



Research Notes

OCLC and RLIN: The Comparisons Studied

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INTRODUCTION

An important frontier of library development is computer applications in libraries. Two of the most important institutions in this field are Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) and Research Libraries Group (RLG). The number of published studies which compare OCLC and RLG or their online computer systems is small. *Library Literature* was searched from 1970 to 1982 under the headings BALLOTS, BALLOTS project, Ohio College Library Center, Online Computer Library Center, RLIN, Research Libraries Group, and their subdivisions.¹ The articles and their bibliographies were examined to identify studies dealing with both systems or institutions. Though unpublished internal library reports must certainly exist, only those few which have surfaced in the published literature are considered here. Through this process twenty-seven English language articles and monographic works were retrieved in early 1983.

The purpose of the present paper is to analyze those twenty-seven articles as a body of literature. This body of literature, though small, is of interest to the library community for what it reveals about librarians' perceptions of the two systems

and their effect upon library programs. Much of the literature appeared in reaction to the University of Pennsylvania's switch from participation in OCLC to membership in the Research Libraries Group and concerns the impact of these institutions on networking and interinstitutional cooperation. Despite the broad range and degree of opinion represented, the literature does provide a consensus of the major advantages and disadvantages of each system.

THE LITERATURE DESCRIBED

Chronologically, the pattern of publication forms a marked curve. The first comparative studies appeared in 1977, as BALLOTS was being marketed on a limited basis by Stanford University just prior to its adoption by RLG and subsequent transformation into RLIN in 1978. Two studies were published in 1977; one in 1978; five in 1979. A disproportionately high number of studies, thirteen, were published in 1980. This peak may be accounted for as a reaction to the University of Pennsylvania's switch to RLG in early 1979. Thereafter, publishing dropped off with four articles published in 1981; two in 1982. The concern with the broad implica-

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tions that these systems have for libraries is also reflected in the pattern of publication by type of journal. The comparison studies have tended to appear in the mainstream general-interest journals, such as *American Libraries* and *Library Journal*, rather than in the specialized journals, such as those dealing with automation.

Despite the fact that both OCLC and RLG/RLIN are online cataloging systems, the major area of concern reflected in the literature has been the impact of these institutions and their systems on networking and interinstitutional cooperation. Twelve articles focus on this area. Technical and public service applications, such as cataloging, reference, and administrative aspects of the systems, have been of secondary importance; five articles cover administrative aspects (including system specifications); five are concerned with cataloging and/or technical services; three deal with reference, interlibrary loan.

Perhaps in an attempt to justify their choice of system, the RLG/RLIN participants are well represented in the literature, while OCLC members, despite their greater numbers, have been less prolific. Overall, in terms of network affiliation, the authorship divides into four groups: seventeen RLG/RLIN-affiliated authors, nine OCLC-affiliated authors, four unaffiliated authors, and three authors whose status is unknown. From 1977 to 1979, only authors not affiliated with either system (e.g., paid consultants, librarians determining which system to join) or RLG/RLIN-affiliated authors were represented in the literature. In response to the University of Pennsylvania's shift to RLG in 1979, six OCLC-affiliated authors published comparison articles in 1980. As time passed and the University of Pennsylvania's action proved an isolated event and not the precursor of a widespread trend, OCLC members again fell silent, with only two studies published in 1981 and none in 1982.

This body of literature is defined by its concern with and comparison of OCLC and RLG/RLIN. However, a significant portion of these studies do not develop their own interpretations of the institutions and their systems or assert conclu-

sions from their findings. Thirty-three percent of the studies do not draw significant conclusions about the two systems. Six of these studies are no more than objective presentations of system specifications. Three studies provide formal quantitative measures of the two systems, such as hit rates, but provide no interpretations of test results. The remaining eighteen studies draw some conclusions about the systems or their parent institutions, but only two of these base their conclusions on formal test results. Thirteen studies provide commentary on OCLC and RLG/RLIN from personal experience or opinion. The remaining three studies are based upon what might be referred to as "informal testing." Danuta Nitecki's study, "Online interlibrary services: An informal comparison of five systems," is based on personal experience and telephone interviews with selected ILL librarians and system representatives.² Similarly, Klaus Musmann's "Southern California experience with OCLC and BALLOTS" is based on visits and interviews with local system participants and representatives.³ Joseph R. Matthews based his study on interviews and a random sample questionnaire with a forty-five percent response rate.⁴ According to Maurice B. Line, when "fewer than half the sample as selected have responded—the results must be regarded as insufficient to come to any firm conclusions."⁵

CONFLICTING PERCEPTIONS

The majority of comparison studies or commentaries, as previously stated, deal with OCLC and RLG and their relationship to networking and library cooperation. These studies reveal conflicting perceptions of the two systems. On the one hand is the vision of OCLC as the "National Library Network."⁶ In this scheme of things, RLG/RLIN detracts from the size and integrity of the one truly democratic network. OCLC's democratic status derives from the fact that it has not addressed itself to the problems of any one type of library. On the other hand, RLG, with its focus on research library problems and perspectives, is viewed as "exclusionary," ignoring the "wider interests of li-

braries as a whole."⁷ This argument, championed by Michael Gorman, is elevated to an issue of "moral and philosophical imperatives."⁸

The alternative vision is represented by the likes of David Stam, Richard DeGennaro, John Knapp, and Jo Chanaud. The existence of OCLC and RLG is seen as healthy competition, "free enterprise."⁹ As Richard DeGennaro puts it:

Our greatest success has come from allowing the entrepreneurial forces of the private sector . . . to act in our own best interests unfettered by government. . . .¹⁰

Contrary to Gorman's exclusionary view of RLIN, David Stam sees the database as a means of making "the work of the alleged few . . . accessible to the many."¹¹ In response to the declaration of OCLC as the one national library network is the vision of a national library network emerging

from the development of a set of *communications links* and *standard protocols* which will allow two-way, multi-lateral communications links between our existing and potential computer-based bibliographic services.¹²

As a part of this debate, Michael Gorman has predicted that

if RLG knows how to achieve quality control in a six-million record database when and if they achieve that size, I will be happy to see it and I am sure that OCLC will embrace the technique.¹³

According to an article by Julia E. Miller, the RLIN database now contains 6.2 million records.¹⁴ There seems little hope for OCLC's adoption of RLIN's methods in this regard.

The exact nature of OCLC is another area where conflicting viewpoints exist. Often, OCLC is described as a library consortium turned "commercial vendor."¹⁵ Though OCLC began as the Ohio College Library Center, it "divested itself of membership" in 1978 and (as a not-for-profit corporation) began to contract its services to libraries via membership networks.¹⁶ As further proof of its commercial attitude, critics cite OCLC's claim that "it owns the database" and

proposed OCLC contract language [that]

would have prevented the use of any system other than OCLC by preventing the use of bibliographic records by anyone other than . . . OCLC and the user library.¹⁷

Joseph F. Boykin, Jr., president of the OCLC Users Council, represents the opposing view when he explains that "OCLC has . . . three classes of membership . . . [and] representative governance."¹⁸

SYSTEM ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Despite the conflicting opinions that exist regarding the nature of these two systems, there is a consensus in the comparative literature as to their advantages and disadvantages. The studies are strikingly similar in this respect. Though some previously central differences, such as database size, are becoming less important with time, the consensus of system differences remains of interest.

The majority of OCLC's frequently cited advantages are in some way a function of its size. OCLC is credited with having a larger database, more participating libraries, a higher percentage of non-Library of Congress and older records and, as a direct result, a better hit rate. OCLC is also viewed as more stable as a result of its broader financial base. Perhaps as a function of size, OCLC is also accepted to be less expensive. This must be seen as major plus by today's budget-conscious librarian.

Other positively viewed features include a more sophisticated ILL subsystem and a regional structure. As Mary Ellen Jacobs explains it, "The majority [of OCLC users participate] through membership in one of the 20 regional networks offering OCLC services."¹⁹ The regional administration of the system is viewed as an advantage responsible for rapid provision of such services as maintenance, training, and support.

OCLC is not without its flaws, chief of which is its limited search capabilities. OCLC searching is extremely rigid. Based on search keys, it does not permit precise entry of the search request. For example, exact name searching beyond the "4,3,1" search key is not possible. The OCLC

database cannot be searched by subject, perhaps its most unfavorably viewed limitation. The corporate name index had been unavailable between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. This was a serious drawback for reference application of the system, as that is the period "when [corporate name searches] are most often requested."²⁰

The quality of OCLC's non-Library of Congress cataloging is also frequently criticized. Some authors even feel that OCLC's lower rates are offset by the fact that due to the quality of records, OCLC is estimated to require more professional catalogers than RLIN.²¹ Another shortcoming for catalogers is OCLC's inability to perform any of the functions of a local online catalog or provide access to a library's own record for a given title. OCLC is criticized for its lack of interest in cooperation between the networks. There has been considerable apprehension over OCLC's assertion that it owns the database. If so, "the RLIN system may prove more advantageous by default."²²

RLIN's most frequently praised feature is, as it is repeatedly referred to, its powerful searching capability. The literature is unanimous in its positive evaluation of this feature. RLIN is searched, similar to DIALOG, by the use of Boolean operators. It can search entire words, truncations, or phrases in fourteen general indexes: personal name and exact personal name, title word or phrase, related title phrase, corporate name word or phrase, subject phrase or subdivision, Library of Congress card number, Library of Congress and Dewey classification, geographic class code, U.S. government document number, ISBN, ISSN, Coden, publisher or issuing agency, and publisher/agency number. In addition, there are also ten local indexes which apply to the user library's holdings only.²³

RLIN is also credited with higher quality and more detailed member input records than OCLC. The provision of local call numbers is a plus, as is the amount of flexibility and choice provided through access to all individual member records online. Additionally, the availability of one's own records online is seen as a major advan-

tage, making the maintenance and upgrading of records much simpler. The fact that RLIN can fulfill some of the functions of a local online catalog is also viewed as a point much in that system's favor.

In general, RLIN is viewed as more ambitious, "meeting a more inclusive set of library objectives."²⁴ Where OCLC is seen as having the present advantage, RLIN is repeatedly praised as the system of the future. A part of that praise is due to RLG's efforts to promote network cooperation and allow unrestricted access to its database.

The major disadvantages of the RLIN system are a function of its size. It has a smaller database and fewer participating libraries. This is perhaps its most frequently cited drawback. Similarly, its growth has been slower, its percentage of Library of Congress MARC records higher, its hit rate lower, and it has less financial security than OCLC. Another important factor that can be linked to size is that of cost. RLIN is substantially more expensive than OCLC.

CONCLUSION

Overall, librarians have compared these two systems in terms of their effect on library programs. Their function as tools available for the improvement of library operations such as cataloging and reference work is only a small part of the literature. The coexistence of the two networks is viewed as either exclusionary or the positive forces of free enterprise at work. This difference of opinion may account for the emotional tone of much of the literature and the high percentage of articles that express an opinion without any quantitative measurement to reinforce its validity. Only two studies that evaluate the respective merits of OCLC and RLIN have as their basis any sort of formal testing. Certainly, in many respects OCLC and RLIN are not comparable. OCLC's mission is directly linked to its database and the provision of auxiliary systems such as ILL and acquisitions. For RLG, however, the RLIN database is only one of several tools developed to support programs for cooperation, preservation, and collection development. Yet, their ability to perform

similar functions makes comparative evaluation necessary to informed library planning and decision making. The library community must venture into formal quantitative measurement of OCLC, RLIN, and the other networks as a basis for future development. The present body of published literature is insufficient to adequately support the decision-making process faced by many libraries at this time, and those libraries that have prepared evaluative internal documents should consider publication of their research. As Kazuko M. Dailey points out:

By making our internal documents available to the profession, we hope to encourage other libraries to come forth with their analyses of the bibliographic utilities and perform analyses, where before we had only assertions or assumptions. The ultimate purpose of "going public" is not to criticize, but to comprehend the bibliographic databases.²⁵

Only through the availability of such formalized comparisons will the networks be seen in their proper perspective, as tools available for the work at hand rather than forces beyond our understanding or control.

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