AN OVERVIEW OF ONLINE PUBLIC ACCESS CATALOGUE (OPAC)

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Introduction:

One of IT's greatest accomplishments is transformation of the card catalogue to the OPAC to facilitate libraries. An OPAC is a library catalogue accessed via a computer terminal for the benefit of library users. It is a computerised catalogue of documents and reading materials available in a library. It provides online access to library's catalogue for users and allows the searching and retrieval of bibliographic records. The OPAC works on several databases, but primarily on the library catalogue database. A catalogue database is the machine-readable form of the card catalogue and is made up of a number of bibliographic records which comprise a collection of data elements (author, title, publisher, subject heading, etc.) organised in a systematic manner which represents bibliographic items.

Harrod's Librarian's Glossary and reference book defines it as 'An OPAC is the catalogue of a library or information centre made available to users online and generally providing a variety of additional facilities such as loan information, online reservation, and library news. With the demise of the card catalogue, the need for stressing the 'online public access' part has disappeared and they are now frequently just 'catalogue'.

The Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science defines, 'OPAC as an acronym for Online Public Access catalog, a database composed of bibliographic records describing the books and other materials owned by a library or library system, accessible via public terminals or workstations usually concentrated near the reference desk to make it easy for users to request the assistance of a trained reference librarian. Most online

catalogues are searchable by author, title, subject, and keywords and allow users to print, download or export record to an e-mail account.

According to Wells, the library OPAC has atleast three distinct functions:

(a) It acts as a bibliographic database or an electronic version of the card catalogue that it replaced, acting as an index for users in search, for example of a particular book. As a logical extension of this, OPAC increasingly also provides links to electronic texts, freeing the user from the necessity of physically locating material on the library's shelves.

(b) It functions as a 'portal' in a way not dissimilar to a library homepage, providing links to nonbibliographical data, either relating to users themselves, i.e., information about overdue books, fines, etc. or other library information like opening hours, etc. In principle, this portal function could be extended indefinitely to connect to a variety of data considered to be of interest to library users; and

(c) The OPAC functions as a promotional artifact, advertising the presence of the library and the services it can provide and at the same time making a statement of authority about communicative links that are supported and facilitated. OPAC potentially has a fourth function as the management of full-text data and management of bibliographic data coverage and the bibliographic functions of OPAC itself become enabled for full-text searching rather than remaining primarily an index. This technology is not widely implemented in current OPAC installations, but it is on the anvil and likely to develop.

Thus, OPAC is a form of catalogue, a computerized catalogues containing records of items in a library or information centre. It is used for storage and retrieval of information as it provide basic search, advanced search, browsing search, Boolean search, search through access points such as author, title, subject, keyword, call number, etc., options. It also provides information on facilities like loan status, location, availability and reservation of document. Basically, the OPAC acts as an information retrieval system. It is not only an information retrieval system but also a module of an integrated library system. Therefore, it has more search capabilities and facilities than the traditional catalogue.

Historical Development of OPAC

Computer applications firstly concentrated on library activities other than the catalogue. They were used in libraries mainly for housekeeping operations like circulation control, acquisitions and serial control. Afterwards began the computerisation of library catalogues and as a result, OPAC came into existence. Much had occurred in OPAC development over the last four decades. Bibliographic records have gone from brief (in some systems) to full, catalogues have been expanded to become catalogue and circulation systems. To facilitate use, 'user friendly' interfaces have been built.

Following are some developments in OPAC which have taken place with passage of time:

• Sixties and early seventies

Earlier some libraries in the sixties used computers for the production of catalogues. Eighty column punched cards were used to print the catalogues on paper. The computer systems of that time were not capable of searching the catalogue online. OPACs made their appearance in the mid-1970s, while the history of library automation can be traced back to 1954; the experiments with online information retrieval began only in the early sixties.

The concept of MARC (Machine Readable Catalogue) heralded a new era in libraries. MARC stimulated the development of library automation and information networks. The Library of Congress launched MARC-I as an experiment when there was no established bibliographic record in machine-readable form. There was no consensus as to which access points were required to take full advantage of an automated cataloging system. Four months before the end of the MARC-I project, MARC-II had been initiated after substantial evaluation of the MARC-I format and developed in 1968 as a result of Anglo-American cooperation. The British Library adopted the MARC record format in 1967 and later on it received increasing acceptance all over the world.

• Mid-seventies

By the mid-seventies, computers started affecting more library processes, particularly circulation control.

• Late seventies and early eighties

Some companies started to develop hardware and software packages or turnkey system for libraries.

The ability to search bibliographic records online came to be referred to as OPAC. The first generation OPACs allowed only direct searching using the actual author or title by matching the exact phrase to the library holding. This meant that they had no ability to browse the catalogue, and a mistake in the search term would leave the user bereft of a correct match. These OPACs had access points similar to those of a traditional card or COM catalogue. Some OPACs were primarily book-finding and locating tools and were fully equipped for known item searching. They were phrase-indexed or pre-co-ordinate OPACs with access points similar to those of a traditional card or COM catalogue, i.e., author, title (as a phrase), class mark or call number (as a phrase) or possibly subject headings (as a phrase).

• Mid-eighties to late eighties

The OPACs became very popular and were rapidly available during 1980s. The first demonstration of OPAC from University of Adelaide held at Biennial Victorian Association for Library Automation (VALA) in 1981 boosted many universities and institutes of technology. By 1985, some public libraries implemented the integrated library management systems like URICA, VTLA, GEAC, DOBIS/LIBIS with OPAC modules.

A large number of suppliers provided integrated systems for library management which included modules for various subsystems such as cataloguing, acquisition, circulation, serial control, interlibrary lending and also OPAC in the mid-eighties. These were second generation OPACs. Some new suppliers like Dynix, came into the field with them based on information retrieval techniques developed by online search services, like Dialog in the 1990s. These OPACs were termed as keyword or postco-ordinate OPACs. The words from titles, subject headings, authors or other names were access points in these types of OPACs and search statements could be combined by linking Boolean operators, user did not require an exact author or title match to find information. These OPACs had

an in-built circulation system, which let users know the copy status of documents and allowed them to place reserves or holds on books.

Keyword search, Boolean search and the increased or decreased of search results were among the features of second generation OPACs. Interfaces were usually in two modes-menu driven and command-driven. This made flexible interaction between the user and OPAC more flexible. In terms of user assistance, these provided more options including, help access, error messages and suggestive prompts. Ease of use and user friendliness were two major features of this generation of OPACs.

Advantages of Online Public Access Catalogue.

Following are some of the advantages of using an OPAC:

• OPAC offers a greater number of access points for a single record;

• It provides access to a wide coverage of information quickly;

• It provides information which may not be available in the printed form;

• It connects to current information since online databases are updated speedily and more

  frequently;

• It eliminates need for tedious clerical work of typing and arranging catalogue cards;

• It offers faster search facilities and the capability of Boolean searching.

 Features of Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC).

The important features of Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) are:

• The GUI is available which is typically thought of as a combination of windows with pull-down or drop down menus, icons and a pointing device such as mouse or trackball to manipulate information;

• The usual features of traditional OPACs such as, storing bibliographical and sometimes full-text databases; providing direct access to a library's bibliographical database by means of terminal or PC, providing instructional help, display of search results in readily understandable form, sometimes remote access from the library's location, information about community events, providing links to circulation files, reference help, etc., providing search through a variety of access points such as author, title, keyword, subject, periodical title, series, call number, ISSN, or ISBN, etc.;

• The ability to use hypertext links to facilitate navigation through bibliographic records;

• A move towards emulation of the appearance and search features similar to those found

  in search engines;

• Linking to full-text when available;

• Ability to help bring a convenience in searching of all electronic information available through one interface e.g., catalogue, CD-ROMs, internet sources, etc.

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