

---

Volume 15  
Number 1  
*Library Catalogs and Other Discovery Tools*  
(Spring 2009)

---

July 2014

## The Library Catalog as Experimental Sandbox

Tom Larsen  
*Portland State University*

### Recommended Citation

Larsen, T. (2014). The Library Catalog as Experimental Sandbox. *OLA Quarterly*, 15(1), 10-12.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1230>

© 2014 by the author(s).

*OLA Quarterly* is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

# The Library Catalog as Experimental Sandbox

by **Tom Larsen**

*Database Management  
and Catalog Librarian,  
Portland State University Library*



A number of such “next generation” catalogs are being developed, all of which show great promise, and none of which is entirely without flaws.

For centuries libraries have made use of catalogs in one form or another as a register of the bibliographic entities found in a particular library (New World Encyclopedia contributors 2008). The modern online public access catalog (OPAC) has expanded this concept somewhat to include not only items owned by the library, but also items freely available via the Internet that have been deemed by library staff to be of value to their patrons. The modern OPAC also improves on previous catalogs with enhanced search capabilities and by being accessible from any computer with an Internet connection.

The recent advent of concepts such as “Web 2.0” and “Library 2.0,” though still nebulous, illustrates that users no longer think of the library as their only, or even their primary, source of information. As pointed out by Coyle (2007a), “The question today is not how do we get users into the library, but how can we take the library to the users. The answer will necessarily involve a transformation of the library catalog.” Users rarely begin information searches in the library catalog, tending more often to start searching the Web using a popular search engine such as Google. The question becomes not one of what resources can be found in the library but rather one of what resources are available anywhere and how can one obtain them (Coyle 2007b). Consequently methods are being developed to pass Internet searches on to a library catalog when appropriate. At the same time, new services are being developed in library catalogs to send a user’s search beyond the local catalog into the catalogs of other libraries, into electronic databases, into digital repositories, or even into the Web. In addition, services are being developed that allow users to provide value-added content in the form of tags, reviews, etc., thus making the catalog more interactive.

A number of these “next generation” catalogs are being developed, all of which show great promise, and none of which is entirely without flaws. An interesting family of new catalog interfaces comes from OCLC and is based on the WorldCat union catalog. OCLC’s WorldCat database contains over 125 million bibliographic records with the holdings of over 10,000 libraries around the world. OCLC has developed three new interfaces to this database.

WorldCat.org provides an interface that displays search results in such a way that it guides users to the nearest library that holds the item in question, then to progressively more distant libraries, thus allowing the user to find the quickest way of obtaining the item from a library. Furthermore, certain Web services (e.g., Google Books) allow the user to pass their Web search on to WorldCat.org to find a copy of the item at a nearby library.

WorldCat Local has the added feature of local branding. The holdings of the local library are displayed first, followed by the holdings of other libraries in the local library’s consortium, followed by other WorldCat libraries. For many purposes, WorldCat Local can serve as the primary interface to the local library’s collections (as opposed to the local library’s own Web OPAC) with the added feature that the holdings of other libraries are also displayed. This feature is useful if the local copy is unavailable or does not exist.

WorldCat Navigator is being developed for Summit, the union catalog of the Orbis Cascade Alliance. It is similar to WorldCat Local except that it is branded for Summit and displays the holdings of Alliance libraries first followed by the holdings of other WorldCat libraries. WorldCat Navigator also allows patrons to borrow items directly from other libraries in the consortium.



None of these new interfaces is without problems. For example, the bibliographic records that display in WorldCat interfaces are based on the OCLC master record, so any notes (as well as other fields) that may appear, in a library's local records will not appear or be searchable, in the WorldCat displays. This is particularly troublesome for libraries with extensive special collections, since these fields are often crucial for identifying unique copies of rare materials (Allison-Bunnell et al. 2008). Furthermore, any authority work done in the local catalog is potentially lost in WorldCat unless OCLC has also done that authority work on their master record. There are many records in WorldCat for which such authority work is sorely lacking. OCLC is aware of these problems, however, and hopefully they will find solutions to them.

The highly networked nature of information resources, and the decreased need for users to be within close proximity to resources, have led some to wonder why libraries even need their own bibliographic database and user interface (Coyle 2007b). Certainly it seems redundant for a library's holdings to be represented in WorldCat and the local database, which sometimes entails duplicated effort. While future improvements in WorldCat may make it possible for libraries to abandon their local catalogs and rely solely on a union catalog, this does not appear to be totally feasible at the present time. In addition to problems with records, many libraries use their local catalogs to inventory items such as study room keys, laptops, their dark archives, and other items that are not appropriate for a world-wide union catalog. In some cases items (e.g., those in dark archives) should not even be visible to anyone other than library staff.

Another reason why some libraries might want to maintain a local catalog is to have an experimental sandbox. At Portland State

University, we have a history of experimenting with our catalog to develop new services for our patrons. One of our more successful experiments involved exploiting the capabilities of the Electronic Resources Management module from Innovative Interfaces to integrate one of our digital archival collections into our database, and then to allow our patrons to navigate through the various hierarchical levels of the collection (Brenner et al. 2006). This system mimics some of the hierarchical characteristics of a finding aid, yet it consists of sets of linked MARC records which can be searched by author, title, subject, etc., with the other bibliographic records in our catalog. These records also contain links to the digital objects themselves. This system has greatly improved access to this collection. The important point here, however, is that this experiment would have been impossible without a local catalog.

Another experiment we performed in our local catalog involved the inclusion of non-Roman scripts (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Arabic, and Hebrew) in authority records. We discovered this had certain beneficial consequences for searching in our catalog. When the vernacular script form of a name was entered into a 4XX or 5XX field in the appropriate authority record, a search using the vernacular script, retrieved records with the vernacular form of the name, and through the cross references provided access to records that contained the name in Romanized form.

This functionality would benefit our patrons, but this project was not carried through to completion because the Library of Congress began including vernacular scripts in their authority records, which then appeared in the OCLC authority file. Currently, it does not appear to be possible in WorldCat to retrieve Roman-script-only records when searching using the vernacular script. Consequently, this type of search still



... we would have never been able to explore the possibilities if we did not have a local catalog in which to explore them.

works best in our local catalog. Again, we would have never been able to even explore the possibilities if we did not have a local catalog in which to explore them.

These are exciting times, and it will be interesting to see what developments will happen in the world of library catalogs and other information discovery systems. Nevertheless, we are not quite ready to abandon our local catalog and throw the proverbial baby out with the proverbial bath water. On the other hand, though, as the baby grows up, it would do well to be flexible. 🌿

### References

Allison-Bunnell, Jodi, Nichole Bouché, John Chapman, David de Lorenzo, Jackie Dooley, Elizabeth Johnson, Mela Kircher et al. 2008. Report of the WorldCat Local Special Collections and Archives Task Force. [http://www.rbms.info/committees/bibliographic\\_standards/committee-docs/](http://www.rbms.info/committees/bibliographic_standards/committee-docs/)

FinalReportWCLSpecCollTaskForce.pdf (accessed 16 February 2009).

Brenner, Michaela, Tom Larsen, and Claudia Weston. 2006. Digital collection management through the library catalog. *Information technology and libraries* 25 (2): 65–77.

Coyle, Karen. 2007a. The library catalog in a 2.0 world. *The journal of academic librarianship* 33 (2): 289–91.

Coyle, Karen. 2007b. The library catalog: some possible futures. *The journal of academic librarianship* 33 (3): 414–6.

New World Encyclopedia contributors. 2008. Library catalog. In *New World Encyclopedia*. [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Library\\_catalog?oldid=751788](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Library_catalog?oldid=751788) (accessed 12 January 2009).

## Dream. Discover. Do!

### Spokane Falls Community College library technician program offers:



- Online A.A.S. degree option
- Library technician certificate option
- School Library Media emphasis option
- Bachelor's degree transfer option

Students also can take advantage of college credit for work experience, independent study and internships.

**For information** contact Paula Duffy Swan, library technician program at 509-522-3809, or [librarytechnician@spokanefalls.edu](mailto:librarytechnician@spokanefalls.edu).

[www.spokanefalls.com](http://www.spokanefalls.com)



Community Colleges of Spokane provides equal opportunity in education and employment. DL

