POINT

Sharing is Better

by Barbara Miller Marson

*I*f librarians truly have moved from a warehouse mentality to one of expanded access, one of the primary resources we have is our online public access catalog (OPAC). A shared OPAC provides us the opportunity to share and cooperate with other libraries. Why are more of us not establishing a shared system?

Certainly one of the advantages of a shared OPAC is the immediate expansion of materials available for patrons to search. A library can greatly enhance the amount of material available on most subjects with no increase in the book budget. This availability expands the horizons of patrons and forces them to think beyond the confines of a library building. In fact, rather than the library forcing patrons to expand beyond its walls, it is more likely to be the patrons themselves who clamor for more than traditional library services. The age of "information consumers" is here, and we can expect voracious appetites. Will these patrons really be satisfied by searching only one library's catalog? Can we serve such a small offering without becoming irrelevant to our patrons?

One might argue that people can search other library catalogs through the Internet. But sharing an OPAC with neighboring or regional libraries provides material that will probably be more accessible, due not so much to distance, but to pre-established cooperative arrangements. And it achieves this at one workstation, in one search session without having to log out and connect to another system or library or to learn a different protocol for another OPAC.

Of course this arrangement presumes some type of reciprocal borrowing agreement or interlibrary loan (ILL) among libraries of a shared system. Materials need to be available to the user as quickly as possible. Document delivery issues are important to a library with a vital and growing ILL department. In an age of access, isn't ILL as important as reference, cataloging, or circulation? Patrons want their information by the fastest means possible and are not concerned with organizational perceptions. A shared OPAC may force a close look at ILL that is long overdue and expand its role.

Such an agreement also might lead more easily to a policy of joint collection development, which would allow participating libraries to commit their financial resources more selectively and wisely. In addition, the possibility of shared cataloging could eliminate separate cataloging of materials that are owned by more than one library. Do we need a separate cataloging department in each and every library? Perhaps a regional consortium could provide the same, if not more efficient and accurate, level of service.

Sharing an OPAC, and thus the hardware and software, also relieves one library from the sole responsibility of maintaining and upgrading a system. Functions can be shared, or at the least, expertise does not have to rest upon only one library staff or person. Among our peers in-house or regionally, one person usually arises as the technological guru. In a cooperative setting, this designation can incorporate a number of libraries.

Besides the advantages of sharing responsibility and resources is a fundamental advantage of sharing costs. OPAC software and hardware can be expensive; splitting costs helps smaller libraries to provide the best system possible.

The benefits to be gained by sharing an OPAC should be investigated seriously by any library that is beginning to automate or to upgrade or change systems. Not to consider the option is to do a disservice to the patrons of one's library, to oneself, and to the library community at large. By recognizing the importance of other libraries' collections to us and to our patrons, we can remain relevant suppliers of information in a time when cooperation is not a luxury.

Sharing Defeats the Purpose

by Harry Tuchmayer, Column Editor

Trying to make a case against resource sharing in the age of information overload isn't exactly the smartest thing I've ever done. With interlibrary loan activity skyrocketing and patron demand for esoteric sources reaching all time highs, you would think that the best thing we could do to satisfy this insatiable demand for information is to empower the user! And what better way to do it than by giving them access to as many library catalogs as possible!

That's right, let's make every library catalog a union catalog! Lets do away with the archaic concept of individual libraries with unique collections and open up the world of knowledge to every library user! In fact, why limit it to just library users? Why not let the great mass of humanity dial-in from home to catalogs all over the world?

Sound familiar? Been talking to Bill Gates recently? Well it does to me, and I for one am sick and tired of finding new and better ways of inundating the average person with more information than they know what to do with. Why on earth do we want to expand access to materials we don't own, when most libraries in America can't even find half the books that the computer says are on the shelf?

It's not that expanding access is necessarily bad. It's just that it really doesn't mean very much to the average library user. Some people just want to come into their local library and walk out with a book — any book on the topic at hand. We don't need more access; we need more books!

Time after time, I've heard branch library patrons say they want what's available here and now, not what can be delivered by tomorrow morning (even though many libraries offer daily courier service). And this demand for immediate results is by no means limited to public libraries. Undergraduates, who are notorious for waiting to the last minute, want sources now, not next week, three days after the paper is due.

Not everyone is writing a dissertation! Some people just need one or two good books to answer a simple question, solve a problem or write a short paper. They don't need a list of thousands of bibliographic citations to every book written on the topic. They want to be able to go to the shelf and choose a book that has already been preselected by a librarian. They want the implied assurance that what they selected represents the best examples of what is really available. They want help!

A shared catalog may be just what the bibliophile has always dreamed of, but for the average person, it's nothing but a nightmare. In fact, expanding access actually may be detrimental to good library service. Not only are many users left with the daunting task of selecting a title from a virtually unintelligible list, they have to do so without the slightest idea as to when (or if) they actually might get the book.

Furthermore, sharing may serve to reduce rather than enlarge collections. What incentive, if any, would there be to penny-wise funding agents to increase the book budget of a small college or public library, if the regional consortium consists of at least one good sized library? As it is, larger libraries are already lending titles that any reasonable library should have purchased. If we further formalize the ILL process by sharing costs and OPAC's, do you really think smaller libraries will be better off?

I'd like to jump on the bandwagon through hyperspace, too, if I didn't think it was headed in the wrong direction. If we are really interested in making libraries more, not less, relevant in today's world, forget enlarging our catalogs with nothing but blind references to works we don't own, and start expanding content access to the wealth of information we already house behind the four rather dull but sturdy walls of the library.