High tech hits the books

Libraries struggle as Computer Age forces a revolution

By Jess Bravin

The Chicago Tribune

The Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) is leading the drive to bring all of the world's libraries online. This new system, named RAL, will allow users to search the catalogs of all participating libraries simultaneously.

The RAL system is designed to be user-friendly and efficient. It will provide a single point of access to information from around the world, making it easier for researchers and students to find the resources they need.

The RAL system will also offer a number of advanced features, including the ability to search for books, journals, and other materials by author, title, or subject. It will also allow users to browse catalog records and view detailed information about each item.

In addition to providing access to traditional library materials, the RAL system will also incorporate electronic resources, such as databases and online journals. This will make it possible for users to access a wide range of information from a single point of entry.

The RAL system is being built on the foundation of existing library automation systems. This will allow libraries to gradually transition to the new system, minimizing the impact on their daily operations.

Overall, the RAL system represents a major step forward in the evolution of library technology. It will enable libraries to provide more effective and efficient service to their patrons, and will help to ensure that information remains accessible and relevant for years to come.
Libraries

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“Can you imagine how many libraries have ‘Megatrends’ by John Naisbit?” Gifford asks. Instead of each library independently cataloging the book, “when it’s on our system, all they have to do is modify the information, to meet their needs. And with one key, they can have catalogue cards printed up.”

OCLC’s three floors of computers hold records of some 13 million documents, Gifford says. Member libraries can gain listings of which libraries hold different materials, allowing a patron at one library to consult the holdings of thousands of libraries across the country. Such services cost at least $1.20 a transaction, not including the cost of telecommunications links between a library and the Ohio center.

Many libraries, however, are finding that still-newer technologies are making giant bibliographic services like OCLC obsolete.

“The wave of the early ’80s was to have a large mainframe computer library, a shared database somewhere, and have a lot of libraries hook into it,” Fasan says. But telecommunications costs have risen in recent years and the costs of microcomputers have fallen, allowing libraries to do their own cataloging less expensively.

The result of the New York Public Library’s approach to electronic cataloging is the recently unveiled CATNYP system, a computerized catalogue of the library’s acquisitions since 1972. Several CATNYP (for “catalogue of the New York Public Library”) terminals are available for patron use in the city’s central library, and are designed to be “user-friendly, as the jargon has it, because many users are new to the electronic catalogues,” Fasan says.

“Libraries have always been formal and offputting to the general public, and we don’t want to increase that,” he says.

Containing 1.25 million entries, CATNYP is the outcome of a decision made 14 years ago to close New York’s card catalogue. In 1972, the catalogue’s drawers contained 11 million cards, making access cumbersome.

From that point on, Fasan says, all new materials were catalogued in machine-readable form—that is, encoded so computers could record and print or display the information electronically.

Technology did not then exist that would allow patrons online computer access to the catalogue, catalogues will be online, says assistant library commissioner Emelia Shroeder, head of the city’s central libraries.

Many librarians disagree with these trends, arguing they will diminish the public’s love for the search for information. “The debate needs to focus on whether a city needs a large central research library,” Rodger says. “Certainly a city the size of Chicago should be paying attention to what people are using in their library and how to serve them, not only what they want to be processed in.”

Some libraries are being forced to cut back, with more people reading, but it is not enough. “Some libraries are slogging toward the future, and others are running toward it, others are ignoring it altogether,” says Rodger, of the Public Library Association.

The debate needs to focus on whether a city needs a large central research facility,” Rodger says. “Certainly a city the size of Chicago should be paying attention to what people are using in their library and how to serve them, not only what building it’s in.”