Global Connections—Online!

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Recently, I found a Michigan library-planning document from 1995 that predicted global access to data by 2014—two decades in the future. The reality is that, in less than a decade, the library world has changed so dramatically that it is hard to keep up with the transition from traditional card catalogs and print indexes to public online catalogs and indexes, full text journal articles, and a vast array of electronic full text books. Obviously, few foretold how quickly we were going to be globally connected through the Internet.

The work of librarians has also changed dramatically because of the tremendous increase in the availability of electronic information retrieval. At WMU in 1985, a popular database called InfoTrac was the first licensed, computerized index that became available to the WMU library patrons on the then, cutting-edge technology: a CD ROM. Although it was considered an amazing resource at the time, it covered just a few years and a few magazines and journals when compared to today’s extensive databases. In reality, we couldn’t begin to imagine what it was going to be like to have hundreds of catalogs and printed indexes available “on screen” through the magic of our fingertips—and at the fingertips of every professor and student. We also could not begin to envision the almost unlimited amount of information, the full texts of books, journal and newspaper articles, government and research reports, graphics, etc. that were going to become available to our library users without setting foot in the physical library.

Let me describe two or three current online databases that illustrate how much the boundaries of information retrieval have broadened in only a few years. One such example is an online index to the content of theses and dissertations, one of the most valuable resources for serious research in all fields, especially for graduate students and faculty. Historically, Dissertation Abstracts International was the key printed tool whose volumes still fill many shelves in Waldo Library. Researchers had to search multiple volumes, by hand, to locate, at best, a brief abstract. To read the entire dissertation involved borrowing from the original library or purchasing a copy from the compiler of DAI.

Fortunately, and early in the international database development process, UMI and its partner company ProQuest started offering Dissertation Abstracts online, which made searching easier and more efficient. The official title in 2007 is ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (PQTD) and access is from the University Libraries’ main screen under D, i.e., Dissertations and Theses (ProQuest). Researchers can search by topic (and several other ways) through 2.3 million dissertations over many years at once, and retrieve more dissertations because the keyword search can include all the words in the abstract. What really opened up accessibility was when, in 1997, UMI moved from microfilm copies to digital images of the dissertations. Today, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses not only offers an index to dissertations produced around the world since 1861, but also the full text of thousands of those dissertations. A researcher can download the full text dissertations to his or her computer, peruse them at leisure, and print out pages that are relevant to his or her research.

Much as librarians would like to simplify access to all print and online catalogs and databases, there is no Google approach or federated (across multiple databases) search process available on our Libraries’ home page. As a result, we have to teach effective searching skills and ways to discern or select which of the many online tools to use. We still describe the online library catalog, WestCat, as analogous to the old card catalog; this resource may be used mostly for searching books, but it also provides many links to online sources of all types as well as the Libraries’ holdings across all collections and formats.

Our Journal Finder replaces the historical serial lists, and more recent databases for finding what journals, magazines, and newspapers we own, either in print or online. Plus, among the 300 other databases accessible from our home page, there are dozens of indexes to articles in various fields of study as well as sources of information about companies, statistics, biographies, archival material, images, sound recordings and much more.

Having said all that, the bottom line is that there is no single answer to “connecting well.” In lieu of a perfect solution, we decided that teaching one excellent database index would be a good approach to “opening up” our Libraries. We have chosen to use ProQuest Research Library, an online “periodical index,” with freshmen students in the English 1050 introductory library instruction classes. This well-designed “general” index covers a wide range of subject areas and indexes over 3,800 periodical publications. This means that, regardless of topics, most students get hits with a simple search. In addition, ProQuest provides different wordings for topics, and gives suggestions for ways to narrow down the topic. The resulting list of publications includes scholarly journals, magazines, trade publications, and newspapers. Another valuable aspect of this ProQuest product is that two thirds of the publications are available online in full text, so the student can click on a link and get the actual text of the article ASAP. If there is no full text link, the student can still find the article by clicking on the “Find it @ WMU” button.

“Find it @ WMU” is one of the most useful electronic innovations we have offered our users in the last couple of years. “Find it @ WMU” is actually a program called SFX that allows for interconnections between library owned resources. We purchase full text journals from many different companies and these companies have moved towards a standard way of creating Web links to their articles. SFX is a “link resolver” that looks for all the sources for a journal, including a record in our library catalog, and presents those options to the user. The user then clicks on a link to the full text of the article, or to the catalog to find a call number for the printed version of the journal. If these options are not available, s/he can click into our Interlibrary Loan system and order the article, which will be delivered through e-mail.

To students, faculty, and almost all users, the Libraries’ online databases and indexes not only blur together, but also seem to be hidden from the casual examiner of our Libraries’ Web site at http://www.wmich.edu/library/. Once found, search screens appear complex since users have become comfortable with the ease of typing a phrase or a question into Google or other search engine. And, quick searches with terms used in Google soon convince them that the Libraries’ “engines” don’t work well. As a result, the companies creating these library research databases are continually improving their search interfaces: to be easier to use, to be more intuitive, to help the researcher along, and, although we hate to say it, to be more like Google. Some are trying to help with spelling suggestions. Others suggest subject terms to use. WorldCat, a massive database of over 62 million records of books and other materials held in libraries throughout the world, ranks its results by the number of libraries owning a certain item, hoping that will give more relevant results than an alphabetic or chronological list.

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Spring Gathering of Friends

The Friends of the Western Michigan University Libraries held the Annual Meeting on April 18, 2007 in the Stewart Tower. The annual business meeting saw the presentation and election of the following officers and Board of the Friends of the University Libraries, Western Michigan University, 2007-2008.

OFFICERS
President: Dr. David Sheldon (2007-08)
Vice President: Mr. Warren Fritz (2007-08)
Secretary: Dr. Sharon Carlson (2007-09)

At-Large Board Members
Mr. Norm Jung (2007-10), Dr. Susan Steuer (2007-10), Ms. Beth Timmerman (2007-09), Mr. Greg Fitzgerald (2007-09)

University Libraries Representative
Mr. Randle Gedeon, Monographic Acquisitions Librarian

Continuing Officers and Board Members
Treasurer: Ms. Regina Buckner (2006-08)
Board Members: Dr. Tom Seiler (2005-08), Mr. Warren Fritz (2006-08), Dr. Kathleen Garland-Rike (2006-09), Dr. David Sheldon (2006-09)

University President Ex-Officio, Dr. John Dunn
Dean of Libraries Ex-Officio, Dr. Joseph G. Reish

Members and guests at the Annual Meeting were delighted to welcome Dr. Elaine Didier, Director of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum, who spoke on “National Treasure: The Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.” Dr. Didier has outstanding credentials and experience in the library arena. Her current position makes good use of her outstanding organizational background in her work at the Ford Presidential Library and Museum, which is located in Ann Arbor and Grand Rapids. “With the power of two, we dedicate ourselves to preserving and making available to the public, the historical records and artifacts of the Ford presidency.”

Dr. Didier enthralled the Friends with her descriptions of the two collections. The Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor has the more traditional “library” collection with “millions” of documents and media including films, sound recordings, photographs, and programs. In Grand Rapids, visitors find extensive exhibits and his entire career on display. Of course, recent events surrounding his death and burial in the site that he chose have brought additional attention to the museum. Dr. Didier demonstrated what President Ford once noted: “I want a living, educational institution that will provide inspiration for generations. The finest tribute of all will be to see the Gerald R. Ford Library and Museum living and growing and constructive and useful.”

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Because there is really no end to the “global connections” to databases, there is much more available than already suggested. The University Libraries has not only been purchasing full text articles online, but also (1) electronic books (e.g., eBray), (2) digitized archival materials (e.g., American Civil War: Letters & Diaries), (3) image collections (e.g., ARTstor), (4) music collections (e.g., Naxos Music Library), and we even have our first (5) video collection (Theater in Video) with definitive performances of major plays. You can find these examples and others through our A-Z listing of databases as well as in subject guides. Most of these are available any place our students and faculty may be—if an Internet connection is available. If they are studying abroad, or on a sabbatical, or at a conference anywhere in the world, they can still be connected electronically with all the resources we have to offer.

What a great time to be a librarian!
What a great time to be a student or scholar!