The published literature during the period 1998 to 2001 addressed three main themes:

- Incorporating electronic resources into the OPAC
- Effectiveness of Web-based OPACs
- Decline of the OPAC

**Incorporating Electronic Resources in the OPAC**

The late 1990s brought to libraries Web-based OPACs. Commonly referred to as “Webpacs,” these second generation online catalogs were the topic of many papers written during this period. How to include records for online resources in Webpacs was an especially popular topic. Porter and Bayard (1999) describe Notre Dame’s Web site selection and cataloging process and offers sound guidelines that other libraries can adopt. More recently, Beam and Copeland (2001) provide a very detailed overview of the Prospector system, the union catalog of the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries. Their paper addresses the challenges inherent in maintaining URLs in OPACs when consortia share a catalog. Hughes (2001) takes a slightly different approach in her work, discussing some of the value-added features of Web-OPACs. These include book jacket images and author biographies—features made possible through the advent and employ of the MARC 856 linking field. Hughes demonstrates the importance users place on the OPAC and how libraries must exert effort to keep the OPAC a viable tool in the Internet age.

**Effectiveness of Web-based OPACS**

An area receiving much attention during this period was effectiveness of Webpacs. A number of well-documented studies were published, particularly Feldman (1999) and Thomas (2001). Feldman, president of a usability testing company, documents a prescription for such testing. She notes that often usability is an after-thought in the design process. She stresses the importance of iterative testing, looking at issues such as user-friendliness, navigation, responsiveness of the system, use of standards, and effectiveness of help screens. Also of note is her advice that the product’s developers not be involved in the testing. Thomas looks specifically at usability of OPACs. He conducts a study with first-year students to determine how well bibliographic records organize information. He discovers that users consider only a few fields important. He argues that OPACs are not just information storage and retrieval systems, but presentation systems, and as such, significant attention should be given to their layouts. Babu and O’Brien (2000) offer an overview of six Web-OPACs. They compare the Web interfaces of Talis, INNOPAC, WebCat, Voyager, GeoWeb, and Aleph. They develop a checklist of features and compare the tested Webpacs against it. They recommend that Web-OPACs offer sophisticated and effective searching capabilities, along with the compulsory ability to link to internal and external resources. In similar fashion, Cherry (1998) reviews ten Web-OPACs, looking specifically at full bibliographic displays. She ranks the systems’ use of field labels, help screens, and screen layout. Findings reveal a number of weaknesses, including lack of online help, options not listed at both the top and bottom of screens, and failure to provide links from authors and subjects. Chisman, Diller, and Walbridge (1999) describe usability tests at the Washington State University Libraries. Their study reveals how little users understand or care about serials, limiting features, and cross-references. Ortiz-Repiso and Moscoso (1999) contend that the perpetuation of traditional practices and structures inhibits Web OPACs from being truly innovative tools. They base their argument on the persistence of cataloging terminology such as main entry and added author in online catalogs, and the time it takes to make changes to the MARC format.
Decline of the OPAC

Much recent literature announces the death of the catalog. It is argued that the Internet and users’ desire for full-text resources make the catalog a little-used, cumbersome resource—no longer the chief resource for information discovery. Since users are going first, and perhaps only, to the Web to satisfy their research needs, Antelman (1999) wonders why we should “attempt to accommodate the[se] new resources in the old gateway?” She argues convincingly that the universe of materials libraries are now faced with is much larger and more fluid than ever before. Although MARC accommodates book descriptions well, it is not an ideal format for capturing details about Web objects. She concludes by contending that a “good enough” culture is emerging, fueled by “instant information gratification.” Antelman’s contentions are convincing. Her article gave birth to an entire issue of Library Computing devoted to the utility and future of the online catalog. A couple of pieces from this special issue, edited by Antelman, compare the usability of Web lists versus the OPAC. Anderson (1999) discusses the practice of maintaining dual systems to expose e-journals to patrons. She comments how it is not unlike the separate lists librarians created to advertise videos and compact discs when these formats first appeared. She describes Virginia Commonwealth University’s utilization of e-journal lists to create MARC records for their catalog. Chrzastowski (1999) also comments on the efforts needed to maintain Web lists and bibliographic records for e-journals. She details the pros and cons of each approach. One advantage the OPAC has is familiarity. Users have experience with it. Web lists, on the other hand, require less effort to use. Patrons can browse and click, a less time-consuming task than searching an OPAC one record at a time. It is this “principle of least effort,” she contends, that will continue to guide practices in this area. Seys (1999) offers an appropriate metaphor, that of the OPAC as hammer. She argues that not every resource, especially Web resources, is a nail. Moreover, she contends that current cataloging rules, despite efforts to the contrary, still do not adequately accommodate online resources. This contention results from cataloging being based on an assumption of permanence, a quality practically nonexistent on the Web. Finally, Baruth (2000) questions whether search engines will make quality services like OCLC’s Cooperative Online Resource Catalog obsolete. She maintains that federated search systems hold the greatest promise for the future.

Works Cited

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