The Future of the Integrated Library System?

Walter Nelson

RAND Corporation

walternelson.com

Prognostication

- I don't know the future of the ILS – but that won't stop me from making predictions
- **I predict:** If we continue with the status quo, it has no future
- **I predict:** If we free the ILS from its current constraints it will be free to evolve and, perhaps, survive

The OPAC as Destination

- It has a distinct identity and whimsical name

- It is the digital equivalent of the card catalog room

- Your customers must go to the information, the information does not go to the customers

The Library as Place

- A destination catalog is tied to a library place
- The library place is where the physical books and paper journals live
- Libraries aren't the places they used to be

OPACs Are Good at Books

- Catalog records are the digital analog of catalog cards
- Catalogs are really good at physical monographs
- Not so good at Journals (*people want articles, especially full text, not issues*)
- Not so good at digital content
- Most research content now resides outside the ILS – though much is imported as an afterthought
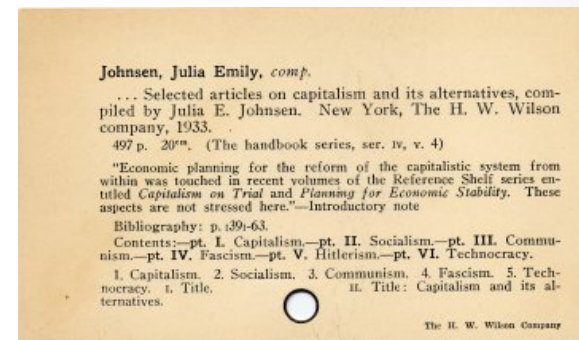
Integrated? Library System

- ILS integrates with itself
- Inward facing integration is an artifact of the pre-internet days
- REAL integration is the ability to integrate OUTSIDE the ILS
  - The rest of the library/enterprise website
  - Other data sources, aggregators and discovery tools
  - HR & Accounting/Purchasing systems
  - Communication & Feedback
  - Social networking
- Much has been done, but not nearly enough

The Fallacy of Integration

- ILS contains multiple systems (purchasing, circulation, serials, search etc.) linked with a catalog

- Each piece has very different requirements

- None is "best of breed"

- A system that tries to do everything will do nothing really well
  - Example: Sharepoint

And now I'd like to ask a few questions

User Experience

- Do your customers (or your own staff) prefer OPAC search to Google etc.?

- Does the design of your OPAC meet current UX standards? Can it be easily modified as standards in your organization evolve?
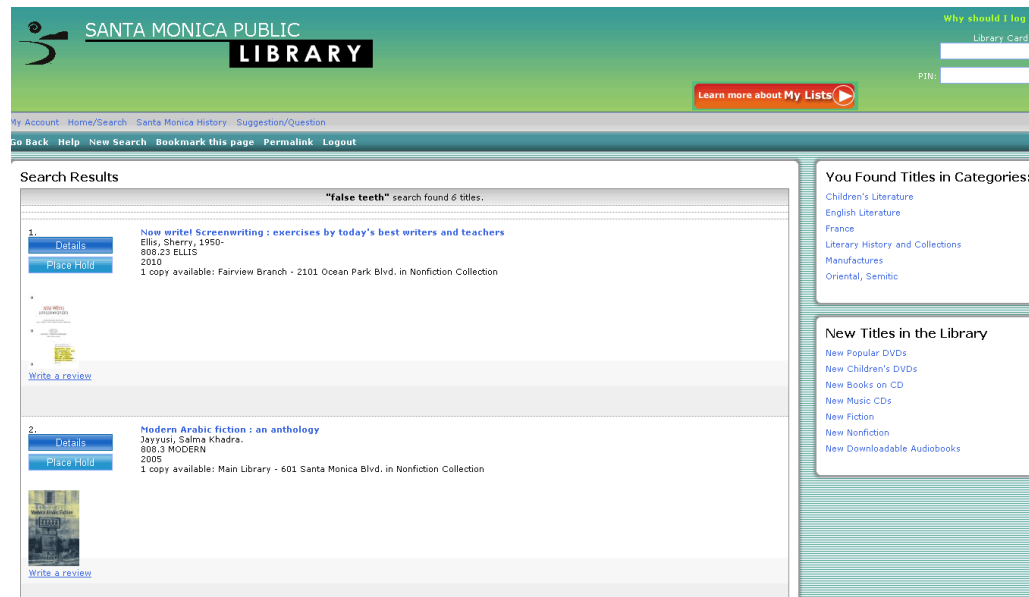
The "Go To" System?

- Is the OPAC the first place your customers look?
- Is it the first place your own staff look?
- When presented with a new Knowledge Management project, is the ILS the best tool for the job?
  - Does it even talk to the best tool for the job?

Integration

- Does your OPAC look and feel anything like your website?
- Does content in your ILS display on your website (do you enter info about one thing in multiple places)?
- Do you use modules like serials and acquisition as intended, or do you use work-arounds
- Does your ILS interact well with systems outside your ILS?

Relevance?

- Is your OPAC increasing or decreasing in relevance to your users?

- Is the cost of the ILS a significant part of your budget?

- Can you foresee a future where the cost of the ILS exceeds its relevance?

- Might you be there already?

  - If it did more useful stuff, might it be easier to justify the cost?

Return on Investment

- Does your ILS address your real needs?

- If it continues to do what it does, and does not do something else, is it an appropriate use of your limited budget?

- What else could you do with the money you spend on your ILS?

Hope?

What the Catalog is Good At

- "Clean" data
- Consistent standards
- If you are doing it right, it's where the good data live
- Good catalogers = good data
  - HOWEVER, data standards must evolve to fit current information needs (*topic for another day*)

An Instructive Example

- RAND Corp needed metadata about RAND publications
- Content for internet and intranet sites
- Publications Dept data was messy and inconsistent
- Attempts to use it failed

The Library to the Rescue

- For many years, the Library had been cleaning up Pubs records to incorporate them into the catalog

- Consistent standards, taxonomy, authors etc.

- Data extracted (with great difficulty) from ILS and used to populate websites

- Success!

The Moral of this Story

- The information was in the ILS, but was useless hidden in there
  - We could not say "just search the OPAC"
- It was only useful when exported
  - Export and repurposing required extensive programming and multiple skill sets
- It was valuable because it was CLEAN data, conforming to consistent LIBRARY standards
- *PS: A plan to expand this model to a wider range of ILS content was abandoned due to resource constraints*

The Fundamental Essence
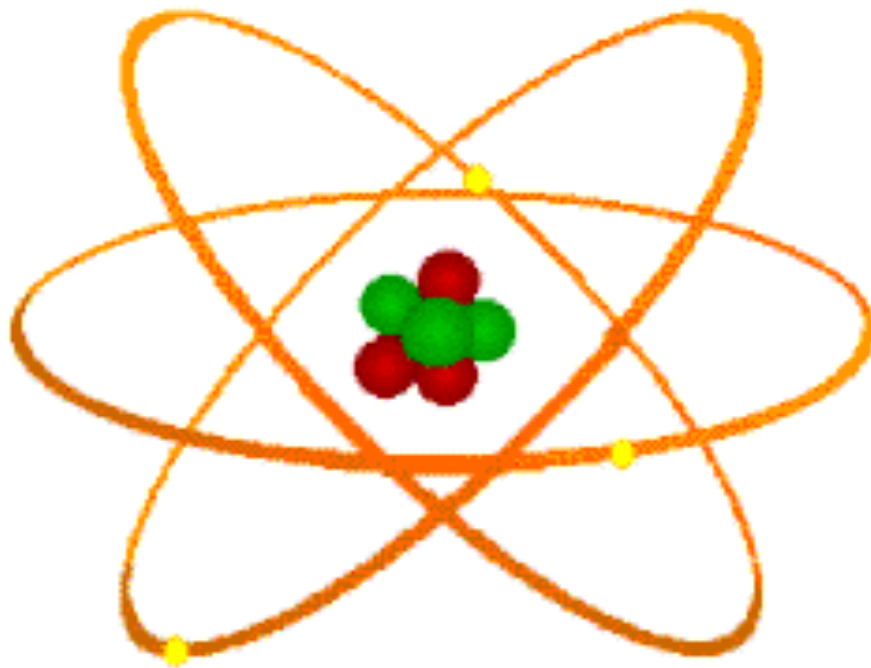
Data is Data

- Your OPAC is a database-driven website
- Nearly all major websites are these days
- Content and format are separated
- The mechanical processes are identical
  - Content resides in data tables
  - Queries cause content to be assembled
  - Stylesheets and "views" define how content will be displayed
- Differences between OPACs and other websites are deliberate design choices

Enter One, Display Many

- In a database driven website, you enter data in one place and it displays in as many places, and in as many ways as you define
- Same infrastructure can support:
  - Bibliographic records
  - Regular old web pages
  - Mobile devices
  - Multi-media
  - RSS Feeds (static & dynamic)
  - XML and other easily shared data extracts

My List of Demands

Set My Data Free!

- Problem: Exquisitely crafted data is trapped in an obscure and ignored corner of the web

- Solution: Present data in multiple ways in multiple places and in flexible formats. Share your data easily and blend it seamlessly with discovery and others' shared data. Let it go where it needs to go.

    - Corollary: Focus on strong standards and consistent quality. This is essential for justifying the very existence of the "data management" aspect of your library

Set My Interface Free!

- Problem: OPAC designers are never as good at interface design as the current state of the art
  - Interface improvements are "upgrades", in the queue with everything else the vendors do
- Solution: Open it up to let your interface be tinkered with by lots of different people who are better at it than you
  - Blend OPAC and website – consistent look and feel
  - Pages more "Web 2.0" compatible

Set My Search Free!

- Problem: OPAC search lacks the flexibility and utility to meet numerous and varied needs and is perceived as inferior to Google and other tools

- Solution: Facilitate searching the same data with a variety of tools in a variety of ways, and internal and internet search engines

  - Make the search "real time" and dynamic, not "data dumps"

The REAL Competition

I predict: Over the next few years, discovery and content management systems will replace "traditional" integrated library systems

ILS Vendors: Your real competition is not other ILS vendors, it's discovery, CMS and innovative mash-ups

Example: Drupal

- Widely used Open Source CMS
- Multiple authors for varied and rich web content
- MARC import, export and display
- XML import and export tools
- Full text (inside digital documents) and faceted search
  - Also search engine and web 2.0 friendly
- One tool manages your whole web presence
- Features like Circulation, Acquisition and Journal management are primitive compared to an ILS
  - The Question: are those additional features worth $n thousand a year?

A Glimpse of the Future

ILS Becomes a CMS

- ILS becomes the Library's entire website (and a good website to boot)
- Flexible metadata templates for non-traditional content
- Content open to external search
- One system creates all types of web content
- Focus on external integration (data feeds, web search, vendor databases, federated search, accounting, HR etc.) not inward facing integration
- Make data sharing easy
  - If the ILS can't make the jump to becoming a CMS – then it can at least make it easy to share data with the CMS and other systems

Library Content Management

- Most organizations need effective content/knowledge management and many haven't found it yet

- If the ILS becomes a real Content Management System, then libraries can leverage that to become viable competitors in the enterprise information marketplace

- If it doesn't, then libraries should probably ditch the ILS and hitch their cart to a better mule

Alternative Futures

- ILS evolves into a repository of excellent, well-dispersed data
- ILS integrates with discovery and CMS
- Catalogers evolve into taxonomy metadata mavens
- "Library" remains a viable organizing principle, with reference and cataloging still in symbiotic relationship
- OR
  - ILS fades away
  - Catalogers disperse to non-library data management operations
  - Reference librarians disperse to scattered research activities
  - "Library" becomes quaint historical artifact
- Perhaps the ILS is the glue that holds the family together

Why is the ILS That Way?

- Vendors give us what we ask for
- We, as a species, are stuck in obsolete mindsets and are asking for the wrong things
- If we don't wake up and start demanding things that are relevant, we and the vendors will meet the same sorry fate

Vendors: Please Make it Easy

- All of this is possible (and being done) now
- We just need to hack your system
  - All that requires is tremendous resources and vast technical expertise
- SAAS/"Cloud" installations are harder to hack
- Provide flexible, easy to use CMS and data integration tools "out of the box" or the risk the Geek Gap
  - Libraries with coders & API programmers evolve and survive
  - Understaffed and poorly supported libraries stagnate and die
- Will the geeks decide they don't need you?

The Way Ahead

- We need to nurture and emphasize our unique skills in organizing and describing every kind of information
  - Take ownership of the "good data"!
- We need to embrace and exploit new ways of presenting and sharing information
- Our discipline needs to encompass database and CMS design and management (librarians need to be more "techie")
- ILS originated data needs to spread easily outside the OPAC
- The ILS needs to become a tool that facilitates all of this
- If it doesn't, we need to find something that does

Where Will This Lead?

- No one really knows
- Information and understanding are flowing in many new directions
- To survive, the ILS/OPAC must open up, join in the flow, participate and evolve