

Boston library computerizing its catalog system

By Simson L. Garfinkel
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

Sometimes, just finding the book you want in the Boston Public Library can be an adventure.

In a smaller library you might go to wooden trays containing the library's card catalog. Boston Public hasn't had a physical "card catalog" since 1973, when the cards were photocopied and published in a 64-volume set, which one searches like a dictionary. Books acquired after 1973 must be looked up in the library's microfilm catalog.

Since the library only has the money to update the microfilm quarterly, books acquired within the last three months aren't there. And even if you find the book in the catalog, there is still a chance that it won't be on the shelf because someone has checked it out.

At that point, finding a book becomes a question of telephoning Boston's branch libraries and the librarians in the surrounding towns to see who has the book on their shelves.

But starting sometime next year or in 1991, finding a book will be as simple as sitting down at a computer terminal and typing the book's name. The computer will instantly report if the book is on the shelf or checked out.

If the book isn't at the BPL, the computer will automatically check libraries in Brookline, Cambridge, Chelsea, Malden and Newton. If you don't know the full name of the book, the computer will let you search for all books which have a certain word in their title or descriptions, says Marta Pardee-King, who is coordinating the installation of the computer network that will serve the libraries in the six cities.

One of the first publicly available online catalogs was installed in the Science Reader Room at the Library of Congress in 1975. Since then, online catalogs have popped up at libraries all across the country; today there are 1,777 such systems in libraries, says Karen Muller, Executive Director of American Library Association's Resources and Technical Services Division.

Last year alone, libraries installed 360 such systems.

The machines are most frequently found in research libraries: 89 out of 118 member libraries had online systems in 1988, up from 75 in 1987, according to a recent survey by the Association of Research Libraries. But the systems are also in many public libraries as well, including New York City's and Philadelphia's.

The plummeting price of computer systems and increasing public acceptance of computers have contributed to the growth of online systems, Muller says. But even more important is a growing database of books

that have already been electronically cataloged, making it cheaper for libraries to computerize.

Every major university in the Boston area now has online catalogs; Boston College has had one since 1983, while Harvard's Widener Library put out terminals for students in 1988.

"People view 35,000 to 40,000 titles a day," and more than 200 people dial into the Harvard system from home computers, says Dale Flecker, associate director for planning and systems.

One of the big attractions of the computerized systems is that they dramatically cut the amount of time that library staff spends maintaining the catalog and performing other clerical tasks, says Jay K. Lucker, director of the MIT system. That is the reason why libraries can justify the sometimes multi-million dollar cost of computerizing.

To check out books, all a librarian has to do is scan a bar code on the back of each book and on the user's library card with a hand-held wand or a laser-scanner similar to those in supermarkets. When books are about to become overdue, the computers send out reminders to borrowers.

Nevertheless, converting a library to a computerized card catalog is a very labor-intensive task.

Most libraries keep their old card catalogs around for many years after they computerize — it simply takes time to get everything copied into the online system, a process called "retrospective conversion." Right now, the Harvard computer system has only three million titles in its computer database, Flecker says, while there are probably more than seven million titles on the shelves — which means there are four million titles that can only be found in the manual catalog.

"A large scale retrospective conversion ... is a very expensive undertaking," says Flecker. "We are in the process of trying to figure out how much." Estimates run from \$5 million to \$10 million, or from about \$1.25 to \$2.00 per title.

Although library users may wax nostalgic over the old card catalog, librarians say that the change is welcome: "Card catalogs are incredibly labor intensive," says Pardee-King.

"It only takes a few misfilings to render it unusable, and patrons sometimes take the cards."

Even age took its toll on the old system. After decades of having people thumbing through cards, Pardee-King says, ink would wear off some cards, and corners with the call numbers would break off. That can't happen now that the information is all stored digitally on computer.

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CALENDAR

MONDAY, November 6

"The Heat is On: Global Warming and You." Panel discussion. 6 p.m. Stone Science Center, Room B50, 675 Commonwealth Ave., BU. Information: 353-3083. Free.

TUESDAY, November 7

"Creating an AIDS Vaccine: How Close Are We?" Panel forum. Sponsored by Harvard AIDS Institute. 5 p.m. Snyder Auditorium, Harvard School of Public Health, 677 Huntington Ave. Information: 782-1689. Free.

"One Culture: What the Arts and Sciences Have in Common." Lecture by Roald Hoffmann, Cornell Univ. poet and Nobel Prize-winning chemist. 7:30 p.m. Alumnae Hall, Regis College, 235 Wellesley St., Weston. Information: 893-1820, ext. 2039.

THURSDAY, November 9

"VDTs and Your Health: Review of the Medical Literature, Ergonomic Factors and Women's Issues." Boston Computer Society's Wellness Conference. Center for Earth Sciences, Bldg. 54, room 100, MIT. Information: 890-9616. Free.

"Deep Sea Exploration." Lecture by Sylvia Earle, marine scientist and CEO of Deep Ocean Technology Inc. Lowell Lecture Series. 7:45 p.m. New England Aquarium auditorium, Central Wharf. Information: 978-5295. Free.

SUNDAY, November 12

Mensa testing. Testing session prospective members of American Mensa, Ltd., organization for highly intelligent people. 9:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Park West Hotel, intersection of I-495 and Rte. 20, Marlboro. Information: 508-755-2904. Fee: \$20.

National Briefs

Bush called likely to meet blacks

WASHINGTON — President Bush has agreed to meet with a group of black leaders at the White House on Nov. 14, sources said over the weekend. The meeting would be the first substantive session in almost a decade between a president and these black leaders, who coordinate their activities as the Black Leadership Forum. President Reagan never met with the group during his eight years as president. Sources among the black leaders said their top-priority item for the meeting's agenda would be to urge Bush to accept, or at least not to block, congressional legislation that would overturn recent Supreme Court decisions that they say undercut civil rights laws. (Baltimore Sun)

Plane collision kills 4 in Ala.

GADSDEN, Ala. — Two small planes collided just after taking off from two intersecting runways at Gadsden airport yesterday, killing all four persons aboard the aircraft. There is no air traffic control tower at the airport. No one on the ground was injured. (AP)

Mo. charges man in insurance case

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The former chief of Transit Casualty Co., a high-risk insurer that left billions of dollars in unpaid claims when it failed in 1985, has been charged with filing a false statement to state regulators, a prosecutor said yesterday. George Pettengill Bowie, 64, Transit's former chairman and chief executive officer, pleaded not guilty Thursday in Cole County Circuit Court, county prosecutor Richard

Cullahan said. Transit left \$3 billion to \$4 billion in claims, mainly from corporate customers in all 50 states, according to its court-appointed liquidator, Burleigh Arnold. (AP)

Army to review denial of a medal

NEW YORK — Army investigators will decide this month whether a veteran said to have killed more than 500 Japanese soldiers during a single encounter in World War II was denied the Medal of Honor because he is Jewish, The New York Times reported yesterday. The Army has conducted a 23-month review of the case of David Rubitsky, 72, a retired merchant seaman who lives in Milton, Wis., a spokesman told the Times that it will decide before the end of November whether to recommend him for the medal. Rubitsky and his supporters say the veteran, armed only with a machine gun, a carbine and an automatic rifle, cut down 500 to 600 enemy troops trying to force their way past him in the jungles of New Guinea in December 1942. The Times said two of Rubitsky's superiors recommended him for the Medal of Honor but a third rejected the idea because Rubitsky is Jewish. (Reuters)

US to curb drug used on pork

NEW YORK — The Food and Drug Administration plans to ban or impose severe dosage limits on a sulfa drug used widely by pork and dairy farmers because of studies showing that the drug, sulfamethazine, causes cancerous tumors in rats and mice. The New York Times reported yesterday that the FDA would take action within six months, but said that both drug and animal industries were primed to protest the probable ban. (Reuters)