SUSAN ROMAN
Executive Director
Association for Library Service to Children
American Library Association

Online Catalogs and Specialized Clientele: Children and Youth

Editor's Note: At the time she delivered this paper, Susan Roman was Head, Youth Services, Northbrook Public Library, Northbrook, Illinois. Her examples are from that public library.

"Whether we like it or not, the child today is far more sophisticated, independent, and knowledgeable than his peers of a generation ago. Have most children's librarians recognized and accepted this fact? I think not."¹ This statement by Elizabeth Gross Kilpatrick in discussing the future of library service to children, could be made stronger. Those who set policy—library managers and trustees—often fail to recognize that children of today are more sophisticated than children of a generation ago. And what is most disturbing is the statement that was quoted was made in 1968 and we still have not accepted it. What implications can be drawn and how can we apply them to online catalogs?

Although online catalogs have been in use for only a few years, they have had great implications in library service for all users. The broad applications of library automation are familiar to many librarians, but it is time to focus on smaller segments of the population within the library market. The amount of information available is staggering, and one of the items on the library agenda for the eighties is who should have access to this information.

Likewise, the amount of information about library holdings that is accessible via online catalogs has increased. In support of the American Library Association's Bill of Rights, we must ensure that youngsters have equal access to online catalog information. Dorothy Broderick, the well-known advocate for youth, states that because of online capabilities a huge
supersystem of information exists in the library today. The problem is that for many librarians the only people "deserving" access to that supermarket are adults.2

Librarians must address the needs of youngsters in the planning process. As a clientele, young people cannot always articulate their felt or unfelt needs, or they may not even be called upon to express their concerns. However, children have legitimate needs. In addition, the youngsters of today will soon be college students and workers-in-training and, later, adult users. Today's youth will be the ones voting for library legislation and supporting our libraries. Children and youth are our future. Therefore, librarians' role as advocates for youth must be exercised, and librarians in all library departments, in all kinds of work in public and academic libraries, need to consider services to children and youth when setting library policies and user training programs.

A case in point is the Northbrook (Illinois) Public Library. Always a forward-thinking institution in terms of library technology, the library was in the first library consortium in the country to have an online circulation system. And, as advances were made, the librarians at Northbrook worked toward the time that librarians and patrons would be using online catalogs. I took it for granted there would be catalogs in each of the departments. It was not until I was asked to appear before our library board to explain why there should be online catalogs in the youth services department that I realized that was not a safe assumption.

Literature Search

Library literature had little to offer in the way of articles dealing with youth and online catalogs. However, other relevant and interesting information was uncovered that demonstrated the importance of online catalogs. This broad-based reading revealed much, including some material of direct relevance for my presentation. Michael Gorman wrote that the online catalog will be the greatest symbol of change, the greatest instrument of change, and the greatest result of the revolution in libraries of the recent years.3

A research finding indicated that 94 percent of all library users prefer online to card catalogs.4 How could we make use of this information in planning at Northbrook? What about our community; would our users feel the same way? What were the implications for staff in an already very busy department with a large collection of materials and a full service of programs?
Initial Staff Involvement

Each staff member in youth services was asked to discuss and decide whether we wanted, or needed, online catalogs for youth and why online catalogs would be better than card catalogs. We brainstormed and collected all of the reasons why we should go online as well as the drawbacks we could envision. By the time I was scheduled to report to the library board, we had come up with user benefits and staff/library benefits. Staff benefits became increasingly important because we began to realize the amount of time we would need to educate our users to the new online catalog. Space planning also became an issue. Where should we put the new terminals? Additionally, publicity via newsletters, handouts, and bookmarks was discussed.

Northbrook Public Library had six card catalogs for the public: (1) adult author/title, (2) adult subject, (3) children’s author/title, (4) children’s subject, (5) adult music, and (6) children’s music catalogs. In addition, the physical arrangement of the library allows for all public services to be on one floor. However, public services areas are peripheral to a central core of library offices. This is important because it is not easy to see into another department except at corners, and using a different catalog takes the user around the building. Another fact is the library belongs to a cluster with twenty-three other libraries giving us a large database.

User Benefits

The online catalog offers direct user inquiry and increased self-help. Because there is access to more information than in the card catalog (e.g., the number of copies and all formats), the librarians need to assume their role as teachers of library skills to make users more independent.

Usually a user only wants to use one catalog where all formats are available. If a patron does not find what he or she wants in one search, the patron usually assumes the library does not have it. Users will not persevere in the same way as librarians who are trained to explore all possibilities. Many online circulation systems provide holdings and location information and sophisticated users know it. They want to get at the information directly. On many occasions users ask reference librarians for circulation information by asking to use reference desk terminals—i.e., patrons are very much aware of the amount of information that is available.

In an online catalog, the patrons can see when an item is due back and can make a decision whether to reserve the material, request an interlibrary loan, or try another library directly. They may need the material quickly and waiting for the due date may take too long.
If the local library does not own a title, patrons can see what other library has it and pursue it on their own or through interlibrary loan. Indeed, the fact that most of the twenty-three libraries in the service cluster do not own a particular title also provides information. One very intelligent parent checked for a book that was suggested by a friend. When she found that only two libraries owned the title she became doubtful of its worth. It provided an opportunity to give reader's advisory service.

Northbrook's juvenile collection of paperbacks and young adult paperbacks are listed only in the computer. Patrons cannot look them up any other way. This decision was made about five years ago when we initiated a new young adult paperback collection. Where would we file the cards? The idea of a separate young adult collection of titles would be defeated if we filed the cards in the children's catalog, and the adult catalog was located in the adult reference department, far from those giving reader's advisory help to teens. Knowing that we were moving toward an online catalog, we made the decision to have the titles available only online.

Research shows that patrons want many terminals in convenient locations. Young children, more often than not, come with parents who may want materials of their own. The adults can check out their books without having to leave children alone while going to other parts of the library in search of the appropriate card catalog.

The call numbers or locators would be better for new materials than they were in the old card catalog because the online catalog afforded new capabilities. The expanded format provided notes on each search of titles, subject headings, joint authors, and illustrators, rather than limiting notes to main-entry searches.

More accurate and up-to-date information is available in the online catalog. In the card catalog there was a lag between the time the material went on the shelf and when the cards were filed. Additionally, no matter how careful we were in maintaining the catalog, there were filing errors.

Library/Staff Benefits

Each department filed cards in its catalogs and pulled flagged items and card sets for discarded items from its catalogs. Librarians and staff could have used that time to give increased service to patrons and to explore new areas of service. Not having to file and pull cards would result in direct cost savings.

With less time spent maintaining the catalog, librarians and staff could cover the public services areas more effectively when short-staffed. With the online catalog, staff in the children's department can place reserves or give patrons locations without leaving the department.
After my presentation to the board, one of the trustees asked an important question. Why would the youth services department need online catalogs since young children cannot read, spell, or type? I explained that those youngsters, either by virtue of age or ability, who could not use the online catalogs would not be able to use the card catalog either. Such youngsters are generally brought to the library by an adult or older child who helps them find materials. The same child who would need assistance to use the online catalog would need help in the card catalog. Our youth services department serves children from birth through eighth grade and also those interested in children and children's literature—i.e., users of all ages.

Another trustee questioned whether children could hurt the database by touching different keys or the screens. The online catalogs for the public have a limited use—title inquiry only. Users have no access to the item or patron entries nor the capability to change the database. Of course, the staff may have to clean the screens fairly often and reset the keyboard, but we can accommodate these needs.

After successfully presenting the request for online catalogs, we proceeded with staff education and anticipated questions and problems our users would encounter. We used the same instructions as the adult department planned to use in order to give uniform instruction within the library. Helping all library staff members learn about the catalog provided an opportunity to determine some of the questions the clientele would ask. We started with touch terminals in July 1984 and in February 1985 we got keyboard terminals. What height should the tables be for children? Should there be chairs next to the catalogs or not? Which terminals would users like best?

Research by Observation

When we installed the touch terminals we discovered a lock on the back panel. Since the staff needed access to the on/off switch, we left it unlocked. It did not take us long to discover that little, and not so little, hands were also reaching behind the terminals. Because many children are taught to boot up the programs on microcomputers by using the on/off switch, our users thought they could begin a new search that way.

Unfortunately, while reaching for the on/off switch, users hit fly-wheels and buttons thereby creating problems. It took us a short time to figure out why the configuration needed to be readjusted so often, and we decided that locking the back of the terminal reduced both patron and staff frustration.

Young people walk straight up to the terminals and begin to work on them. If the terminal does not work, then, and only then, do they read the
instructions. The adult department puts out stacks of instructions while the children's department replaces instructional brochures every few days or so. Adults stop and stare, but they generally do not willingly approach the terminals. The adults need to be encouraged to try. One woman said that she would continue to use the card catalog. Once the staff explained that new materials could only be found online she decided to try using the terminals.

Subject searches, so often necessary for school reports, take some time. Accordingly, at least one terminal at seated height is necessary. Also, a parent with a child in arms needs to sit while conducting a search.

More children are requesting interlibrary loans. Where once we used to suggest the interlibrary loan alternative, we find our sophisticated users initiate interlibrary loan requests after using the online catalogs.

Youngsters who have microcomputers at home want to know how soon we will have dial-up access to the online catalog. We give them an inch, and they want a mile!

Just as the staff is alert to helping someone who stands at the card catalog for a long time, we listen for the "beeps" of our new terminals and then try to offer assistance.

The touch terminal may be slow for some author/title searches, but it is really good for subject searches. Since the screen does not scroll, youngsters have more time to get information from the screen display. However, the next generation of keyboard terminals offers many more display alternatives that will help subject searches.

We find our users are attracted to a bright screen. We tried computers with differing screen intensities and found that the users preferred a brighter screen. The terminals with screen-saving capacity that shuts off the display after a certain period of time, are even less attractive to the user than the dull or bright screens. Apparently users are interested in the text on the screen, and they stop to read the information.

Once users see the capabilities and information available in online catalogs, they notice mistakes and question the staff closely about materials. Suddenly our mistakes are glaring us in the face! And users check to see if the mistakes have been corrected the next time they visit the library.

The staff has tried to be very encouraging about the capabilities of the online catalog. We use the online catalog to demonstrate library skills for visiting classroom groups, scout troops, etc. Because they have been involved from the beginning, working with the online catalog generally has been a positive experience for staff.

It is difficult to write good directions for using the catalog that will be helpful to both children and adults. We find that a one-to-one approach is best. But that is nothing new to librarians.
Because the library's entire collection is in one catalog, the staff has been able to save time previously spent doing tedious card catalog maintenance. As a result we have been able to spend more time with users. Youngsters who did not use the card catalog are eager to try the computer terminals. Those who routinely walked past the card catalog straight to our desk for help often try the online catalog first. Accuracy becomes very important in searching online. Our young-sters are encouraged to become better spellers.

Many youngsters had only viewed computers as game machines. The online catalog gives them an opportunity to see other possibilities for computers. As a result, basic computer literacy is reinforced for the users. More adults ask children's department staff for help. We place more adult reserves and requests from the children's department because patrons can use the catalogs in our department for their material needs as well.

Summary

Indeed, children seem to use the online catalog more quickly and to use it more often than adults. Children often show adults how to use the new technology. More often than not I have seen parents defer to their children when it involves the computer catalog. Children have few of the hangups that most adults have. Kilpatrick was right when she stated that children are more sophisticated, independent, and knowledgeable than children just a generation ago—especially when it involves computer technology in the library. Youngsters have a right to the advantages this technology offers. Therefore, it is in our best interest to ensure children's access to technology. Children's enthusiasm for the technology may help ease other users' and staff members' resistance, too.

REFERENCES