Retrospection: The First Hundred Years of North Carolina's Libraries ~The Last Quarter~

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This final article in a series about North Carolina's libraries highlights services that developed during the last quarter of the twentieth century when automation was becoming a vital part of libraries. During these years, libraries were constantly changing to keep up with the ever-increasing demands brought on by automation. School libraries did not embrace automation as quickly as public and academic libraries where the demand for online services grew faster than library budgets. In the new century however, school media centers have access to outstanding electronic resources. North Carolina's libraries have done well during the last hundred years meeting the needs of patrons and can be proud that library services are now available to all citizens.

The developments in school libraries during the last quarter century have culminated in several versatile online resources. One such product is NC WISE OWL (www. ncwiseowl.org), a Web site designed by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, is an exciting tool that enables public school students, faculty, and parents to use the Internet constructively. The site includes several subscription databases, encyclopedias appropriate for elementary, middle and high school students, information about authors studied in middle and high schools, access to newspapers, and a professional collection for teachers. This resource, which provides an educational gateway to the Internet for kindergarten through high school students, is definitely worth recurring support from the North Carolina General Assembly.

Automation was at the foundation of many developments in public, academic, and special libraries throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century. Beginning with the introduction of OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) and online database searching in the 1970s and including virtual libraries of the early twenty-first century, automation has changed significantly how librarians work and serve patrons.

Cumbersome online search services such as DIALOG changed how librarians interacted with patrons and formalized reference interviews in which research topics were defined and narrowed. Since patrons paid for online time, librarians used thesauri to develop search strategies before logging on. Results were usually received by mail a week after the search and the patron returned to pick up the printed citations and pay the bill. Online search methods of the 1970s were antiquated in comparison to the searching that can be done anytime and anywhere today.

The billion-record OCLC (www.oclc.org) initially was dedicated to creating bibliographic records and printed catalog cards in the mid 1970s. It added interlibrary loan in the late 1970s and reference support in the early 1980s. Today, a Google search for WorldCat (www.worldcat.org) returns results through which someone can find libraries that own a book, the distance to those libraries, and ways to cite the title. Affiliation with some type of library, however, is required for a user to gain access to the full resources available through OCLC.

The North Carolina Union Catalog (NCUC) became an online resource in the 1980s after many North Carolina libraries joined OCLC through the regional network, SOLINET (Southeastern Library Network). The NCUC cooperative card file, which began in the 1930s to let librarians and patrons know which libraries owned a book, was replaced by microfilm in the 1970s. NCUC update cards were produced for several years through OCLC bibliographic transactions until WorldCat became the major online resource for locating library materials.

The development of the North Carolina Information Network (NCIN) during the late 1980s laid the groundwork for NC LIVE (www.nclive.org), the state's electronic library of the twenty-first century. The State Library oversaw NCIN and assisted all types of libraries—public schools were not included in the beginning—in accessing information. By the mid 1990s, the NCIN migrated to an Internet-based platform, and NC LIVE magically appeared in libraries after just two years of planning and lobbying the General Assembly for funding. Anyone can access the electronic resources of NC LIVE using computers in North Carolina libraries; those who are registered at a public library or have an academic institution affiliation can access the resources from any computer with an Internet connection.

Building planning became more complex in the 1990s because staff members often were asked to project their needs for automation-related facilities when they had no idea what the future might

hold. Many new buildings became obsolete before construction was completed. Public service desks were often relocated to make room for computers that provided catalog and Internet access, and library staff assisted with computer-related questions along with reference inquiries.

The Y2K concern did not cause major disruptions in libraries, but the year introduced a decade with other challenges for libraries. North Carolina public, academic, and school libraries added services for non-English speaking patrons following the influx of internationals, especially Hispanics/ Latinos. Libraries updated computers with Spanish language software, offered English language tutorials, and trained library staff to work with the new patrons.

More than ten years after virtual resources threatened to replace librarians and libraries, online resources offered through libraries have established that the institution is here to stay. Librarians have become more creative to keep patrons informed of the multitude of resources available and to make them realize that all information is not available through Google.

A developing influence on libraries is the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) (www.imls.gov), a federal grant-making agency created in 1996 by the 104th Congress. In 2002, the State Library began distributing grant funds to support programs such as automation equipment purchases, digitization projects, and planning grants. North Carolina ECHO (Exploring Cultural Heritage Online) (www.ncecho.org) is just one product of this program.

The exponential growth of electronic resources has impacted the production of reports issued by many government agencies. For example, since the early 1990s, library statistics like the ones that were used to compile information for previous articles in this series are now being published on agency Web sites. When state documents were issued in print and then in microfiche editions, they were accessible mostly at document depository institutions; now many state documents are accessible online.

Funding, collection management, staffing, and space are a few of the issues facing all types of libraries. Future challenges will be how to allocate funds to acquire electronic and print resources, employ staff to assist patrons and process materials, offer services for a diverse patron population, and provide space for computers and facilities for patrons who often have personal electronic devices. Library developments during the next century will be more difficult to document in increments, but certain benchmarks along the journey will note the progress of future generations.

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