

# Discovery and delivery? First, a national catalogue.

By Ken Chad. September 2010

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*With concerns over anti-competitive practices in bibliographic services companies, why can't all UK libraries be part of a national library catalogue?*

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A professor of Information Sciences recently wrote in *Library Journal*. 'In a focus group for one of my research studies, a college freshman bemoaned, "Why is Google so easy and the library so hard"<sup>1</sup> It seems this view is widely shared. The 2005 OCLC *Perceptions of Libraries*

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*and Information Resources*<sup>2</sup> looked into people's information-seeking behaviours and preferences with respect to libraries. It revealed that 84 per cent of those surveyed start with search engines like Google;

library catalogues are for a tiny minority (one per cent). It's perhaps worrying then that the information in our UK public library catalogues is generally part of the 'hidden' web and is not indexed by Google or other search engines. Why do we ignore user preferences and 'hide' this rich resource? How might we make it easier for users?

I don't mean libraries aren't on the web – they all have their web-based catalogues (Opacs). However the issue is the bibliographic and holdings records that remain in their library management systems (LMSs) 'silos.' So while Google will typically index and find (the full text of) a library *strategy* paper, it won't discover a book in my local library. Well that's true for *my* local library. But slowly, and with almost no publicity, some libraries are beginning to 'expose' their collections to Google to make them easier to discover.

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At the time of writing about 20 public library authorities<sup>3</sup> have done so. Universities have been doing it as well. The way they achieve it is to load their catalogue data onto OCLC's WorldCat which in turn is harvested and indexed by Google (and other search engines such as Yahoo and Bing). WorldCat is the default 'find in a library' link from Google Books. This enables a 'live' link to be made to local catalogues to show holdings and availability. 'Local' is determined by postcode. The user enters their postcode (or it can be 'remembered' by WorldCat) to see holdings in libraries nearby.

<sup>1</sup> 'Visualize the Perfect Search.' By Carol Tenopir. *Library Journal*. 1 March 2009.

<http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6639354.html?industryid=47130>

<sup>2</sup> *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources A Report to the OCLC Membership*. OCLC 2005

[http://www.oclc.org/reports/pdfs/Percept\\_all.pdf](http://www.oclc.org/reports/pdfs/Percept_all.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> They are listed on the 'National Catalogue' entry of the Local Government Library Technology ('LGLibTech') website. <http://lglibtech.wikispaces.com/National+Catalogue>

Imagine then if all UK library authorities followed the example of the pioneering twenty. We'd not only have a more discoverable publicly funded resource but also we'd effectively have a national public library catalogue. Such a move would surely please users. The recent 'Public Charter for Libraries'<sup>4</sup> argues that the 'essential value of public libraries needs to be reinforced at both local and national level' and public library authorities should 'collaborate and share best practice.' It goes on to recognise some of the benefits in doing so. 'Collaboration between neighbouring authorities will make limited resources go further and .... will mean all libraries are better able to meet users' expectations'.

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The last government's (DCMS) policy statement on public libraries also supported the idea of a 'national catalogue' but it was viewed as one of the tasks of a 'strategic body' and would only happen 'if money becomes available.' The current government has scrapped the notion of such a strategic body. So is a national catalogue dead? If local library authorities have already made a business case for being discoverable on Google, might this 'bottom-up' approach evolve into a national resource?

A library authority I spoke to said that around six per cent of 'hits' on their catalogue were coming via WorldCat. Considering it's still early days and there has been no publicity, I think that's impressive. Close to a quarter of total WorldCat traffic comes from Google.

This may all sound too good to be true and, of course, there are some issues. Perhaps the most important one is that having a national view of library resources doesn't mean I can actually get hold of a copy of the book I want regardless of the library that owns it. 'Discovery without delivery' is not that useful. The Society of Chief Librarians initiative to create 'universal' public library membership<sup>5</sup> is a certainly a step forward. However it excludes Scotland where local authorities are implementing their own 'National Entitlement Card'.

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Indeed Scotland and Wales have stolen a march on England in that they already have national catalogues.<sup>6</sup> In Wales, according to Alyson Tyler at CyMAL: 'Users can also request

<sup>4</sup> Change is overdue- a public charter for libraries. Libraries for Life for Londoners. April 2010  
<http://www.librarylondon.org/Manifesto.htm>

<sup>5</sup> 'SCL Announces Universal Membership.' The President's Blog. SCL September 2009  
<http://www.goscl.com/scl-announces-universal-membership/>

<sup>6</sup> CAIRNS is the Co-operAtive Information Retrieval Network for Scotland. CAIRNS allows the simultaneous one-stop searching of the catalogues of multiple library collections of print and electronic resources held by Scottish libraries and information services for learning, teaching and research.  
<http://www.scotlandsinformation.com/cairns/>

Cat Cymru beta brings together publicly accessible library catalogues from all across Wales into a single search. By entering a term in the search box .. you can choose to look for all kinds of material in any of the Public,

the item that they find, and they can join a public library online as well.<sup>7</sup> However, as yet, the data in the catalogues isn't yet indexed by internet search engines and so remains 'hidden' from many potential users.

Some library authorities are addressing the delivery issue by taking part in regional consortia around a shared management system.

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Several LMSs have specific consortia borrowing features that enable reciprocal borrowing rights across authorities. The London Libraries Consortium covers around one third of London. One commentator says: 'With just one library card [users] have an entitlement to around 5m items all recorded and instantly discoverable in a single shared catalogue. They can request material from any library and when they have finished return the book to whichever branch is most convenient'<sup>8</sup>. The SELMS consortium in south-east England encompasses around 200 individual libraries serving about 5m people<sup>9</sup>.

These consortia continue to grow and maybe these separate LMS-based consortia will begin to interoperate over time. This is certainly technically possible.

Taking a wider perspective technology continues to transform the whole notion of a library. It has enabled services such as Google, Amazon, LibraryThing, Wikipedia, OpenLibrary to deliver low cost or free 'library' services on a global scale. The library world is slowly learning some of the advantages of aggregating data on a 'web-scale'. For example reviews, tagging, and recommender services are more effective. Duplicating these services 200 times across the UK doesn't make sense economically or from a user perspective.

We can see that the pieces are in place. The technology is there and offers potential to make savings whilst improving services offered to library users. Consortia have demonstrated that the policy, administrative and practical barriers to delivering services across library authority boundaries can be overcome. So what is holding public libraries back from going further? Concerns have been expressed about Google and OCLC exerting powers of monopoly<sup>10</sup>. 'Lack of leadership' was cited by some librarians I spoke to and some were disappointed that the idea of a national strategic body or agency had been dropped by the

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Higher Education or Further Education Libraries or libraries in a particular region.

<http://library.wales.org/catcymru/>

<sup>7</sup> Posting to LIS-PUB-LIBS listserve 20<sup>th</sup> July 2010

<sup>8</sup> 'A Better Library Service Costs Less: Shared Services in London Libraries-- the London Libraries Consortium.'

By Ann Rennie 27 October 2007. Local Authority Library Technology.

<http://iglibtech.wikispaces.com/Better+Library+Service+Costs+Less>

<sup>9</sup> 'A blueprint for sharing services: Civica SELMS consortium reshapes library services for five million people in SE England.' Civica press release. 2010.

<http://www.civicapl.com/UK/News/Press/SELMS+Civica+press+release.htm>

new government. Two themes stand out: keeping library holdings 'hidden' away in library Opacs (even consortia ones) is 'making it hard' for lots of users who will also become frustrated if they discover books they can't then borrow.

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<http://lglibtech.wikispaces.com>

<http://helibtech.com/>

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<sup>10</sup> For example see 'SkyRiver and Innovative Interfaces file major antitrust lawsuit against OCLC.' By Marshall Breeding. Library Journal 29th July 2010

[http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/home/886099-264/skyriver\\_and\\_innovative\\_interfaces\\_file.html.csp](http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/home/886099-264/skyriver_and_innovative_interfaces_file.html.csp)