AUTOMATION OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY NETWORK IN SASKATCHEWAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes in general the current manual
operations of the Saskatchewan Provincial Library,
and outlines a scenario for future automation of key
elements at the Provincial Library and the Public
Library network of the province.

A public library network in Saskatchewan became a possibility in 1953, when the Provincial Library was established. "the most important single action in the improvement of library services was the creation, in 1953, of the Provincial Library..." So states the Library Inquiry Committee report, which became the blueprint for the network.

Today, the network consists of ten systems - seven regional libraries, two large city libraries, and the network centre - the Provincial Library.

The network is a manual one - based on cooperation and goodwill. The parts of the network share their resources readily. In 1978, 210,000 interlibrary loans were handled, 92,000 of them through the Provincial Library which coordinates interlibrary loans using a somewhat archaic union (main entry) catalogue. This catalogue theoretically contains the holdings of public, regional and special libraries.

In reality, this catalogue leaves something to be desired. It began in 1958, when the Provincial Library initiated a centralized cataloguing service for public libraries. The catalogue is, therefore, not complete for the older library systems. Libraries have not always taken advantage of the service, and, while doing their own cataloguing, have been known to report neither their additions nor their withdrawals. And yet, it has grown to be a monstrosity of some 300-400,000 entries. It is the principle tool for both cataloguing and interlibrary loans for the network. Picture a medium sized public library catalogue, surrounded by 20 people busily opening drawers, shuffling slips of paper, and, in their free time, filing. Then, picture a scene from a Keystone Cops movie. You now have a fairly accurate image of our "Union Catalogue."

·The amazing thing is that these same 20 people in 1978, through superb organization, manually processed 106,000 requests for cataloguing and verified and handled 92,000 interlibrary loans, many of them supporting computer literature searches.

Searching for bibliographic information, keeping locations and retaining some semblance of authority manually can become very complex. The procedure by which a request for cataloguing becomes a set of catalogue cards can involve as many as thirty steps, depending on where the information is finally located.

Since the work being done at the Provincial Library on behalf of public libraries is expanding at the rate of at least 10% yearly, and since the staff complement has been reduced slightly, it is imperative that the network begin to make use of the available new technology. The basis of public library operations in Saskatchewan is the Union Catalogue, which stores the descriptions and locations of materials held in all member libraries. This basic tool has to be converted into machine-readable form, to allow the network to progress. But if the catalogue as it now stands were converted, the problems would be compounded, because an incomplete and inaccurate manual file, would become

an incomplete and inaccurate computer file.

Therefore, another route must be followed. A plan has been drawn up whereby the three largest libraries in the network (Regina, and Saskatoon Public Libraries and the Provincial Library) will convert their catalogues into machine-readable format, thereby providing a basis for a new, and real, union catalogue. Automated circulation systems would be installed, also based upon this database. The Provincial Library would, during this phase, automate its cataloguing activity.

The next phase would see the step by step automation of all other libraries in the network.

The proposed scenario could be (in brief)

1 (a) Provincial Library joins an online cataloguing network.
1 (b) Retrospective conversion projects in three largest libraries begin.
2   Upon completion of 1 (b), circulation systems installed at Regina, Saskatoon and Provincial Libraries. Upgrade to online catalogues.
3 (a) Acquire database management system and
3 (b) Implement integrated online interlibrary loan and inquiry modules.
4   Introduce online computer systems in Regional Libraries.
       (Ball 1978)

The planning process towards automation is central to the success of the project. A commitment to the project will be required from all public libraries and from the Provincial government. Therefore, under the leadership of the Provincial Library and the Regina and Saskatoon Public Libraries, all systems will be invited to participate in the planning. A management structure is still to be worked out, preferably one which requires the network governance to be under the wing of the Provincial Library.

With the commitment of the systems and a plan of management will come the necessary resources for further development. The first projects will begin as early as January 1980.

Of course, future developments are still hypothetical. But so were the plans for computer-based literature searching, which has become a standard reference tool for the network (802 searches were conducted In 1978, up from 222 in 1977).

The last public library system was in place by 1974, completing the first phase of a public library network. The time is right for the next phase - the massive expansion of services through automation. The public library community in Saskatchewan has always been confident of its ability to move forward. Success with automation is expected, and very likely. What appears at present to be a backward network holds the potential to become a showpiece for all of Canada.

REFERENCES

Ball, Alan J.S. Automating the Saskatchewan Union Catalogue.
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