. Hits typically display surrogate records, not the content itself. Moreover, people desire to use a limited number of tools to apply their searches (a sort of metasearch). Unfortunately, much of library content is separated into silos - different indexes, different functionality, and different nomenclature.

People generally experience success with library catalogs when they are looking for known items, but often do not achieve the same level of success when they are exploring a topic that they know little about. A search to find "Catcher In the Rye" by JD Salinger is likely to be successful, but finding resources on forestry management is often more problematic for users.

As the Internet becomes the "social Web" people expect to interact with the content they find - read and write reviews, blog their experience, and learn from the experience of their peers. They expect some degree of recommendation and suggestion. They expect perma-links that they can list and incorporate into other things.

As more and more content is "born digital" it is increasingly accessible only digitally, not in print nor physically manifested. This has resulted in things like journal packages, open access content, and institutional repositories. Library catalogs are not very amenable to the dynamic nature of digital content. There have been a number of suggestions in the profession for revising the library descriptive and processing standards to meet the challenges of this new environment.

All of these things do not mean the demise of librarianship nor the venerable library catalog. There are still great opportunities for the traditional activities of libraries, namely collection, acquisition, organization, preservation, and dissemination of data, information, and knowledge.

On the other hand, it does mean librarians might need to consider modifying the functionality of their traditional tools to better meet people's expectations to stay relevant in the rapidly evolving information space. What sorts of changes might librarians make and how might they go about implementing them?