

Notes and Communications

Too Big or Not too Big: Considering the Issues for a Canadian Archives Information Exchange Network

by WENDY DUFF and KENT HAWORTH

Those of you who subscribe to the ARCHIVES LISTSERV on the Internet may have seen a recent discussion on the merits of using "super-utilities" such as the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN), OCLC, or (in Canada) UTLAS. The exchange raises very significant issues for archivists, and especially archival institutions, contemplating either the development of new, or the use of already existing, information exchange networks. The issues become more germane as Canadian archivists and archives generate standardized descriptive records in accordance with *Rules for Archival Description*. The issues raised in this "electronic exchange," which is reproduced below with the permission of the authors, raise more questions than answers for those of us thinking about a national information exchange network for Canadian archives. The following questions and issues are of particular interest:

1. How useful for users are archival descriptions maintained in large bibliographic databases compared with archival descriptions resident in locally-developed systems? In other words, should archives invest in the development of a large automated national network (to replace the ULM in its manual form) or does the nature of archival materials, together with recent developments in electronic communication, offer more efficient (for users) and economic (for sponsors) alternatives? Richard Saunders's very preliminary analysis suggests that use is not affected by registering information on archival records in "super-utilities." On the other hand, use increases when users situated close to where the repository is located can browse through their local system and find references that they may not have located otherwise.
2. How suitable are super-utilities like RLIN, OCLC, or UTLAS, designed as they are for bibliographic descriptions, for holding archival descriptions? The BC Archival Union List Project, an account of which appears in *Archivaria* 34, gives us some insights into the benefits of local systems. The exchange below highlights the growing view that the value of large super-utilities is diminishing as the number of regional networks increases.
3. Whether archivists use super-utilities or local systems, it is clear that indexing systems enabling access to archival materials must be improved. More research needs to be done—as Judith Turner notes and *Subject Indexing for Archives* emphasizes—on the methodologies for indexing archival materials, before we start dumping descriptive records into any automated system. Can there be efficient and effective access if unstructured descriptive records are fed into structured databases? Deciding whether to develop your own system or

use an already-existing system should come only after a consideration of the means by which archival material is made available. How do users search for archival material? Archivists know very little about the means by which users get access to the information that they seek. The studies that have been conducted are inconclusive.

4. Access to archival descriptive tools (inventories, lists, etc.) can be achieved more simply and economically through Internet access and the use of gophers. Archivists, particularly reference archivists, will have to become as familiar with these new search strategies as many users of the Internet are now. As Helen Tibbo points out, archivists will have to promote the use of these reference tools in their own institutions. Are our professional associations and institutions preparing us for these new realities?

Date: Thu, 6 May 1993 14:32:44 -0600

From: allrs%msu.dnet@TERRA.OSCS.MONTANA.EDU

Subject: Archives records and Biblio. utilities

To: Multiple recipients of list ARCHIVES

...I was the nuts and bolts on a project in 1988-89 in Utah to put AMC cataloguing onto RLIN. We eventually put 8000 (yes, that's the right number of zeros) online in the 18 months [we] were allotted, from two universities, two colleges, and the State Historical Society. State Archives and another university were already RLIN members and adding records anyway. Utah State Univ. was previously putting their records into OCLC, and we largely copied their records (manually) into RLIN. No other institution had even done cataloguing.

When everything was in it broke down like this (and I don't have my stats in front of me, this is from memory) for the following year: USU had one additional user due to RLIN access, the State Historical Society had none, the Univ. of Utah had one (maybe two), Weber State had none, Southern Utah had none, and I don't know for State Archives and the other library. Note that USU's records were on both OCLC and RLIN and that virtually nothing happened.

BUT — USU was also downloading records to their local system, and Weber and Univ. of Utah got tapeloads for their records for their own OPACs (State Historical Society still hasn't automated — they use RLIN to produce cards). Those statistics were markedly different. Manuscripts use at USU was up substantially over years past when no AMC records were available. Weber's stats (which weren't much to begin with) rose, and manuscripts use at the University of Utah fully doubled in a single year. I did a 3-month survey on manuscripts use at the U in the fall of 1991. It showed the greatest increase in numbers of student users, but corporate (businesses, broadcasters, etc.), and faculty/researchers' use were also up substantially.

Moral: In-house use is going to jump for browsers, which could include dial-in users to an OPAC, because that is who is using a catalogue. I suspect that research use by "foreigners" will remain low for a couple of reasons.

First, that there are a relatively small number of researchers who work on any one topic, so the chances that one will be looking into a bibliographic utility to find sources and get those specifically at your institution, is fairly small. That conclusion is borne out by some of the user studies that demonstrate that much information is gleaned from footnotes and colleagues — basically, prior research. Third, researcher access to bibliographic utilities is very small, since they tend to be technical tools, not research ones. BYU has patron-accessible RLIN terminals at each reference desk, but there are very few times that anyone besides a reference person uses one. That may be a function of need or of unfamiliarity.

The value of a bibliographic utility is its technical link —essentially cataloguing. I see little need to spend time —and dollars — putting records into a large utility if you will not be downloading records to your own catalogue. I have worked now with RLIN, OCLC, and WLN. The only one to which I could advise submitting AMC records is RLIN. I can't even count on one hand the number of researchers from any field that I have known to look for materials on OCLC or WLN (there *has* to be someone, simply to prove the exception to the rule). Don't waste time submitting records to a utility for research purposes (unless you are writing a grant), but do put them on to get them into your own catalogue. Most people will write or call to inquire about your holdings and then judge. If they figure it worthwhile, they will dial in to your OPAC first or do it when they come themselves.

To conclude with an overly-broad generalization — I see the role of super-utilities diminishing as research tools, not increasing. Electronic access is becoming too pervasive, too cheap, too easy, to have to rely on a large — and expensive — connexion to the big networks. As technical tools they will probably always have a niche. The rise of regional networks (which tend to be thematically or geographically similar in content and focus), which are themselves networked, seem to be quietly rising in importance. I suspect it is because they are one step closer to meeting the needs of individual institutions than the homogeneous monsters of the 70s and 80s.

Richard Saunders
Montana State Univ.

saunders/lib@renne.lib.montana.edu
alirs%msu.dnet@mtsunix1.bitnet

Date: Fri, 7 May 1993 09:33:00 LCL

From: "Tibbo, Helen" <TIBBO.ILS@MHS.UNC.EDU>

Subject: RLIN/OCLC

I have just a couple of observations to add to this discussion. First, OCLC has only offered subject access and anything like an "end-user-friendly" front end for the pass [*sic*] couple of years. Not many libraries, let alone archives, are yet providing clients with access to EPIC or FirstSearch (the latter is specifically for end-users). This many increase with time, esp. if prices go down. I am sure OCLC will market these products so they can reap the most \$\$ and users the market will yield. Archivists cannot expect to get many new users via these systems if they don't offer and promote reference searching of these systems in their own institutions.

Second, the OPACs of many university and research libraries are now searchable via the Internet. If a user can "guess" which institutions may have the best concentrations of materials for which he is looking, going directly to that online catalogue, if it contains MARC/AMC records, loaded from OCLC or RLIN, is a great research strategy. If the user finds promising material, he may even be able to look at the full finding aid if it is mounted on a gopher. This, perhaps more than RLIN or OCLC, because Internet access is "free" (at least, it seems so to the user) to university researchers, should increase catalog and materials use from remote clients. As part of this, archivists should become proficient searchers of these catalogs so they can help their clients and suggest this as a research strategy.

Of course, we are at the dawn of this technology and it will take time before researchers change their information-seeking behaviours. We must remember this will [affect] OCLC and RLIN, too. Until librarians and archivists make these tools available and promote their usefulness, clients will not be falling over each other to get in the door to use them. This has already happened in special libraries and the demand is great. Scientists have bibliographic searches

done as a matter of course. While the scientist almost never has to pay for these searches, special librarians have done much to promote this type of information access. Entering the records is only the first step of providing national access.

Helen Tibbo
Assistant Professor
School of Information and Library Science
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
tibbo@ils.unc.edu

Date: Fri, 7 May 1993 19:53:32 -0500
From: Judith A Turner <jat@CSD4.CSD.UWM.EDU>
Subject: Re: online user stats

In an earlier post Richard argued that the day of the national bibliographic utilities with their enormous databases of cataloging records was passed [*sic*] because of OPAC's accessible [*sic*] on the Internet, information contained in gopher servers, etc. Perhaps this is true for Archives although how many library catalogs is your average Internet surfer willing to search through to find an item, given that the searcher doesn't know for sure if it exists and, if so, where it's held? Give me an OCLC database any day.

I doubt that the day of a national bibliographic utility is over as long as it continues to provide shared cataloging for items which are published or issued in more than one copy. Since that covers pretty much everything except archival and manuscript collections and museum objects, that is everything that is apt to be catalogued, I think there's still a pretty good argument for continuing to have one or more such utilities.

I would like to commend OCLC for its innovative marketing in recent years. I'm sure like Richard they recognize the competition that OPAC's and the Internet provide and they are moving into new services to stay in business. In the meantime they have adopted a pricing strategy that shifts the costs away for the libraries and archives which are creating the database and onto those institutions and individuals who are using the database. While I don't expect a rebate check quite yet, I do appreciate that this type of marketing and service extension is creating the corporate profits necessary to protect and ensure the continued existence of that database that so many of us have contributed to over the years.

I'd also suggest that those of you who are concerned about name and subject authority control, a really crucial element of a good online catalog, take a look at these files next time your cataloging on your national utility. There have been quite a few NUCMC authorities entered recently.

Judith A. Turner
Milwaukee Public Museum

Date: Mon, 10 May 1993 08:08:33 -0600
From: alirs%msu.dnet@TERRA.OSCS.MONTANA.EDU
Subject: OCLC

What is the list good for if not to argue! So it is that I take exception to Judy Turner's comment on searching OCLC. It's a great tool. But like my hammer, I don't use it for everything I want to do. Admittedly, they are branching out into new search engines and services (with suitable prices tagged thereto — one step closer to an information monopoly, to be paranoid), but her

comments presuppose that a searcher knows what they are looking for when they go to The Machine. As Rob Spindler noted, current technology structure does not support much besides focal searching.

Second presumption, that the researcher knows how to use OCLC's rather convoluted search language. When you look at OCLC as a product, it becomes rather apparent that it still is a bibliographic tool, not a research tool.

Perhaps it will make it beyond the technical service departments, but it won't be soon. Without a complete ground-up rewriting of its code, I doubt that it will be able to meaningfully deliver what it really wants to.

A substantial part of the problem is in being a pioneer. OCLC code and architecture was written from a substantially smaller regional network (Ohio, specifically). The database has outgrown its container. New hardware has kept up with some of the problem, but not solved the crux of the issue — indexing and searching. Like most things computorial, it has perhaps become dated, though the corporate structure is really working hard to bring it up to date.

One drawback it will never overcome is the modern dependence on the myth of inclusivity. No matter how big the database becomes, it cannot address what is unrecorded. As I have said before, perception does not need to be based in reality — a bit like LC protesting that they are not a national standard and that it's not their fault that everyone looks at what they are doing.

We recently had one of our central administrators come in an[d] express amazement that everything was not "online". The problem here is a hundred-year backlog; we only got a computer ten years ago — our focus has been in getting the up to the minute stuff on first. But while using the card catalogue has been statistically dropping, it is still being used because the new electronic catalogue is not inclusive. That will forever be OCLC's problem, no matter how up-to-date they become. It is, incidentally, the same problem that plagued the keepers of the library at Alexandria, three thousand years ago.

Richard Saunders
Montana State Univ.

saunders/lib@renne.lib.montana.edu
alirs%msu.dnet@mtsunix1.bitnet

Date: Mon, 10 May 1993 14:27:48 -0500
From: Judith A Turner <jat@CSD4.CSD.UWM.EDU>
Subject: Re: OCLC

All I was trying to say about searching on OCLC was that it's better to search one large, albeit difficult to use, database than have to search hundred of little (also difficult to use and each as idiosyncratic as the last one) OPAC's.

That aside, I agree with you, although the searching capabilities of PRISM, especially the latest (and too expensive for us to use unless all else fails) keyword capabilities throughout the Union Catalog and the full name and title scanning in the authority files, are major improvements over the derived search keys of the retrospectively named First System. Have you used any of these new search capabilities?

Indexing is another matter but OCLC, RLIN, or our local OPAC can only work with what we give them. IMHO, we archivists and librarians, along with the educators in archival and information science, ought to be working on indexing and trying to improve it. If we are the mediators between the researchers/end-users/patrons and the collections truly, we should be working with the systems engineers and software designers to improve indexing. Unfortunately between institutional barriers, the huge investment libraries and archives have made in LCSH,

and the difficulty in getting to the right people to talk with about this problem, we're stuck with what we've got and change will be evolutionary (apologies to Stephen Jay Gould for using this word in its conventional sense) rather than revolutionary.

I sympathize with you about the problems which the "myth of inclusivity" are causing. We have the last 11 years of records on OCLC, but the first 100 years exist as handwritten cards in a catalog and no OPAC yet for us. There's a big technology gap between the have's and have-not's and I feel like I'm operating in a 19th century environment part of the time and the 21st at others.

Judith A. Turner
Milwaukee Public Museum