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Public-Access Provocations: An Informal Column

"I Like It Like That"

By Walt Crawford

I walk up to the librarian, book or videocassette in hand, and say "This is great. I'd like something else like this one." Or, just to make it interesting, "I'd like more along these lines." What does the librarian do?

Unless I'm very old or very young, or the library has extraordinary public services librarians, chances are I'm better off with this alternative strategy: I walk up to the next-generation library catalog and find a record, possibly a known record. Perhaps the catalog asks me if I'd like "more items like this one"--or perhaps I pose one of the challenges above. What does the catalog do?

One Answer: Related-Record Searching

If it's CARL--and if I know what "<X> for EXPRESS" means in the set of prompts--it brings up a screen with the call number and searchable fields in the record, organized by type and with brief comments, for example: "AUTHOR(s): (Materials by or about the same author)."

All I need to do is enter a line number to get a shelf-list browse or search for one of the authors or subjects. One subject choice is "Alphabetical List of Entries," which breaks all the subjects down into words and lets me formulate a new search.

Dynix has the prompt "RW = Related Works," which brings up a somewhat similar screen, although without call number. The prompt's clearer though, and as with CARL, if the first record was Norman Mailer's *Of a Fire on the Moon*, the system offers the possibility that I want other books by Norman Mailer, not necessarily other books about "Astronauts--United States" or (to get really specific) "United States--Civilization--1945-."

INNOPAC always offers "Show Items Nearby on Shelf" (shelflist browse), but only offers "SHOW Items With the Same SUBJECT" if this was a subject search. It wasn't, so I'm out of luck.

Sirsi's UNICORN has the prompt "LIKE" when you're looking at a single record. Selecting that prompt gives you the heading "CATALOG LOOKUP BASED ON ITEM" and a numbered list of every searchable field in the record, labeled by type of field and with

author-title added entries split into authors and titles.

In many cases, one of those options will do just what I want, and some other catalogs such as LIAS offer similar facilities. Personally, I'd take the CARL approach, but with the UNICORN prompt. But that's taking one feature in isolation, always a rotten way to judge a catalog. In a perfect world with perfect single-subject items, the "more about" question could always lead to a shelflist browse--but we don't live in a perfect world!

Note that all of these catalogs give me a list of possibilities and let me decide what "like" means in this case. That may be a long list of possibilities--for example, there were 17 numbers in the UNICORN example I saw. Should the catalog just go off and find me "another one that's just like the other one"? What would that mean?

Likeness Depends on the User

Think of the videocassette Blaze, starring Paul Newman as Earl K. Long. If I want "likeness" or "aboutness," I could be looking for A.J. Liebling's The Earl of Louisiana and Michael L. Kurtz's Earl K. Long. But I could also be looking for The Color of Money or, for that matter, The Big Easy (you figure the connections). Then again, I could be looking for Blaze Starr's autobiography in book form. Related-record searching may help with the first and last cases, but it won't usually help me find those other films.

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If I really want "aboutness," I might also want Randy Newman's sound recording Good Old Boys; perhaps some specific recordings by Hank Williams, Sr. and Dr. John the Night Tripper; maps of Louisiana and Maryland from the late 1950s; articles on the Long dynasty from Time Almanac on CD-ROM; an Earl Long press conference that was recorded and is held on tape in a particular archive (but can be digitized and sent to me); and a current work on the sociology and art of exotic dancing. Can I get that from any catalog, now or in the future?

It gets worse. If I read the A.J. Liebling book, I may find I want "another one just like it"--but in this case, what I'm after is a twentieth century political biography written by a masterful writer. You say people don't make jumps like that? Certainly they do, at least for leisure reading.

You Can't Always Get What You Want

I don't expect any current or future online catalog to give me all of the results discussed in the preceding section. How could it, unless it could read my mind and had enormous amounts of information on every item in the collection?

But, as a group of aging British would-be librarians once sang, "If you try sometimes, you just might get what you need." Good related-record searching will get the patron part of the way there with relatively little effort. At least it will if "likeness" is something that ordinary retrieval techniques can

identify.

But it isn't always, as in the last example above. For that matter, I'll bet at least one patron has gone into a Los Angeles library looking for "fifty more books just like this one"--where "like" means "the same color binding and about the same size." There are limits--aren't there?

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