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Library Catalogs and Other Discovery Tools

Over the last few years, it has become nearly impossible to read a library journal or attend a library conference without reading or hearing about “next generation catalogs.” Many thoughtful and vocal critics have pointed out that library catalogs are hard to use, do not include information users need, and do not measure up to the non-library sites our users frequent, such as Amazon and Google. Vendors and individual developers alike have responded, developing new systems and new models to help users discover the treasures their libraries contain. Some of this trailblazing work has taken place right here in the Pacific Northwest. In this issue, we feature the work of some modern-day library pioneers who are performing the hard work required to take our retrieval systems in new directions.

The articles in this issue range from the unconventional (or all-encompassing) to the visionary to the specific and concrete. John Replinger offers a plea for more intelligent, flexible catalogs that can adapt to the changing needs of users. Mark Dahl shows us how we can help make this vision a reality by moving to network-level, global systems that benefit from the participation of large numbers of users. Meanwhile, Tom Larsen argues

that local catalogs still play a valuable role in meeting user needs, allowing libraries to present unique materials in creative ways that may not be possible in large-scale, shared systems. Stephanie Michael sums up these varying perspectives in her overview of last fall’s ACRL regional conference, which focused on next-generation catalogs. The next two articles describe a variety of projects intended to enhance access to library materials. Terry Reese discusses the development of LibraryFind™, an open source metasearch tool developed at Oregon State University. Al Cornish tells us about the Orbis Cascade Alliance’s partnership with OCLC to develop WorldCat Navigator, the product that now powers the Summit union catalog.

In order to build user-centered discovery tools, we need to determine what users need and how they interact with our systems. Elizabeth Ramsey reports on her work doing usability testing of keyword searching in the Concordia University catalog, while Wade Guidry describes the changes made to Beachbooks, the Coastal Resource Sharing Network catalog, in response to usability testing. Allison-Bunnell tells us about the Northwest Digital Archives, a specialized retrieval system for archival finding aids, emphasizing

the role of usability testing in its design and development. Archival and other materials from special collections are also the subject of Richard Sapon-White’s article. Noting that many of these materials are not cataloged and therefore not findable using library discovery tools, he suggests some ways to tackle that problem.

Throughout all of these articles, one message comes through loud and clear: our systems must be built around the needs and expectations of our users. Users should not have to do things the library way, using library search syntax and vocabulary. Users expect our systems to be as easy as the non-library systems they use regularly. The goal of user-centeredness, however, can be achieved in many different ways. Each library has unique collections and user needs, and this diversity is reflected in the variety of systems and models described in this issue. The key question is, How do we create and implement systems that best meet the needs of our users? We hope you find both inspiration and food for thought in the pages that follow.

Guest editors

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