

Chapter 8

Technology, Contracts, and Electronic Resources

ABSTRACT

The electronic revolution, which began over fifty years ago, has changed not only the way libraries operate but the way people conduct research and business, interact with each other, socialize, communicate, and even commit crimes. Originally, the phrase “library electronics” referred to an ILS (integrated library system) or an OPAC (online public access catalog). Today, this same phrase refers to not only the ILS, OPAC, and public access computer but to print management and computer reservation software, e-books, CD-ROMs, databases, and CALR vendors. As technology has changed libraries, it has also changed users’ behaviors, research techniques, public services, and the librarian’s role. Intended to be an extension of the collection development and public services chapters, this chapter explores the effect of the digital revolution on the public law library, ways public law libraries can utilize the technology, and how and why these libraries are being driven to increase their use of digital technology. Because contracts are commonly thought of as being associated with electronic resources, the authors have chosen to discuss contract issues in this chapter rather than in the Collection Development chapter. Other related topics include transitioning from the card catalog to the OPAC and ILS, electronic formats, vendor selection, miscellaneous electronic technologies, and pricing issues.

OVERVIEW

Twenty-five years ago, the phrase library electronics referred to both the turnkey and the custom designed ILS system as well as to one or two off-line public access computers for word processing and

educational games. Because computers were much more expensive, many of the smaller public and academic libraries were just beginning to automate library tasks, frequently joining or establishing a library cooperative in order to manage the automation expenses. Because of the cost and the lack of

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professional librarians, few public law libraries automated. For example, in 1986 the two public and two academic libraries in Grayson County, Texas signed the incorporation papers forming the Bibliographic Association of the Red River (BARR), however their shared OPAC did not go live until 1988 (M. Eason, personal correspondence, July 7, 2011). The same county's public law library did not have any computer resources until the 2002/2003 FY. Thanks to falling prices making computers affordable, library automation has become a common sight and today even the smallest public, school and academic library now has some type of OPAC, if not a complete ILS. Yet many public law libraries remain without something as basic as a library catalog in either card or electronic format.

As discussed in Chapter 1, public law libraries have been slow to leave the traditional law library organizational paradigm behind; preferring to either warehouse the collection by hiring a facility caretaker or taking the "human catalog" approach in which the law librarian is expected to know every item in the library's collection intimately enough to pull something from the shelf immediately upon receiving a request. An examination of law library history indicates that if a public law library had any type of manual catalog, it was often incomplete or lacked uniform subject headings (Brock, 1974, p. 359). Few studies on law library catalogs have been reported in the professional literature. According to Christine Brock (1974, p.359), William Roalfe's 1953 study showed that 43 of 115 law libraries "...reported [they] had no catalog... and that 27 of 72 libraries with catalogs regarded them as inadequate." Other than academic law libraries, Brock did not identify any of these law libraries by type so it is not possible to know how many of the surveyed libraries were private or public law libraries. It appears that no other study of law library catalogs has been done since Brock's 1974 article but judging by the amount of ILS and OPAC email

mailing list queries over the past five years, law librarians are beginning to seriously examine the need for at least an OPAC.

During this same period, other areas of the law library's digital world have evolved, beginning with the CALR movement. During those early years, online research was conducted by a dumb terminal that connected to the internet via an external modem that held a telephone's handset. Not only was online searching incredibly expensive but unless a printer was connected to the dumb terminal, the results were snail mailed to the researcher. Once the internet became readily accessible, CALR vendors devised an internet accessible interface and more sophisticated platforms to allow immediate access to search results and firm law librarians jumped on the digital bandwagon. During these early years, costs kept most public law libraries away from the digital format with many waiting until the late 1990s to move into the CD-ROM market. It was the millennium before some of the public law libraries began migrating to at least one database contract. The library's organizational setup, the staff's role in library services and the legal community's willingness to trade books for CD-ROM and online databases often determined whether or not the library made the leap from print to digital format. Many of the smaller, less professionally run public law libraries were slow to make the change. For example, the Judge R. C. Vaughan County Law Library (Sherman, Texas) did not begin using CD-ROMs until the 2002/2003 FY, adding a small online CALR subscription during the 2004/2005 FY (Whiteley, 2004, p. A8). Today's library users are so digitally oriented that public law libraries are now racing to catch up with their private and academic law library colleagues. The lack of digital resource access is no longer a case of risking being left behind but a case of being left behind in collection development, fiscal management, public services and resource utilization.

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