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• FEATURE •

The Response to “Building Earth’s Largest Library”

by **Steve Coffman**Director, FYI — *County of Los Angeles Public Library*

First, let me take this opportunity to thank all of you who read “Building Earth’s Largest Library: Driving into the Future” [*Searcher*, March 1999, <http://www.infoday.com/searcher/mar99/coffman.html>] and took the time and trouble to get back to me with your comments, questions, suggestions, criticism, and even offers to help set it up. The response has been truly overwhelming. As of this writing, I have received over 250 e-mails, listserv postings, letters, phone calls, and faxes in response to the article — and they are still coming in. That is by far the largest response I have ever received to any piece I have ever written — and I have written some pretty controversial pieces — and I think it clearly shows that something about the Earth’s Largest Library idea has struck a chord that resonates in the library world.

The vast majority of your responses have been positive, often enthusiastic. In fact, if it were up to many of you, we would start building the thing tomorrow; many of you only wanted to know how you could help. Well, nobody is building anything quite yet, but some opportunities may arise for those of you who would like to get involved to help refine the idea and draw out the plans.

Others of you, however, liked the concept in general, but had some questions or reservations as to how — or if — various pieces of it could actually work out. Others liked some parts of the proposal but not all. And a few of you just didn’t like the idea at all, or, among the more diplomatic, thought it impossible to implement. Many issues raised are legitimate and important ones. While I don’t have the space here to respond to every comment made, I would like to answer some of the more common objections and address critical issues.

The article took a pretty broad look at the library field; comments ranged over a wide spectrum of issues. Overall, the responses centered on four major subject areas: the catalog, collection development, ILL, and library cooperation/management. A miscellaneous category covers everything else.

The Miscellaneous Stuff

Several of you suggested that the comparison with Amazon wouldn’t work because Amazon wasn’t making any money, or that Amazon was a stock bubble that was about to burst, etc. To which I say, who cares? Libraries, in general, are not about making money, but about service. When we look to Amazon as an example, we should look at its great big, marvelous catalog that millions of its customers — many of them our customers — love. We should look at how it only costs Amazon about \$12.5 million to develop and operate that catalog and transaction system, while libraries collectively spend many times as much on our catalogs and circulation systems and get much less out of them. Now, librarians definitely have legitimate issues with how much it would cost to operate Earth’s Largest Library, but it should not matter to us if Amazon itself makes money

(particularly now that the company has begun diversifying into all sorts of products), unless, of course, we happen to own stock in it.

A new library school student (I'm not going to use names here, unless I have express permission ...you never know who's reading *Searcher*) wrote in to say that she thought "it was going to take a bit of a revolution for the public library to thrive" and that as a future school librarian, she hopes that children are not forgotten in the transition for "they must have the very best access to good food for their minds." I'm sure all of us who have worked in public and school libraries would heartily endorse those sentiments. Giving kids and their teachers access to a much broader selection of material than the typical school or public library can supply is part of the answer. However, in my experience I have found that students (including college undergrads) often need immediate access to material (with assignments due tomorrow) and cannot afford to wait even a day or two to have books delivered. So, if we want to make sure students do have access to good food for their minds, we will have to deliver a lot of that food electronically. Already a good deal of current, general-interest periodical literature has been converted to electronic format. Now books have begun to come around as a result of the various digital library initiatives. Some commercial firms, like NetLibrary and Wizeup.com, have jumped into the market. I think the future looks pretty promising for school kids and for the rest of us who demand instant gratification...if we could only find a way to pay for all this stuff. But maybe we have.

A good many responses and discussions focused on how we human beings might fit into this brave new world. Some objected to my suggestion that we could do without many of the staff we employ behind the circulation desk by relying more heavily on patron self-checkout, as Amazon does. One person outlined a hypothetical situation where a patron had seen a book on a television show of some sort, but only remembered that the author had red hair and that the book had a tree on the cover. She went on to suggest that if the patron were just "staring at a computer screen," they might never find that book, "but some unnecessary paraprofessional might just have seen that TV show, and remembered the title." Now, that seems to me like a great argument for having staff familiar with topics covered on the talk show circuit and with what goes on in the literary world in general, but if you have staff with that knowledge and expertise, it seems the very last thing you would want to do with them is stick them behind a circulation desk where they spend the better part of the day performing mind-numbing work on the off-chance somebody might ask them a question about a book they had seen on TV. Let's get those people out from behind the circulation desks and put them to use helping people on the floor and on the network where they belong and leave the menial labor for the machines. Good people are hard to find. We have an obligation to the community, the profession, and our employees to fully exploit all of the talent and knowledge they bring to us.

[If you want to find the books recommended by Oprah, just go to Amazon.com and I suspect you'll find them listed. (If not, they soon will be.) Click on each of the Oprah books and you'll pull up a picture of the book, including that tree.]

On one listserv, a whole big discussion erupted around the concept of "technophobia." Some thought that large numbers of patrons, particularly older patrons, are "technophobic" and would not want to use any computerized catalog to find and check out their books, while other patrons could not afford computers. As librarians, we have an obligation to serve everybody, whether they have or want to use a computer or not. Others responded to that argument by pointing to the fact that the old days of the card catalogs weren't so great either, that people often had a very difficult time using those as well, and that, in comparison with Amazon, we currently do not do a very good job of serving the increasing numbers of people that do own computers. I'm sure some validity exists on both sides of this issue, but I would suggest that the problem is temporary.

Older patrons afraid of computers are gradually dying off. (Hmm. Perhaps I could have phrased that better.) In

fact, some studies show that the older segment of our population constitutes one of the fastest growing segments of computer users. The price of computers and online access is dropping so fast, that Cisco Systems now estimates that by the year 2003, over 80 percent of all U.S. households will have Internet access at home. In the meanwhile, librarians can help everybody along by making sure that our catalogs are at least as intuitive, convenient, helpful, and easy-to-use as Amazon's. We should also make sure that we have well-organized buildings and collections with subjects clearly marked on the shelves in plain English, so that those who prefer to find their books by browsing can do so at least as easily as they can at a Barnes and Noble bookstore. Finally, let's make sure that we have lots of good customer service people on the floor (not behind the circulation desk) to assist those people who cannot find what they want by searching the catalog or browsing the collection.

Which brings us to the first major issue that many of you wanted to talk about.

Catalog and Circulation

About half of those who wrote in had something to say about the catalog and circulation system. What amazed me most in all the letters I received is the fact that almost none of you wanted to defend what we have now. Apparently a general consensus exists that current OPACs and circulation systems have only the most limited functionality (especially in comparison with systems like Amazon's), that both patrons and staff find them difficult to use, and that they cost way too much for the value received. In fact, one systems librarian in the midst of installing a new integrated system said she had gotten so furious with the company that she "wants to spit every time she sees one of the vendor reps." Another person wrote that the "biggest problem with the Earth's Largest Library idea was getting people to accept the demise of the catalog/automated systems industry." However, if your comments constitute any indication, you are clearly ready for a change. Apparently this area has a high enough animosity level that it might not be too hard to convince people to embrace a new model.

But while almost everybody wanted something new, some of you had concerns about having a single Web-based catalog and circulation system that would support many libraries. Some of you wondered whether the Web could support the amount of traffic such a "super-catalog" might generate and whether the Web was reliable enough to keep operating consistently without crashing. Here, I think we can say that if the Web is good enough for real-time online stock trading, e*Bay auctions, and book selling, it certainly ought to be good enough for us. After all, our legacy systems do not work 100 percent of the time either.

Even though unhappy with their current systems, others approved of how those systems allow them to look at local collections in many different ways and to make special analytics or notes on shelving locations and other local matters that a single national/global catalog with one bibliographic record for each work might not allow. I disagree. With their comparatively bottomless pits of storage capacity, computers can support customizing and reorganizing information to fit individual needs very efficiently. As long as the master catalog can identify each library's unique holdings, it should be a simple matter to look at local holdings and pull in local catalog notes from a separate database, without giving up the efficiency and selection power offered by one large master catalog. We just have to design it right.

But perhaps the issue that most concerned you arose around how to create the master catalog. Originally, we suggested using the OCLC database to build it, plus a source for current in-print titles such as Bowker's Books In Print, Muze, Baker & Taylor's Title Source II, or Ingram's lpage. However, some of you pointed out that regional union catalogs already exist and that it would make more sense to build on those rather than trying to create something entirely new. Others did not want to be beholden to OCLC or any other commercial or quasi-

commercial source and wanted to create the whole thing from scratch, building on records from the libraries that choose to cooperate.

Of the three options put forward, I still prefer the original idea of building on the OCLC catalog and an existing commercial source. Although that model would certainly require a good deal of work, in the long run it would give the greatest number of titles the fastest — which is what our customers want — and for the least amount of effort — which is what we want. The regional union catalog approach might work as an alternative if the OCLC+ model didn't fly, but it would give us a much more limited database to start with. Also, the geographic regions underlying those regional union catalogs have no natural benefit to offer the process. Amazon customers couldn't care less where their books come from, and neither do ours. Relying on networks of union catalogs would also create the potential for significant duplication of effort. We should concentrate our efforts on “enhancing” records (adding tables of contents, copying cover art, including reviews, etc.), not reconciling the same bibliographic records for a number of different regional catalogs.

The most difficult model would be building the thing from scratch. Of course, participating libraries would own the records and would be beholden to no one, but the level of effort, not to mention the time required to pull it off, could be tremendous. We are dealing in Internet time here, and my sense is that we have to do something big and grand and fast, if we hope to capture the imagination of our customers and our profession. If we do not, somebody else will do it for us, while we stay trapped under the hood trying to get the engine to run.

Collection Development

The concept of “patron-centered collection development” also generated a good deal of controversy, while reopening an old library debate about whether collections should be based on demand or on quality. The original idea was that if we allowed patrons to select from one large catalog that included over 43 million items, librarians could use their selections to help determine which titles got added to the local collection and which they would order on demand from outside libraries. Librarians would use the same strategy with patron information as Amazon uses with customer demand to determine which titles to add to its own inventories and which to order from wholesalers and publishers.

One collection development librarian stated the demand side of the argument very neatly: “It is time to butcher the sacred cow that proclaims libraries know better than the patrons we serve what they need or should read.” And many of you agreed with her. On the other hand, some worried that libraries would just become bookstores, that librarians wouldn't design their collections any more, that our shelves would be filled with thousands of copies of Tom Clancy and Danielle Steele.

Both sides of this controversial issue have fought long and hard over the years. We will certainly not settle the issue here. However, there is really no reason why patron-centered collection development should be incompatible with either position. Fundamentally, we simply propose to use the patron's selections and suggestions as a source of information about what should and should not go into the local collection. If your library caters more strongly to popular demand, then you may want to give patron selection greater weight and purchase a broader range of the material they want, regardless of other considerations on merit or its lack. If you prefer to build a “quality” collection (however you want to define it), you still need to take the desires of patrons into account, except in this case you might only purchase those materials that also met your quality standards or other collection development criteria. You could even find the patron information useful in helping you promote usage of the “quality” material. But no librarian can justify ignoring the wants and desires of those they mean to serve and expect to survive for long.

Interlibrary Loan

Many of you felt that issues involving ILL were the Achilles' heel of the entire Earth's Largest Library concept and you quickly identified a number of potential problem areas.

First and foremost, the problem of costs. As several people pointed out, the traditional ILL transaction is more complicated, and hence more costly, than a standard retail sale, because the patron has to request the book, the library has to send it out, and then the library has to get it back again. Several of you felt that handling those kinds of transactions on a large scale would prove prohibitively expensive, so the idea would never fly.

Many of the problems with the costs and logistics of interlibrary loan have been around for a long time. I would not presume to try to solve them all in the space of this article. However, ample evidence also exists that these problems may have become far more solvable than some of you imagine. We can find better, more efficient, less costly ways of doing interlibrary loan.

In the first place, we should learn from other people who have had to deal with the issues and costs involved in sending an item out and getting it back again. All kinds of companies rent things, often far more expensive items than ours. Some of the largest rent — you guessed it — audio books, videos, and DVDs, some of the same material we circulate. Places like Audio Adventure and Netflix.com rent audio books and movies over the Web for as little as \$4.50 including shipping. Let us look at their operations to see what we can learn about designing efficient systems that keep our costs down.

Beyond the renters, let us learn from companies like Amazon, Bookfinder, BiblioFind, and others that daily ship thousands upon thousands of individual orders from their warehouses or — even more complicated, from hundreds of independent booksellers — directly to their customers, and who do it for next to nothing. Beyond booksellers and video stores, American business is full of companies that have developed extremely efficient distribution models. Lessons from one field extend to others. When Amazon wanted to improve its distribution system, the company hired the chief of logistics at WalMart and got sued by WalMart for stealing their secrets. Learning from others is an American tradition. In World War II, the War Department (old name for the Department of Defense) brought in advisers from Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey to advise them on logistical problems.

Second, many of the design features posited for the Earth's Largest Library, such as a global catalog, a single, integrated circulation/order system, and patron-initiated ILL, could significantly reduce the amount of handling required on ILL requests, with corresponding reductions in cost. For example, if patrons could search a global catalog of 43 million items, they could select the material they wanted themselves. No longer would ILL staff have to do separate bibliographic verifications. If one married the catalog to good holdings and circulation information, one could route the patron's request automatically to the most convenient library that actually had the item available, rather than having the request slowly wend its way through an ILL queue with staff in library after library checking shelves. Finally, the supplying library could ship the item directly to the patron, instead of going back through the requesting library as they do today. The patron would automatically check the item out via a signature with UPS or FedEx. When the shipper picked it up again for the return trip, shipper records would initiate the return checking.

That kind of a system could reduce the number of people required to handle an ILL transaction from whatever it is today (probably a half-dozen or more, if you include the staff at both the requesting and supplying library)

down to two: the person who pulled and shipped the item and the person who received it back and returned it to the shelf at the supplying library. (Of course, participating libraries would have standardized, re-usable packaging designed to accommodate multiple uses.) All the rest of the operation would be automated with corresponding substantial cost reductions over our current methods of operation.

We do need to learn more about how such a proposal as Earth's Largest Library would affect usage of our collections. Leslie Morris, editor of the *Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery & Information Supply*, wrote, "ILL costs would decline rapidly if we were 'cherry pickers.' Loaning and borrowing current in-print books is cheap and easy. But, when you include 19th century French newspaper articles and other exotica, costs escalate and turnaround times deteriorate." On the other hand, wouldn't many if not most potential requests come for the "cheap and easy" rather than for the exotica? And if the exotic and expensive stuff really only accounts for a small percentage of what we do, why let it block the big picture? Morris also wrote that it would be easier to implement the Earth's Largest Library model if we had centralized ILL like the British do, rather than the decentralized system we use now.

Have we really waited too late to adopt a centralized system? If one really anticipated doing a lot of interlibrary loan, it might make economic sense to set up large distribution facilities like the BLDSC at Boston Spa — either to handle the cheap, easy, and most commonly requested material, or to serve as a central repository that would provide easier, more efficient storage and access to exotic and hard-to-find material, much as the Center for Research Libraries does today. Or maybe you could do both. The point is that I don't think we've really crossed any kind of a Rubicon in terms of the ILL models available to us. The decentralized could be centralized if it makes economic sense to do so. Let's not take anything off the table.

Eventually, of course, all of this material — or all of it that matters, anyway — will be digitized and we may no longer have to worry about moving physical items around. But even after we do reach that point (and it remains a long time off), we will still have to solve some other vexing problems. For example, who accepts responsibility for archiving and preserving electronic records — publishers, libraries, intermediary vendors, or somebody else? If we reach the point where everything we need exists in electronic format, will we need libraries (plural) anymore at all, or will one big library suffice for all of us? These are the real problems of the future. Working on how to move books around to maximize the value and the service potential of the inventory we already have should make us glad to work on the easy stuff!

Library Cooperation

According to most of you, the single biggest problem with implementing Earth's Largest Library had nothing to do with the catalog, or the circulation system, or collection development, or even with the costs and vicissitudes of interlibrary loan. Most of you felt the idea would flounder because we could never get that many libraries to cooperate with one another. Michael Dahn, librarian and Webmaster at Stetson University College of Law [Internet address: dahn@law.stetson.edu] who wrote a long piece filled with specific suggestions about implementing the plan, said it best. He had asked his staff to read the article and then asked them, "Why won't this ever work?" The answer he got caught him by surprise:

I expected a wide range of answers, but to my surprise, everyone quickly settled on one reason. It wasn't that we could never build a database that big. It wasn't that the infrastructure would be too expensive. It wasn't that we did not have the technology to make it cost-effective, or that we would not be able to muster the technical expertise required. Everyone (except me — I'm a dreamer) agreed that the reason Mr. Coffman's ideas would never work was that we could never get enough libraries to cooperate.

[For full details on his view of the implementation problems, go to our Web site

[\[http://www.infoday.com/searcher\]](http://www.infoday.com/searcher) and look for **“Earth’s Largest Library: A Plan of Action.”**]

Many of you quickly faulted current library management. One wrote that as a group they “lacked vision, and were more interested in making sure the i’s were dotted and the t’s were crossed and that personnel appraisals were filled out right, than they were in doing anything substantive to advance their profession, to say nothing of the needs of their users.” Another person likened the situation “to the difference between peacetime generals and wartime generals (at the beginning of the Civil War). The peacetime generals got where they were through family connections, protocol, and bureaucratic finesses.... The problem was that the very skills that made them successful during peacetime rendered them hopeless in imagining and managing their way through real situations of dynamic change and conflict.” Many of you went beyond management and blamed our “corporate culture” in general. Some phrased it nicely (“changing long-held and deeply held beliefs would be serious challenge”); others were far less complimentary and far more vernacular.

Having worked in the profession and in some pretty mind-numbing bureaucracies for many years, I can appreciate the problem. No doubt our profession does need a lot more people with “fire in the belly,” people unafraid of shaking things up. Our profession is in a time of great change and crisis. To get through it successfully, we need men and women who, as John Muir said, can “match our mountains.”

Of course, if we prove unequal to the task as a profession, plenty of others will step into the breach and do it for us. Since the publication of “Earth’s Largest Library,” I’ve been contacted by no fewer than eight major commercial vendors interested in pursuing the project from a purely business point of view. If we librarians can’t pull this off, someone else will. So why not let them? Because I think we would do it right, that our professional standards of service would guarantee patrons get what they need and not what conveniences or profits a vendor would supply, and because it’s our job.

Despite the obvious problems, I remain pretty optimistic about our chances for building Earth’s Largest Library, or something that looks very much like it. After all, we’ve done it before. OCLC itself and that 40-million-item WorldCat database is a shared accomplishment of similar stature, and our interlibrary loan system (for all of its problems) and bibliographic control tools require cooperation on a massive scale. So, if we decide to build this thing, we would have some blueprints to follow and a solid foundation to build upon.

But I think what I found most encouraging was a little exchange that occurred on a listserv between two people responding to the article. One underlined the insurmountability of the political problems of pulling off such a system, writing, “Steve’s model of building Earth’s Largest Library on the basis of global cooperation between all the world’s libraries is not at all comparable to Amazon.com. It would be comparable to building Earth’s Biggest Bookstore on the basis of global cooperation between all the world’s bookstores. Now I think everyone would agree, that would be an interesting project.” A few minutes later, another person answered back, “The American Booksellers Association seems to have made a start...,” and pointed to ABA’s new BookSense program that will launch this summer. ABA has managed to pull together over 1,000 independent booksellers, some of the most idiosyncratic, obstreperous, and strong-willed creatures on the face of the Earth, and get them to work together to form what could become, in effect, Earth’s Biggest Independent Bookstore. As with Amazon, customers will be able to search through one massive integrated catalog, with orders fulfilled from the inventories of participating bookstores and wholesalers like Baker & Taylor. [If you want to see how it might work for out-of-print books, check out <http://www.bookfinder.com>, available now.] When asked what led her to give up a little of her independence to participate in the BookSense program, Chris O’Hara of Auntie’s Bookstore in Spokane, Washington, said, “BookSense is not perfect. But it’s here, it’s workable, and I just have

to compromise. I don't think any of us have any choice. Otherwise the world will pass us by."

The same is true for librarians.

Steve Coffman is Director of FYI, at the County of Los Angeles Public Library (<http://colapublib.org/fyi>). His e-mail address is: coffman@cerf.net

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