

# Making collections work

## Remote access and browsing

by Dan C. Hazen

Many library pundits expect an increasingly electronic future as print acquisitions wither away and existing holdings are digitized. However, the grandiose schemes through which we would leapfrog from our paper-based collections to a virtual future assume an unrealistically massive deployment of digitizing resources. The thoughtful utilization of scanning and digital technology, in conjunction with improved subject access and better management tools for interlibrary loan, could more plausibly provide the bibliographic and technical infrastructure that will allow large-scale cooperation at last to take shape. The results will include revitalized hardcopy collections, more efficient and effective library operations, and enhanced services focused directly upon users and their needs.

### The dysfunctions of print

Print-based library collections are purposeful constructions whose contents reflect a particular topic or theme. By bringing together related items, they foster a cumulative coherence beyond what each work can provide on its own. Most users, however, do not pore over every document potentially relevant to their topic. Researchers instead rely on browsing, through which they first see what there is and then make very quick assessments to decide what to inspect more carefully.

Collections' cooperation, however, presumes remote access. Reduced acquisitions

budgets enforce the same result, with additional complications due to the lack of a coordinated approach. From the user's perspective, all off-site resources are similar in that they must be chosen sight unseen, requested in accord with special procedures, and received only after a wait. The frustrations are least when researchers can easily identify every item of potential utility and then choose the books that they really want. But current trends leave users even less able to browse through the collections that they need.

### The pieces of the puzzle

As direct access to collections subsides, catalog records are more and more crucial in guiding users to relevant library materials. The identification and browsing processes formerly supported by physically accessible collections must now be provided through improved bibliographic records. This requires two complementary approaches.

In the first place, catalog records should be as complete as possible. Libraries use classification systems and call numbers to construct browsable collections. However, "less than full" bibliographic records are commonplace. Many materials, prominent among them those sent to off-site storage facilities, receive only cursory cataloging. Classification numbers and subject headings are among the first casualties as records are simplified. Known item searches suffer few effects, but the omissions can stymie research-

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ers seeking to identify larger sets of materials.

More complete catalog records will help compensate for the difficulties that arise when materials are housed beyond easy reach. Only when all bibliographic records carry organizing information like call numbers or subject headings can they be arranged in the sequences that a browser would expect. There are other benefits, as well. In the first place, the consistent inclusion of classification numbers or subject headings will provide our users with access to a complete roster of relevant materials, not just those that happen to be on the shelves at a particular moment. Our "virtual stacks" will always be in order and complete. Perhaps more important, any library's holdings can be shelved in but a single physical arrangement, to which stack-bound browsers must adjust. More complete and consistent cataloging will permit users to exploit all the sequencing flexibility that our cataloging formats and online systems can provide. Enhanced cataloging, in other words, will allow our users to generate "virtual collections" of their own design.

Online catalogs that permit researchers to create their own collections, however, will not address their subsequent need to "browse" these holdings and isolate the materials that they really want to see. For many years, technological limitations restricted catalog listings to database records comprised of elaborately formatted character strings, machine-readable codes, and brief snatches of text.

Digital technology, as it offers new ways to present and represent information, also enables our second approach to improved bibliographic access. Electronic images that complement and enhance bibliographic records may allow users seeking remote holdings to approximate and in some cases improve upon the sorts of quick inspections that they have traditionally conducted at the shelf. These image files could be limited to the title page, the table of contents, and perhaps a page or two of the introduction. The goal is to convey the flavor and a bit of the substance of a document, so that users can quickly inspect works online and decide what to retrieve.

Our scanning resources are finite, and their deployment requires careful consider-

ation. Only very narrow coverage will be possible if we exhaust our digital energies in scanning entire works. Moreover, large-scale, full-text scanning assumes relationships between research routines, extended electronic texts, and digital delivery mechanisms that are still uncertain: on-screen study is tedious, massive printouts are expensive, fully searchable texts are costly and often unnecessary. Limited scanning to enhance bibliographic records, by contrast, could significantly improve access to the bulk of our collections. This approach also makes sense in terms of technology, economics, and user needs.

### **Benefits of selective scanning**

Digitizing front matter is an activity that can be pursued on its own. The same holds for ensuring more complete bibliographic records. In each case, the advantages will affect libraries as well as users. Even greater benefits will result from a combined approach. The possibilities include the following:

- **Simplified cataloging.** Cataloging could become quicker and cheaper if elements like long contents notes were replaced by digital images of tables of contents. Some of the difficulties associated with non-Roman scripts might likewise be reduced. Rare book cataloging can also bog down in painstaking transcriptions of complicated title pages. A digital picture could, literally, be worth a thousand words.

- **Collection management.** Effective electronic browsing should enable library holdings to generate the demand they truly deserve, without artificial distortions due to physical inaccessibility or because catalog records do not fully suggest their intellectual content. Librarians can then employ accurate measures of interest and use as they locate materials on-site or in remote storage, decide on multiple copies or withdrawals, and set preservation priorities.

- **Cost control.** It is expensive for libraries to retrieve materials from remote storage, and even costlier to order a book through interlibrary loan. Online browsing will not necessarily reduce either storage retrievals or ILL activity. It will, however, encourage informed requests in which materials are used as productively as possible.

Keeping track of all these retrievals will allow us to conceptualize more adequately the potential nature, role, and costs of distributed collections. Levels of demand for remote materials will likewise inform our efforts to improve delivery systems.

- Cooperation. Scanning and improved bibliographic control are linked operations appropriate for all our libraries. But repetitive scanning makes no more sense than duplicative cataloging. A coordinated approach is essential. Enhanced records, when incorporated in (and perhaps sponsored by) the bibliographic utilities, will also enable scholars to "browse" the fullest possible universe of materials appropriate to their research.

Better online catalogs and virtual browsing will renew the bases for cooperative collection development. Librarians will be able to associate levels of demand with individual items, categories of material, and entire collections. Appropriate joint strategies can then be devised for collection development, preservation, and cataloging.

- The role of technical services. Targeted scanning with improved bibliographic

records will have a direct impact on cataloging. Catalogers, too often beleaguered and too easily ignored, are cartographers of the world of learning.<sup>1</sup> Digital technology could substantially enhance their maps, thereby helping cataloging to fulfill its potential as libraries' quintessential user service.

- Building the digital library. The enhanced catalog records and digital images proposed here should be complemented with mechanisms to track interlibrary loan requests on a national level as well as within individual libraries. Items generating heavy interlibrary loan traffic will often be strong candidates for digitization. The research library community has not yet devised a compelling strategy for digitizing hardcopy holdings, though our limited resources mean that any efforts must be small. A system that reflects informed user demand will serve us well.

### Conclusion

Digital images can be particularly useful in conveying a sense of materials not readily at (*Making collections work cont. on page 113*)

### ACRL seeks Editor for *RBML* *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship*

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) is seeking an editor for the rare books journal *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship (RBML)*. The *RBML* editor is responsible for the editorial content of the journal and is assisted by an editorial board, primarily in refereeing submissions. The editor, who is the chair of the *RBML* Editorial Board, receives submissions and sends them out to board members for their review. The editor makes the final decision on all items appearing in the journal.

The position of editor of *RBML* is voluntary. The editor is appointed for a three-year term and may serve a maximum of three such terms. The editor recommends to the ACRL Publications Committee for their approval who shall be on the journal's editorial board and also who shall be book review editor. Production of the journal is handled by the production manager at ACRL Publications in Chicago, with whom the *RBML* editor works closely.

Appointment will be made by the ACRL Board of Directors at the 1998 ALA Annual Meeting. The incoming editor will assume full responsibilities in July 1999 after working a year with the outgoing editor. Applicants must be a member of ALA and ACRL. Applications for the position of editor of *RBML* should be sent to:

Hugh Thompson  
Director of Publications  
ACRL, 50 East Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611

Deadline for receipt of applications extended to March 1, 1998.  
Finalists will be interviewed at the ALA Annual Meeting in June 1998.

*Section 2. Board of Directors.* Mail or electronic votes of the Board of Directors may be taken provided they are authorized by the officers of the Association and all voting Board members are canvassed simultaneously. An affirmative vote of a simple majority of the voting Board members shall be required to pass a motion. On each mail or electronic vote, each voting Board member shall have the option of voting for or against the motion, to abstain, or to hold for discussion at the next regularly scheduled meeting. Time limits shall be the same as stated above in Section 1 of this article. Actions shall be confirmed at the next regular meeting of the Board.

*Section 3. Committees.* Mail or electronic votes of duly constituted committees may be taken by the chair of such committees. An affirmative vote of a simple majority of the committee members shall be required to pass the motion. Voting option and time limits shall be the same as stated above in Section 2 of this article.

### **Section XXI: Parliamentary authority**

The parliamentary authority used by this Association shall be the same as that used by the American Library Association.

### **Article XXII: Amendment of bylaws**

*Section 1. Proposals.* Amendments to the bylaws may be proposed by the Board of Directors; by any standing committee of the Association in writing to the Board of Directors; or by a petition signed by 25 or more members of the Association.

*Section 2. Board action.* A proposed amendment to the bylaws shall be voted upon by Association members after it has been approved by a majority of the Board members present and voting at two consecutive meetings held not less than two months apart.

*Section 3. Notice.* Written notice of the text of the amendment shall be provided to members at least one month before consideration.

*Section 4. Voting.* Amendments may be voted upon by members either by mail ballot or at a public membership meeting.

a) If by mail ballot, the bylaws amendment is accepted if a majority of those members participating vote in favor of the amendment.

b) If at a public membership meeting, the bylaws amendment is accepted if a majority vote of the members, present and voting, vote in favor of the amendment.

*Section 5. Adoption.* If not otherwise specified, a proposed amendment becomes effective as soon as it has been approved as described above. ■

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*(NASULGC cont. from page 101)*

American Universities. The upshot of the stimulating, wide-ranging conversation was twofold. First, it became clear that at least some provosts now realize that many "library" issues, such as the spiraling cost of serials or the licensing difficulties of digital information, are really systemic issues for the whole academy to grapple with. The second result was an invitation for librarian participation in a half-day program at the Council on Academic Affairs' summer meeting, and consequent opportunity to bring these matters to the attention of many more of the member chief academic officers.

There will also be a separate summer meeting of the Commission on Information Technology in conjunction with the Commissions on Outreach and Technology Transfer and on Extension, Continuing Education, and Public Service on the theme: "Cyberpartners: Will It Change the Way We Collaborate?" It will be held June 3-5 at the Chicago Hilton and Towers. While only 15 or so librarians participated in the NASULGC Annual Meeting, it is hoped that more will attend and form a visible presence at this summer program.

NASULGC is comprised of some 180 land-grant and public colleges and universities, all of whose librarians fall under that membership eligibility. It is an influential organization whose attention is increasingly riveted on all the issues of importance, both to individual libraries and to ACRL. More participation by librarians can only benefit us all. ■

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*(Making collections work cont. from page 99)*

hand. Catalog records that routinely include subject access will enable our users to exploit the full promise of automated systems and the MARC format, at the very moment when on-site browsing takes a back seat to remote access and the associated reliance on online records. Measures to track more precisely interlibrary loan traffic will open the way both to new strategies for cooperative collection development and to the creation of a shared, cost-effective "digital library."

### **Note**

1. My colleague Barbara Halporn introduced me to this happy phrase. ■