WestCat: A New Generation

By Lance Query

On July 31, 1998, the University Libraries at Western Michigan University stepped into the 21st century. Finder, the Libraries' first online catalog, which dates back to 1989, was replaced by a new state-of-the-art system located, for most users, in an Internet environment. Although, at first, the user may not perceive the unique aspects of WestCat—a new name for a new resource—a small amount of experimentation will demonstrate that the role of the library catalog has changed dramatically.

Historically, the primary purposes of a library's catalog were simple and straightforward. First and foremost, it served as a finding aid for the books, periodicals, newspapers, special collections, documents, multi-media, and other resources that were located in that particular library. Behind the scenes, it was the major way to provide inventory control for the collection. In reality, even the most elaborate institutional catalog never really met its primary role of "cataloging" the library. All kinds of resources including maps, photographs, manuscripts, pamphlet and clipping files, many government publications, reference guides, and a host of other acquired items were excluded or, on occasion, found in a separate listing. And, of course, no institution thought seriously about referencing or indexing materials outside of the collection that it owned.

Today, as remotely accessible electronic resources increase in number, importance, and reliability, academic library catalogs are becoming a part of a network of access tools—and to the publications themselves. The ability of Web-based catalogs to link local, building-specific collections to an unlimited number of resources found elsewhere is now a part of the system found in the University Libraries at Western Michigan University. WestCat, our OPAC (online public access catalog), has replaced Finder. We now are able to provide access not only to Western Michigan University collections, but to the almost infinite world of cyberspace.

A number of companies have become leaders in the field of integrated library and information management systems. The most successful in the relatively short history of this emerging technology is the Endeavor Information Systems Incorporated, located in Rosemont, Illinois. Their software, Voyager, is especially designed for academic libraries. It recognizes the need for the library to serve as "the center of campus information networks, providing access to worldwide research resources, and assuming responsibility for information delivery." (Voyager: A Technical Overview of the Library and Information Management System for Today's Networked World, Rosemont, IL: Endeavor Information Systems Incorporated, n.d., p. 1)

After three years of intensive review of several major contenders in the field of information management, Western Michigan University developed a five year transitional plan to implement the Voyager system, budgeted at $5,000,000, that would incorporate client/server architecture; support the known standards or protocols for systems interconnectivity (e.g., Z39.50, USMARC, TCP/IP); build on UNIX® and Microsoft® Windows® technology, and as part and parcel, employ a graphical user interface (GUI) that, in essence, allows the user to move easily from module to module. All of this technological jargon can be simply translated: WestCat will provide more access to the University's collections, and, as the system is fully implemented, users will have direct access to electronic resources that we do not own. The term often used for this is "hotlink." For some, it is simply translated as "clicking" on the highlighted terms or opening well-placed icons. Instantaneously, the screen reflects the hotlink home—another catalog, a source to contact, or the full data/information itself.

The full-text Internet response changes, in an essential way, the concept of library ownership. The Internet's inclusion of electronic journals and other publications has created a significant information resource. This external "library without walls" will be used whether libraries choose to organize the materials or not. Unfortunately, when users access the Internet, they find that search features are primitive, usually relying on free-text searching. Almost never is there a controlled vocabulary or field searching. Because of this fact, libraries are taking on the role of organizing and managing the Internet. This can be done when an OPAC is Web-based since the hotlinks can point to the full-text resources found on the WWW.

And, herein lies to major challenge to the University Libraries. Library hotlinks do not come into being without some human establishing the connection. Make no mistake about it: providing hotlinks,

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i.e., connections to Internet resources, is a labor-intensive process. Many records in our catalog will need to be created by original catalogers with in-depth knowledge of the Internet and resources in non-standard formats. Moreover, given the ephemeral nature of electronic location on the Internet, and the unstable manner in which its sites exist, a hotlink can send a patron to nowhere. What existed yesterday has now disappeared. As of yet, we have no final answers to the problems inherent in “pointing” versus “owning.” However, we are convinced that WestCat must make use of the “graphical interface” that has changed information management. The old catalog was a highly organized bibliographical record of the collection of a particular library. WestCat is still such a catalog. In addition, because of the nature of the Web, WestCat is now an information gateway to the Internet.

The decision is made. The new generation OPAC and library management system is a “go” and running. Patrons and staff members are able to locate resources found in the University Libraries via a Web interface. Our bibliographic records indicate what the University Libraries “holds,” and we are developing links to the vast array of external, worldwide network sites and documents. Moreover, the new Voyager software has made our catalog into one of the most sophisticated retrieval systems that exists anywhere in the world. The traditional ways to retrieve information (author, title, subject, keyword, call numbers) are augmented with several novel types of discriminating search strategies, an extensive cross-reference mechanism, automatic truncation, and, quite important, relevance rankings.

Welcome to WestCat. Welcome to the 21st Century.

Freedom’s Voices

Two of the most striking recent works added to the Carol Ann Haenicke American Women’s Poetry Collection are illustrated in the photograph on the right. The top, pop-up book is Lady Freedom Among Us (Janus Press, 1994), a poem by Rita Dove in one of the unique book creations of Clair Van Vliet. While serving as Poet Laureate of the U.S., Dove wrote this poem personifying the statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome that she could see from her LC office.

The lower book is the poem On the Pulse of Morning (Random House, 1993) that Maya Angelou read at the inauguration of President Clinton in January of that year. Random House printed a limited edition of the poem in paper wrappers, a copy of which is shown here.

Two African-American women poets, two celebrations of freedom from our nation’s capitol city and one of the many areas represented by the American Women’s Poetry Collection.

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Gatherings