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Opening the library catalogue up to the web: a view from South Africa

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Abstract

While libraries still spend much time and money on building and maintaining catalogues according to accepted international standards, there is considerable evidence that users are inclined to bypass libraries and their catalogues in their search for information and to rely solely on information provided by web search engines. This paper discusses the different and sometimes conflicting needs of on the one hand instant information seekers and on the other the needs of scholars that may be better served by information not obtainable by web searching alone. It proposes that one way of promoting and facilitating catalogue use is to include records for remote electronic resources into online catalogues, so that information about both print and electronic resources could be retrieved by a single search. The paper concludes by reporting on a survey done at a training workshop on the cataloguing of electronic resources, which was held by the Library and Information Association of South Africa 's Interest Group for Bibliographic Standards, in July 2006.

Keywords

Cataloguing remote electronic resources; South Africa

Introduction

Libraries spend enormous amounts of money on their catalogues. The Library of Congress spends \$44 million per year on its catalogues alone (Marcum, 2006:5). So there is an enormous amount of money and effort invested in catalogues as we know them.

But experience is also beginning to tell that all too frequently, catalogues are being bypassed when information is sought. This is the age in which Google is assumed to provide answers to everything. Students no longer come into the library; they think all they need to do is to hit Google. There is a clear danger that print collections may be in danger of being overlooked, essentially wasting this enormous investment in the catalogues that provide access to them.

This paper will consider recent international reports on this problem and the extent to which it is also evident in South African libraries. It will attempt to show that catalogues can be significantly enhanced and made more attractive to users if they are seen to contain not only bibliographical information about material in the library, but that they can provide access to full text documents as well. Finally, the results of a brief survey on the inclusion of electronic resources into South African catalogues is considered.

The changing nature of the library catalogue

Very recently, the Library of Congress commissioned a big investigation to look into the changing nature of library catalogues and their integration with other discovery tools. A prime concern was the preservation and future use of their investment in library catalogues, recognising that “to fail to define a strategic future for library catalogs places in jeopardy the legacy of the world’s library collections themselves” (Calhoun, 2006:7).

Libraries, however, do not only provide access to collections of printed materials. Most scholarly and research journals are now available electronically and libraries are increasingly providing access to full text papers and documents by mounting licensed databases on their web sites. A recent investigation found that 15 academic libraries in southern Africa provide at least some such access to full text databases (Visagie, 2006:29-30), at significant costs to their parent institutions.

South African academic libraries, like their international counterparts, have traditionally provided access to their resources by providing users with different access routes to different kinds of materials: access for full-text journal and other electronic resources from aggregations on the library web site; and access to traditional print materials and other resources physically held in the library, through the online public access catalogue (OPAC). In many instances these databases are mounted separately on the library home page and must be searched individually.

This might be convenient for librarians, but users may suffer as the onus falls on the searcher for information to have to look in different places to find what is needed. Often searchers do not understand the distinctions between OPACs and databases, and might not know of all the places where information may be found when the different sources are not linked in any way. “Very few unrelated access systems talk with each other”, notes Madison (2006:11) and users are not lead to all related resources from a single search. Searching library databases therefore, may be regarded, especially by inexperienced library users, as cumbersome as and much more difficult to use than Google.

The traditional role of the library catalogue has always been, since Cutter’s *Rules for a dictionary catalogue* (1904:12), to help users with a need for information to:

- Find out what is available
- Decide which items are appropriate and which are not
- Select the most suitable items
- Get hold of them.

Library catalogues have been carefully constructed to fulfil these aims and it has always been understood that a certain amount of user training is necessary to

exploit their potential to the full. While librarians have been refining their retrieval systems over many years, Internet and software experts have more recently been trying to do achieve the same objectives in very different ways. They have built sophisticated search engines & large databases, but their aims have been the same and can be described terms of assisting users to *find, identify, select and obtain* information resources and to do this as quickly and (for the user) as simply as possible.

The inevitable result is that that the perceived “more difficult” library catalogues are in danger of being overlooked when information is sought, essentially wasting the enormous investment in their construction. The important recent study by the Library of Congress has expressed this very frequently mentioned concern that “a large and growing number of students and scholars routinely bypass library catalogs in favor of other discovery tools” (Calhoun 2006:5).

Such sentiments are frequently encountered in library literature and were confirmed by LibQUAL+ survey at the University of Cape Town in 2005, where it became clear that respondents, not only students but staff as well, were not aware of the full text journal literature that is readily available from the library databases. The inevitable result is that users do not know about and may miss out important information that only the library can provide.

Users of the catalogue

The Library of Congress study and its conclusions which suggested inter alia that traditional cataloguing should be simplified and speeded up in order to provide searching that more closely resembles the Google experience, however also elicited a strong critical response. Mann (2006), for example, was adamant that a clear distinction was not made between the seeker for quick, exploratory information and the scholar who may require very different information, both in quality and quantity.

Mann proceeded to demonstrate that scholarship is not best served by the kind of information retrieved by web search engines. Scholars may require access to “the obscure, the out-of-the-way, and the little-demanded material – as well as the vast stores of copyrighted books that are not digitized, and that are only available onsite” (2006:4). Scholars also need the sophisticated search tools such as “full Boolean combinations in nested parentheses, or wildcard truncation, or proximity operators” (Mann, 2006:8) available to search structured databases. These features enable comprehensive retrieval of relevant material in the database, rather than produce an unmanageably large hit list selected by a search engine according to its own proprietary relevance ranking software.

On the other hand, students today belong to the Google generation. They want quick answers and easy navigation. They don't want to be bothered with bibliographic information; they want full text. They don't want to have to go to the

library to fetch things (UCA 2005:8). The student or the seeker for quick, appropriate information might therefore indeed be well served by the search engine approach. “Anyone who needs information immediately will generally be much better served, right from the start, by *formats other than books* – i.e., Web sites, newsletters, periodicals, encyclopedia articles, online abstracting services, newswires or broadcast scripts” (Mann, 2006:16; his emphasis).

Libraries, even in South Africa, have to take note of these apparent conflicts and consider how they affect their own catalogues. Right now, and probably into the foreseeable future, the worldwide web or even Google is not going to put into the hands of the individual user everything that is available in libraries. Print collections are still growing apace, the publishing industry is alive and well and people are buying more books than ever before. All print material is by no means available digitally. In spite of its much advertised intention to digitize the content of some of the world’s largest libraries, Google hasn’t solved the issue of copyright either, and into the foreseeable future will not be able to provide much more than some kind of a catalogue-like record for items that are protected by copyright. In Google’s own words it is admitted that full text will not be available in the case of copyright items:

Click a book title and you'll see, like a card catalog entry, some basic information about the book. You may also see a few snippets of text from the book showing your search term in context. If the publisher or author has given us permission through our Partner Program then you'll see a few full pages from the book and if the book is out of copyright, you'll be able to page through the entire book (2006).

Libraries should therefore be concerned about user ignorance or their avoidance of catalogues. Information held in catalogues is too valuable and potentially useful to be wasted by users who neglect looking for it or are unaware of its added value. Ways will have to be found to improve accessibility and to promote the use of the catalogues that cost such a great deal to maintain.

Opening up the catalogue to the web

There is no question that the catalogue still is an essential tool in libraries. Even the Calhoun report stated explicitly that “the option of rejecting library catalogs is not considered” (2006:7). The catalogue is a consistent and precise source of information. From the point of view of the librarian, it has an essential role in managing bibliographic and inventory control. For the user, its browsable classified arrangements, authority control and standardised descriptions identify items uniquely and make explicit the links and relationships between materials that are related in different ways. It is often the only source of information about older material that is still subject to copyright. In this era of Google, the challenge therefore is to maintain a catalogue that still makes sense to users and to market its advantages much more vigorously so that users understand what added value it can provide.

There are a number of approaches to dealing with this intractable problem. Ultimately, sophisticated portal technology will enable federated searching in OPACs, whereby a single set of keywords will yield results from a wide range of electronic databases and other resources, including the web. This is sophisticated and expensive technology that will probably not be available to many libraries in South Africa in the foreseeable future.

Another more immediate, more manageable and less expensive approach is to open up catalogues to the web, by cataloguing remote electronic resources and including links to full text books, electronic journal articles and other documents directly into catalogue records. In cases where full text electronic documents are available therefore, the catalogue will no longer simply give information about where an item may be found, but instead provide direct access to the full text through a clickable link in the catalogue record.

Cataloguing electronic resources

Many electronic books are available these days through databases like the African Digital Library, Early English Books Online, netLibrary, Project Gutenberg, Sacred Texts Online and many more. In some cases libraries make these online aggregations available from the library web site through a clickable link under a heading such as "Databases of Electronic Books", but that still means that users may not know about them, so they have to go and hunt for them and have to look for them in a number of different places.

To leave a user to his or her own devices in this way does not provide optimal service. There is a good argument to be made for providing direct access to the electronic text from the catalogue in order to provide a better service to users.

Littman & Connaway (2004) made it clear that electronic books offer some significant advantages over print. They cannot be stolen or get lost, they don't go out of print. They don't take up any shelf space. They can be read by a number of users at the same time. They are available for 24 hours of every day and one doesn't have to go to the library to get them. Full-text searching is possible, which could be particularly valuable in the case of reference books, and images and text can be cut and pasted (a more questionable value). Most importantly, these authors suggest, an e-book may be a very real and cost-effective alternative in cases where print copies are in high demand or in short supply.

The question remains whether readers will actually use electronic books. While no published South African studies have actually tried to test this by doing circulation analyses for electronic books, research in the USA has shown that e-books accessible from the OPAC are indeed used. Where both print and electronic versions of the same book are available, both are used, and the authors conclude that e-book use seems to be increasing all the time (Littman & Connaway, 2004).

According to Bothman (2004) it is possible to catalogue e-books in a number of ways. The simplest approach, which may be used when the library already owns the print version, is simply to note the existence of the electronic version in the same record as the print. This is known as the “multiple version record”. When the library does not already hold the print, and optionally even when it does, the e-book may be catalogued separately, as a unique manifestation. According to Weitz (2006), it is preferable to create separate records when both print and electronic versions are available in the library, but she suggests that the implications of a decision the one way or the other should be investigated in terms of the local situation.

As far as the cataloguing of electronic journals is concerned, it is also possible to provide a link to the electronic version in the record for the print version, or to catalogue e-journal versions separately. According to Beck, single records may be used when the bibliographic record for the print version provides adequate access to the electronic version and that there are no significant differences in content between the two: when “the original and online versions can be considered equivalent manifestations”. (2004:8) Separate records should however be made when there is major additional content and the two records cannot be regarded as equivalent.

Electronic resources in South African catalogues

In July 2006, the Interest Group for Bibliographic Standards (IGBIS), a national interest group of the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) held the third in its series of annual Advanced Workshops for practicing cataloguers; this time with a specific focus on the cataloguing of electronic resources. IGBIS has been active in South Africa since 2003 and some of its aims are “to promote and facilitate the application of bibliographic standards in South Africa”, to promote “standardisation in bibliographic work nationally,” to “identify training needs in respect of bibliographic standards and to conduct continuing education for information workers by arranging talks, meetings and workshops” (IGBIS).

The Workshop as a manifestation of this last aim, was attended by some 100 librarians from all over South Africa. The second of the four days was devoted to the cataloguing of remote electronic resources and at the close of the day participants were requested to complete a short survey on the extent to which they were already including records for remote electronic resources in their own catalogues.

A total of 85 survey forms was distributed on the tables where the participants worked and 44 were returned. While there was no attempt at sampling and participation was voluntary, the entire audience consisted of practising cataloguers or librarians with an interest in cataloguing, so that the responses

may be regarded as broadly representative of the current approaches to dealing with remote electronic resources in libraries that are serious about cataloguing in South Africa. A total of 30 different institutions were represented in the sample. The majority of responses came from university libraries (21 from 14 institutions); the others were from public library services (7 responses from 4 provincial or metropolitan services), government departments (7 from 6 departments), research libraries (6 from 4 institutions) the national library (2) and one from a bank. The figures below summarise the findings:

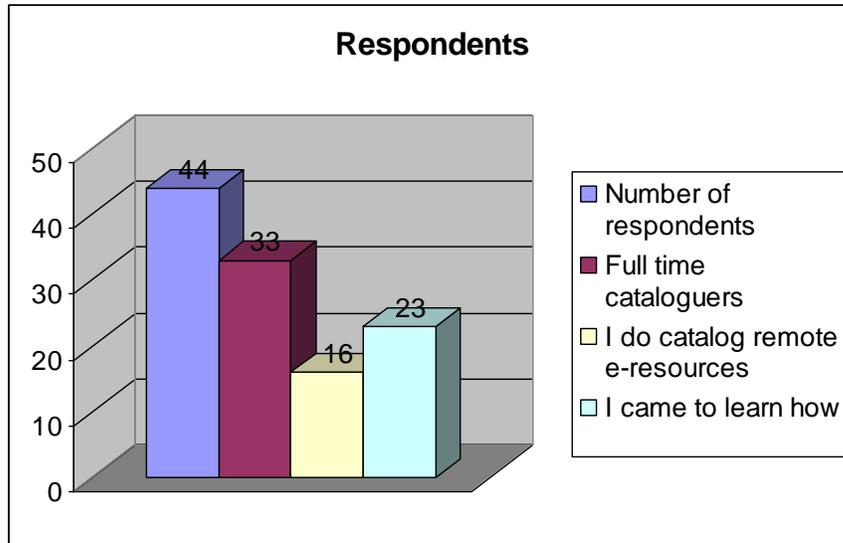


Figure 1. IGBIS Workshop: respondents.

Figure 1 shows that most of the respondents indicated that they were actively involved with cataloguing at their institutions; 33 were full time cataloguers, 7 were part time and the other four labelled themselves, “manager,” “trainer,” “standards specialist,” and “serials librarian” respectively. Interestingly enough, 23 respondents said they had come to the Workshop to learn how to deal with remote electronic resources rather than that they were already able to. Free text comments on the survey forms confirmed that cataloguers thought they were not yet ready for cataloguing remote resources, as they had not been trained, and that they expected to learn at the Workshop in order to implement what they had learned at their own institutions.

Responses indicated that 16 cataloguers were already cataloguing remote electronic resources to some extent, although Figure 2 below shows that only 12 said their institutions already did so on a regular basis. Thirty respondents indicated that their institutions were not yet cataloguing remote resources on a regular basis, but would like to do so in the future.

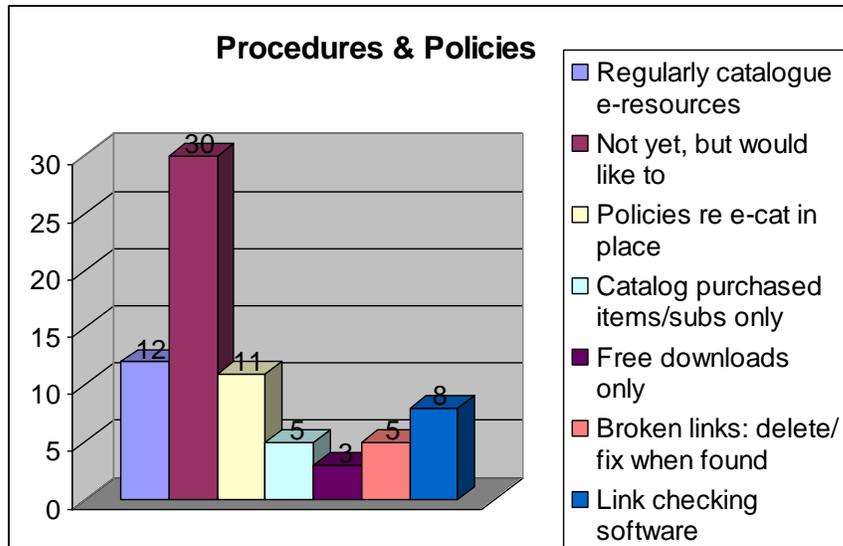


Figure 2. IGBIS Workshop: cataloguing procedures and policies of participants institutions.

It was clear that much of the cataloguing was still taking place as and when the need arose, as only 11 respondents (from eight different institutions) said they had policies in place to deal with the cataloguing of remote electronic resources.

When requested to explain how they decided on which remote resources to catalogue in the absence of a policy, five free text responses indicated that items that were purchased or subscriptions to electronic formats; or resources that were freely available (three responses), were included in the catalogue, often by downloading such records or pasting the url into the record for the print format. Respondents who were not cataloguing remote resources left questions unanswered.

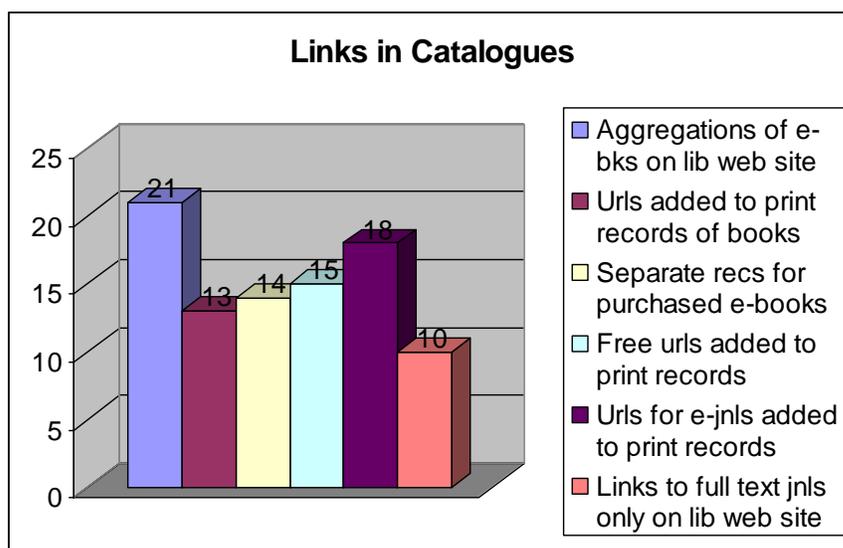


Figure 3. IGBIS Workshop: links to remote resources in participants' institutions

Figure 3 shows the extent to which links to remote resources were included into OPAC records, or only made available from aggregations on library web sites. Links to collections of electronic books were available from library web sites (21 responses) and links to full-text electronic journals were added to records for print journals according to 18 respondents. There was little difference in whether links to e-books were added to the print records (13), or whether separate records were made (14). The fewest respondents said that links to full text journals were *only* available from their library web site (10 responses). Respondents who were not cataloguing remote resources left blank spaces.

Conclusions

As noted above, this investigation does not claim to be representative of all cataloguing practices in South African libraries. It does however provide a snapshot of practices in primarily academic, research and other large libraries that are serious enough about their cataloguing to send full time staff members to an advanced and specialist workshop.

The findings indicate that the inclusion of links to remote electronic resources into OPACs is not yet widespread or consistent in South African libraries. While links to full text remote resources are made in a number of catalogues, they are still made as and when the need arises, and guiding policies still appear to be fairly rare. Many of the survey questions were also left blank or marked with “don’t know,” so it may be assumed that a lack of experience and confidence in dealing with remote resources is still prevalent, but there nevertheless seems to be a recognition that remote resources should be included into catalogues, so that users are able to access remote resources directly, rather than having to search for them in separate databases. Evidence was found that cataloguers are willing to learn new cataloguing practices and were preparing to implement new procedures.

This survey also confirms that there are significant training needs present among South African cataloguers and that IGBIS plays a real role in fulfilling this need.

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