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The Public-Access Computer Systems Review 1, no. 2 (1990): 91-93.  
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Editorial  
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"Libraries with Glass Walls"

By Charles W. Bailey, Jr.

As an increasing number of academic libraries provide Internet access to their online catalogs and other databases, the nature of library services is changing.

Dial-access to library systems was primarily a convenience to local faculty, staff, and students. Typically, no effort to publicize dial-access service was made beyond the library's primary clientele. If geographically remote users could obtain dial-access instructions, they were generally welcome to access the catalog, but long distance costs limited this type of use.

On the other hand, Internet links provide remote users with significantly increased access to library systems. Costs are determined by the user's institution. Some users are charged-back for computer time, others are not. From the Internet user's point of view, access barriers certainly exist; however, these barriers mainly relate to having adequate instructions and appropriate terminal emulation software. Various projects, such as Dr. Art St. George's list of Internet library systems, are addressing the documentation issue.

From the library perspective, troubling issues arise about Internet access. What is the library's obligation to provide technical support to remote users? How does Internet use impact on the library's limited system resources, which are needed to support the library's primary clientele? How does Internet access affect system security? What effect does Internet access have on license agreements for locally mounted databases?

Accustomed to the free flow of information on Internet, faculty members and academic administrators are likely to have little patience for foot dragging by librarians when it comes to network access to library systems. Computer center directors may also find resistance from librarians puzzling and unacceptable. On the other hand, a proactive, positive response by librarians to Internet access is likely to be warmly welcomed by the scholarly community.

Computer networks won't go away, and scholars will become increasingly dependent upon their services. As computer network interconnections and capabilities increase, the "global village" may become a much more immediate day-to-day reality in libraries. Government-funded networks for businesses and general citizens may also develop over time, and these networks may be linked to scholarly networks. Both of these potential developments could greatly increase the size and heterogeneity of the network user population.

The long-term issue is not whether library systems will be available on computer networks like Internet. They are likely to be linked to these networks. The real questions involve deeper issues about the nature of library services in an era of computer networking.

Libraries have developed an intricate web of interlibrary loan agreements in the context of national and international copyright law. Prior to the current era of increased electronic access to information, scholars' inability to easily identify needed materials has shielded the interlibrary loan system from the full brunt of potential demand. Now, users can employ Internet to search remote online catalogs as easily as they can search their local catalogs, and, in the future, similar access may be available on NREN and other networks. The interlibrary loan system has been recently stressed by libraries' declining purchasing power combined with the advent of public access to CD-ROM databases, locally mounted databases, and bibliographic utility databases (e.g., EPIC). How will it react to the increased demands created by network access?

It is possible to imagine a future interlibrary loan environment where increased loan restrictions will significantly limit the flow of information. It is also possible to imagine an environment where end-users will electronically place their own interlibrary loan requests at libraries world-wide, indifferent to the source of the needed item. In between these two poles is the large grey area where the probable future of remote access to library collections lies.

Fantasies of "virtual libraries," where users transparently access needed information regardless of location, depend on no-cost, unrestricted access to electronic information. In the real world, ownership and access are interwoven, library materials are usually in print form, and libraries are not usually high funding priorities for their parent institutions. If electronic information is obtained from commercial sources, libraries may need to restrict remote access to it. Ironically, print information in remote libraries may be more accessible than electronic information.

Jane D. Segal, User Education Coordinator of Rice University's Fondren Library, coined the phrase "libraries with glass walls" to describe the phenomenon where users can rapidly retrieve information about needed materials in remote libraries, but they cannot access these materials easily or quickly. For a variety of reasons, the interlibrary loan system cannot provide access to all of the materials identified by a remote library's online catalog and, since it is bound by physical processing and delivery constraints, the interlibrary loan system is much slower than electronic access to the online catalog. Until we grapple with the difficult issues associated with remote access to library systems via Internet and other computer networks, there are going to be an increasing number of hand and nose prints on the glass.

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