"Only Connect ..."

One of the memorable quotations that reflects a contemporary dilemma is that of E.M. Forster who, in *Howard's End*, stated, "only connect the prose and the passion." Today's almost unlimited access to information has created some special problems when humans do attempt to connect recorded data to their needs. One not-so-small step toward connectivity is now underway at Western Michigan University. We are one of six institutions in Michigan that will install PACLink software and support hardware in their libraries, which will ultimately create an easily connected statewide and national database network. Critical to this essential step has been the receipt of a $50,000 College and Technology Grant from the U.S. Department of Education that provides partial funding for the software/hardware package. Staff members Helen J. Healy and Bettina Meyer were instrumental in preparing the funding proposal that will bring the University Libraries to the requisite computer capability.

Besides linking with the University of Michigan, Wayne State University, Michigan State University, Eastern Michigan University, and Central Michigan University, a significant number of other libraries across the U.S. are moving toward coordination of access. Among them are the Indiana colleges and universities and the SUNY (State University of New York) system. Specialized services such as Data Research Associates, the SIRSI Unicorn system, and library vendors including OCLC are also involved in the development of a national telecommunications network based on a key standard, the Z39.50. It is this standard, largely unrecognized by the public, that will be implemented by the PACLink project.

So, what is Z39.50 and why must it be incorporated in our systems to enhance computer communication? The answer is not necessarily a simple one given the confusing language of modern technology. Basically, Z39.50 is a library networking standard, a communication base or mechanism, that serves as a building block for a flexible and vendor-independent environment. That environment, once in place, allows different user (vendor) systems to talk to each other without changing the search interface of the home system. Implementation of Z39.50 will permit the faculty member, student, or other user at Western Michigan University to search the online catalog at libraries located at the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, or the Kalamazoo Public Library, to cite only a few examples, directly from Finder, our own University online catalog. Every other institution will have a code name that can be selected, such as "Choose Mirlyn" and, in this example, the user would then be able to search the catalog at the University of Michigan. At the present time, this is possible only by leaving WMU's Finder, dialing MichNet, selecting Mirlyn, and, after a few more steps, finally searching the U. of M. catalog.

A second, major advantage of the use of the Z39.50 protocol is that those libraries using the NOTIS search system, which we do, can also search similar systems such as OCLC's FirstSearch databases. This becomes very important to anyone who has experienced the problems of moving from one vendor's database to another. Each database has different instructions for similar actions and the typical library user quickly becomes frustrated by the multitude of details that needs to be recalled for effective searching. With the Z39.50 link, the WMU search interface—the one with which you are most familiar—can be used in external searches; there are no new commands to learn and no individualized training for each database.

Still another valuable benefit from PACLink is that users will be able to initiate interlibrary loan requests as they locate materials in other collections. While searching another catalog, users often see materials that they know they wish to review. If they then initiate an interlibrary loan request, the "system" will check the WMU libraries, inform the user that it is or is not available here, and if not, speed the loan request to the Resource Sharing office for processing. Actions that currently involve a number of separate steps, logging on and off systems, and staff intervention will be completed with a minimum of paperwork and personnel.

In addition to the software that will provide the "standard" interface, the grant funds will be used to acquire an additional ARIEL workstation. These workstations are high-powered microcomputers equipped with laser printers, optical scanners, high speed Ethernet network connections, and special software. ARIEL workstations scan and transmit over MichNet (and the Internet) high resolution reproductions of articles or documents. However, for the system to operate, ARIEL workstations must exist at each end of the transmission. When these stations are in place, bound materials as well as single sheet documents can be scanned and a high-quality copy of the material is sent to the requesting library. One such station already exists in Resource Sharing, Waldo Library, but the addition of another will double our capacity to acquire excellent copies within a shorter time frame.

To sum it all up in a few words, the PACLink project will provide easy and transparent access to numerous online catalogs and database systems using a familiar search interface; offer facilitated intra- and interlibrary loan for users on- and off-campus, provide expanded ARIEL workstation document delivery; assist in the placement of a new computer platform for all library services; and, as an added bonus, expand opportunities for staff education. If all deadlines are met, the PACLink project will be completed within a single year, but, equally important, the University Libraries will have taken a giant step closer to becoming the electronic library of the future. We will have made the connection!

H.J.H.