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John Bhagwandin

Grand Concourse branch, New York Public Library

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**A USER STUDY OF THE HUNTER COLLEGE LIBRARY
ONLINE CATALOG SYSTEM**

by

John Bhagwandin

HUNTER COLLEGE LIBRARY: BACKGROUND

In the early 1970's the Hunter College Library administration embarked on a plan of putting together a fully integrated automated library system by the early 1980's. The actual automative process began in 1973 with the installation of a CLSI acquisitions system which soon became obsolete. In 1974 the OCLC bibliographic system was installed to handle both the cataloging and acquisitions processes.

By Spring 1983, with many of its records already in a machine-readable data base, the library administration proceeded to convert the remaining pre-1974 records to machine-readable form as a prerequisite to achieving full automation. The resulting data base, as of January 1985, consisted of 90 percent of the entire holdings of the library, the exception being 25,000 volumes currently undergoing retrospective conversion from the Dewey Decimal System to the Library of Congress System.

In the Summer of 1983, the library administration contracted for and had installed hardware and software from CLSI systems incorporating an online public access catalog as well as circulation control. The card catalog was completely abandoned except for the Dewey holdings. In 1984 the acquisitions and reserve book room modules were added to the system making it possible to track through the online catalog materials on order and materials placed on reserve.

THE ONLINE CATALOG OPERATION

The online catalog was first made available to the public in September 1983. Currently, the main Hunter Library has fourteen public access terminals located next to the Reference Division and nine additional public access terminals, one on each floor. The auxiliary branches, the Health Professions Library and the School of Social Work Library each have two public access terminals.

The type of terminal chosen is the touch-panel system. A touch-panel terminal allows a patron to interact with the computer simply by touching commands on the

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John Bhagwandin is a reference librarian at the Grand Concourse branch, New York Public Library.

2 URBAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN

screen rather than typing in instructions on a keyboard. Although using the touch-panel terminal is a simple three-step process, searching by AUTHOR, TITLE or SUBJECT, the library has provided ample training sessions, instructional guides, and user manuals to facilitate and acquaint patrons with the system.

THE USER'S QUESTIONNAIRE¹

For this study, which was conducted only at the main library, a three-part questionnaire was developed to cover most of the pertinent aspects associated with interaction between the user and the terminal.

The introductory page of the user questionnaire outlines the purpose and relevancy of the study. Part one focuses mainly on the user's background, while part two stresses the user's initial reaction in using the system. Part three concentrates on the actual online bibliographic searching process. In addition, a portion of the questionnaire is devoted to the user's comments.

THE ONLINE CATALOG SURVEY

During the Fall semester of 1984 over a three-week period (the week before mid-term examinations, the week of mid-term examinations, and the week after mid-term examinations), 111 questionnaires were distributed to patrons using the online catalog. The questionnaires were distributed Mondays through Thursdays at 10:00 am., 2:00 pm., and 6:00 pm. daily so as to achieve a good sampling of patrons and ensuring a broad spectrum of user feedback. Of the 111 questionnaires distributed, a total of 105 were returned, a 94.50 percent response rate.

Data gathered from each of the questionnaires were streamlined, tabulated, categorized, and arranged under the following ten headings:

1. Approval rating of system by patron's academic status;
2. Approval rating of system by patron's age group;
3. How often patrons have utilized the system;
4. Amount of relevant citations found by patrons;
5. Whether there are enough terminals at any given time for patrons to use;
6. Time it took patrons to learn to use the system;
7. Level of difficulty involved in using the system;
8. Whether the letters and numbers on the terminal screen are easy to read;
9. Rate at which the computer responds to the patron's touch; and,

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¹
See pages 9-13

HUNTER COLLEGE ONLINE CATALOG SYSTEM 3

10. Patron's preference: the card catalog or the online catalog.
A special category was created to cover the comments made by patrons.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

A statistical breakdown of the data for each of the above mentioned categories has been compiled, and an analysis of the data in the form of tables for each category is presented in the following pages.

TABLE 1

Approval rating by patron's academic status.

STATUS	Numbers of Responses (N=105)	Number Approving	Percent Approval	Percent Disapproval
Undergrad	52	52	100.00	--
Grad	21	20	95.23	4.77
Faculty	16	15	93.75	6.25
Staff	12	11	91.76	8.33
Alumni	04	03	75.00	25.00

All status-groups included in this study have given their overwhelming approval of the online catalog system.

TABLE 2

Approval rating by patron's age group.

Age Group	Number of Responses (N=105)	Number Approving	Percent Approval	Percent Disapproval
16-19	16	16	100.00	--
20-25	29	29	100.00	--
26-29	22	21	95.45	4.55
30-39	14	14	100.00	--
40-49	10	09	90.00	10.00
50-59	08	08	100.00	--
60-70	04	03	75.00	25.00
Over 70	02	01	50.00	50.00

All age-groups included in this survey have given their overwhelming approval of the online catalog system.

4 URBAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN

TABLE 3

How often patrons have used the online catalog

Number of Times	Number of Responses (N=105)	Percent of Responses
Every day	35	33.33
Twice-a-week	40	38.10
Every week	18	17.14
Every two weeks	8	7.62
Every month	4	3.81
Other	--	--

71.43% of the participants in this survey have used the online catalog everyday or twice a week.

TABLE 4

Relevant citations found by patrons

Number of Relevant citations	Number of Responses (N=105)	Percent of Responses
More than needed	42	40.00
Adequate	51	48.57
Some	11	10.48
None	01	.95

88.57% of the participants in this survey have found more citations than needed or an adequate number of citations using the online catalog system.

TABLE 5

Are there enough terminals at any given time for patrons to use?

	Number of Responses (N=105)	Percent of Responses

HUNTER COLLEGE ONLINE CATALOG SYSTEM 5

Yes	31	29.52
No	74	70.48

Even though a majority of participants have stressed the necessity for more terminals, the above figures must be viewed in light of the survey being conducted during peak-usage hours.

TABLE 6

Time taken to learn use of the online catalog.

TIME	Number of Responses (N=105)	Percent of Responses
15 minutes or less	77	73.33
Approximately 30 minutes	21	20.00
Approximately 1 hour	5	4.76
Approximately 1 day	2	1.91
More than one day	--	--

93.33% of the participants in the survey have taken 30 minutes or less to learn to use the online catalog, stressing the simplicity of the system.

TABLE 7

Level of Difficulty in using the online catalog.

	Number of Responses (N=105)	Percent of Responses
Very easy	75	71.43
Somewhat easy	26	24.76
Somewhat difficult	3	2.86
Very difficult	1	.95

96.19% of the participants in this survey have found the online catalog system very easy to somewhat easy to use.

6 URBAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN

TABLE 8

Are letters and numbers on terminal screen easy to read?

	Number of Responses (N=105)	Percent of Responses
Yes	91	86.67
No	14	13.33

13.33% of the participants felt that the letters and numbers on the terminal screen were either too small or too large or that the brightness of the terminal screen needed adjustment.

TABLE 9

Computer response rate

	Number of Responses (N=105)	Percent of Responses
Too fast	03	2.85
Somewhat fast	09	8.58
Just right	64	60.95
Somewhat slow	18	17.14
Too slow	11	10.48

While a majority of the participants indicated that the response rate of the computer was just right, most of those who dissented felt that the response rate of the system was somewhat slow.

HUNTER COLLEGE ONLINE CATALOG SYSTEM 7

TABLE 10

Patron's preference: card catalog or online catalog.

	Number of Responses (N=105)	Percent of Responses
Card Catalog	04	3.81
Online Catalog	101	96.19

REVIEW OF COMMENTS

Only 39 percent of the participants in this study made comments of one form or another. The comments made proved to be quite interesting and informative and may be of some use to the Hunter College library administration.

The overwhelming majority of undergraduates indicated that the online catalog system in its present format was excellent and should remain the way it is. They proposed that more terminals be installed to accommodate all students during peak usage times; and furthermore, they said that the fingerprints on the touch-terminal screens should be cleaned more often.

The single recurring theme expressed by graduate students, even though they had stated their approval of the system, was the idea of making some sort of enhancement to the online catalog whereby Boolean searching would become possible.

Comments by members of the faculty have been basically twofold. First, several faculty members expressed their dismay over the exclusion of the sizeable Dewey collection from the online catalog data base. Secondly, many expressed the idea of having public access terminals placed campus-wide in all the academic departments.

The comments of a few patrons in the over-sixty age group revealed that they did not disapprove of the online catalog itself, but that they had reservations about the changes that its introduction had brought about. One of these changes is the necessity to retrieve materials from

8 URBAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN

a nine-floor facility, rather than have the items paged as was the case before the introduction of the online catalog.

OVERALL EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

The overall results of the online catalog survey indicate that the patrons strongly approve of the system and that the chances of a return to the traditional card catalog are remote. Some of the outstanding features of the online catalog system, highlighted in this survey, are:

- a. easy access to records in data base -- searching by author, title and subject by simply touching the terminal screen;
- b. need for limited training -- takes an average of fifteen minutes to learn to use the system;
- c. rapid retrieval of records -- takes approximately forty seconds to locate a given record;
- d. current status of an item -- indicating whether an item is on the shelf, in circulation, at the bindery, or on hold;
- e. current location of an item -- in reference, in education, in special collections, in government documents, or on reserve; and,
- f. convenience factor -- sitting comfortably in front of a terminal, not having to move from one card catalog drawer to the next, and being able to search and retrieve records from the entire holdings of the library.

Some aspects of the online catalog system that patrons found unsatisfactory were the lack of an adequate number of terminals during peak-usage times, such as during the midterm and final examination periods, and the exclusion of the Dewey collection from the data base.

Finally, in regard to various recommendations concerning improving and enhancing the online catalog system, it should be noted that the Hunter College Library administration has plans which include the installation of public access terminals that will introduce Boolean searching operations hooked up to the library's data base on a campus-wide scale.

HUNTER COLLEGE ONLINE CATALOG SYSTEM 9

APPENDIX I

THE ONLINE CATALOG: USER QUESTIONNAIRE

Your response to this study will help to focus on the concerns and problems of end user searching as well as to the good features of the service -- the ultimate goal in mind being to maximize the successful searching process.

PART ONE: BACKGROUND INFORMATION---INSTRUCTIONS: CHECK ONE ONLY. [✓].

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a. I am:

Male.....[   ]
 Female.....[   ]

---

b. My current academic status is:

Student.....[   ]
 Faculty.....[   ]
 Staff.....[   ]
 Graduate.....[   ]
 Other.....[   ]

---

c. My age group is:

Under 16.....[   ]
 16 - 19.....[   ]
 20 - 25.....[   ]
 26 - 29.....[   ]
 30 - 39.....[   ]
 40 - 49.....[   ]
 50 - 59.....[   ]
 60 - 70.....[   ]
 Over 70.....[   ]

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d. I come to this library:

Daily.....[   ]
 Weekly.....[   ]
 Bi-monthly.....[   ]
 This is my first time.....[   ]

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10 URBAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN

e. I use the online catalog:

On every visit.....[ ]
 On almost every visit.....[ ]
 Occasionally.....[ ]
 Rarely.....[ ]
 Never.....[ ]

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f. I learned to use the online catalog:

From a friend.....[ ]
 From the library staff.....[ ]
 From using printed instructions.....[ ]
 From an orientation session.....[ ]
 Other.....[ ]

---

g. My main field of study is:

Arts and Humanities.....[ ]
 Social Sciences.....[ ]
 Education.....[ ]
 Business/Management.....[ ]
 Physical/Biological Sciences.....[ ]
 Medical/Health Sciences.....[ ]
 Major not declared.....[ ]
 Other.....[ ]

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h. Have you ever used an online catalog system
 from another institution?

Yes.....[ ]
 No.....[ ]
 If yes, where.....

PART TWO: USING THE ONLINE CATALOG---INSTRUCTIONS:
 CHECK ONE ONLY. [✓]

---

a. (FIRST TIME USER ONLY)

I have not used the online catalog up to now
 because:

I do not like computers.....[ ]
 I had no time to learn to use it.....[ ]
 I did not take any training sessions.....[ ]
 The terminals were always in use.....[ ]
 I am an infrequent user of the library...[ ]
 I have felt no need for it.....[ ]

HUNTER COLLEGE ONLINE CATALOG SYSTEM 11

b. How much time did it take you to learn to use the online catalog?

15 minutes or less.....[ ]
 Approximately 30 minutes.....[ ]
 Approximately 1 hour.....[ ]
 Approximately 1/2 day.....[ ]
 Approximately 1 day.....[ ]
 More than one day.....[ ]
 If more than one day, how long.....

---

c. How difficult or easy was it for you to learn to use the online catalog?

Very difficult.....[ ]
 Somewhat difficult.....[ ]
 Somewhat easy.....[ ]
 Very easy.....[ ]

---

d. Are there enough terminals at any given time for students to use?

Yes.....[ ]
 No.....[ ]

---

e. Are letters and numbers on the computer screen easy to read?

Yes.....[ ]
 No.....[ ]

---

f. The rate at which the computer responds to your touch is:

Too fast.....[ ]
 Somewhat fast.....[ ]
 Just right.....[ ]
 Somewhat slow.....[ ]
 Too slow.....[ ]

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g. If given the choice, which do you prefer?

The card catalog.....[ ]
 The online catalog.....[ ]

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12 URBAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN

Comments:

PART THREE: ONLINE BIBLIOGRAPHIC SEARCHING
CHECK APPROPRIATE BOX OR BOXES. [✓].

a. I need information for:

A course paper or report.....[ ]
A thesis or dissertation.....[ ]
Teaching or planning a course.....[ ]
Personal interest.....[ ]
Other.....[ ]

b. I searched for what I wanted by:

Complete author's name.....[ ]
Part of author's name.....[ ]
Complete title.....[ ]
Part of title.....[ ]
Subject.....[ ]

c. In the online catalog search I found:

More than what I was looking for.....[ ]
All that I was looking for.....[ ]
Some of what I was looking for.....[ ]
Nothing that I was looking for.....[ ]

d. I got help in doing the online search from:

Printed materials.....[ ]
Instructions on the terminal screen.....[ ]
Library staff.....[ ]
A student.....[ ]
I did not get help.....[ ]
Other.....[ ]

HUNTER COLLEGE ONLINE CATALOG SYSTEM 13

e. In relation to what I was looking for, the online search was:

Very satisfactory.....[ ]
Somewhat satisfactory.....[ ]
Somewhat unsatisfactory.....[ ]
Very unsatisfactory.....[ ]

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f. My general attitude toward the online catalog is:

Very favorable.....[ ]
Somewhat favorable.....[ ]
Somewhat unfavorable.....[ ]
Very unfavorable.....[ ]

---

g. Compared to the card catalog, the online catalog is:

Better.....[ ]
About the same.....[ ]
Worse.....[ ]
Cannot decide.....[ ]

---

h. List some online catalog service improvements that you would like the library to make:

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY OF THE ONLINE CATALOG.

14 URBAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN

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