

**The Informational Front End System
at the
University of Calgary**

by

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As the on-line catalogue becomes a fixture in academic libraries, the need for a user interface into the various components of the catalogue becomes paramount. Where the library has an integrated system, the system itself should make the user interface easy. Where libraries maintain two or more on-line systems, extra efforts must be made to assist the user to move easily among the different catalogues.

At the University of Calgary Library, we have three on-line public catalogues: the DOBIS system, which provides searching access for all monographs and those serials and periodicals which have been upgraded to AACR2; the NOMADS¹ system, a catalogue of government publications; and the Serials List, a holdings list for both serials and periodicals.

All of these systems reside on the University's administrative computer (IBM 3081) and can be accessed at any one of the Library's 165 terminals or via dial-up remote access.

Although there was initially a comparatively simple procedure in place to move among the systems, it was decided that the development of an Informational Front End system would be beneficial. This gateway² would incorporate not only details of the library automated systems and how to move from one to another, but also general library information and up-to-date library hours.

The Department of Administrative Systems Library team designed and implemented a basic tree structure system written in CICS command level COBOL which provided a flexible easy-to-update format for the Informational Front End. The system provides for up to 99 functions, with a maximum of 99 pages in each. Screen format is controlled by the user, as is highlighting of individual lines. Updating of the system is done on-line in the Production mode, or extensive changes can be keyed into the parallel Test system and loaded overnight into Production. This is particularly

useful for large-scale changes which must be timed to a particular date.

Staff were invited to preview the system and provide comments. A great number of constructive suggestions were received and implemented to improve the prototype. This input continues and because of the relative ease of changing the Front End, good suggestions are implemented regularly.

Initial objectives of the Informational Front End were as follows:

1. To assist the patron to move easily among three online catalogues.
2. To provide on-line assistance and basic library systems information to users, particularly library hours and location code information.³
3. To assist remote access patrons in using the systems. (Figures 1a and 1b)

In the first year, the objectives were met with some interesting results. Use of the NOMADS system both by staff and patrons increased and the profile of government publications was raised. The online Serials system, introduced in the fall of 1987, to replace the serials holdings printout was a very popular addition. On-site users responded that it was quite easy to move among the systems, once the decision was made about which system was most appropriate to the search at hand. Remote access patrons found the Front End helpful, particularly the hours listings which help them to plan online sessions when the system will be "up". (Figures 2a and 2b)

Keeping the library hours information up-to-date and accurate, particularly at the beginning of each semester and during intersessions is time consuming and must be done to deadlines. Location changes for catalogued materials and the addition of a new location require retyping of all the information as the system does not have word processing capabilities. The Test and Production systems must be kept in step, so that quick changes made only in Production will

not be overwritten by a scheduled rollover from the Test system. There are also costs involved with general system maintenance and the scheduling of jobs. Current estimates for keeping only hours and location information up-to-date average about 10 hours per month.

In September of 1987, a new module of DOBIS was implemented that allowed a user to "Send a Message to the Library" from any terminal, on-site or remote. (Figures 3a and 3b). The Informational Front End was the logical vehicle for responding to these queries and became our electronic bulletin board.⁴

In the initial seven months, 4,323 messages were sent. 24.3% (1,050) were legitimate questions, comments, etc. A further 8.8% (384) were database corrections for the various systems. Approximately 66% of the messages were mistakes, frivolous messages, testing of the system, etc. An estimated 25% of all the messages sent had to do with remote access. 411 messages or 39% of questions asked were answered online. This is not a true reflection of the number answered because there was a great deal of duplication of questions. By counting the duplicates, probably closer to 80% were answered. The database corrections were particularly useful; both staff and patrons reported typos, incorrect dates, duplicate records, and other mistakes. These were corrected immediately. If a record is being used, it should have priority for correction. Often questions illustrated some general misunderstanding of the system which afforded us the opportunity to respond in detail.

Adding the message system to the Informational Front End required more staff time. On a daily basis, a senior staff member in Technical Services read and printed the questions, sorted them and sent them to the Public Service staff contact person for answering. It is important for a senior person to do this original vetting, because of the nature of some (very few) of the messages. On a weekly

basis approximately one half day was required to key in the new questions and answers and to proofread the screens. The Public Services staff contact answered and/or distributed the questions. Those staff that received questions also spent time composing answers. One problem arose with repeat or similar questions. A file of answers was kept in Technical Services and responses displayed in a "Frequently Asked Questions" section. (Figure 4)

In addition to the staff time involved, a job is scheduled at Administrative Systems to update on a weekly basis the Production system with the new questions and answers. This allows Technical Services staff to key in the questions at convenient times during the week.

The Message System was enthusiastically received by staff and users alike. In a small survey during February of 1988 these were some of the comments received:

"I hope you keep the messages on-line. I read them regularly and often find little hints that make working on DOBIS/NOMADS, etc. much easier. I don't write messages often in it, but read it regularly."

"Don't let others fool you, your DOBIS system is very easy and concise. (I find it very easy to locate material. I just wish it wasn't always signed out.)"

"I use the send a message program often. I think it's great! Lacking access to a remote terminal, the only place I can use it is from within the Library. Keep it up!"

"I use the message board frequently to report errors in spelling on DOBIS and other problems. I also enjoy reading the messages."

"I think that the on-line message service provided by the Library is a great service to the University Community. Unfortunately, the screens are not updated often enough."

During the year, there were also some negative comments:

"I am very much opposed to the use of these computers for the purpose of sending library messages. It is very frustrating to be waiting for a terminal to do research and find that people are using terminal time to send messages. Why don't you go back to using the bulletin board in the Library Link?"

"I would like to congratulate you on your manipulative editing of questions and theoretical answers, you should be proud of your responses which fail to answer the original question."

The Message portion of the Front End was maintained from September 1987 until the end of June 1988. Because of other priorities in the Library, questions have not been answered on-line since then. Messages are reviewed daily in Technical Services and forwarded to appropriate staff members for information. The "Frequently Asked Questions" screens and a section on Remote Access are kept up-to-date each term to ensure the information is timely. Library hours, Location codes and other information is regularly kept current.

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Using Buckland's models for interfacing electronic mail with the online catalogue, the Informational Front End, combined with Messaging, represents a combination of the Broadcast Mode, the Comments Mode, and the Bulletin Board Mode. Communication was "many to many" and allowed for all

users to benefit from answers to specific questions. It also provided a direct communication channel for users when the reference desk was not staffed or for those users not on-site.

Even without Messaging, the Informational Front End has served the Library well. It is a flexible tool that allows patrons to better use our online catalogues. It assists us in communicating with all users and allows those users who prefer to seek information about the libraries on-line to do so.

The Informational Front End has extended the on-line catalogue to a more complete library information system. At this writing, a new on-line system is about to be added - access to the Film Catalogue of the Department of Communications Media will be available in summer 1989. While full system integration is the ultimate goal, the gateways provided by the Informational Front End have allowed us to link the on-line catalogues with staff and users in a productive alliance.

Footnotes

1. NOMADS is a locally developed version of the Cooperative Documents System, developed at the University of Guelph in Ontario.
2. The Informational Front End is a gateway which allows a user to move transparently among the Library systems. For a discussion of the gateway concept, see Mason, Charlene. "The total information system: the gateway concept at a large university." in Conference on Integrated online Library Systems. Proceedings. Canfield, Ohio: Genaway Associates. c1987. p. 103-111
3. Staff are also available at Reference Desks to assist patrons. In addition regularly scheduled demonstrations of the systems are provided during the Fall/Winter terms. (No registration is necessary for these sessions)
4. See also the following: Pittman, Donna "The Question Board." College and Research Libraries News June 1987. p. 327. and Patterson, Elizabeth and Seldon Deemer. "The End-User's View of DOBIS." Paper presented at the 7th DOBIS/LIBIS Users Group Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, September 1988. 12 p.
5. Buckland, Michael K. "Combining electronic mail with online retrieval in a library context." Informational technology and libraries. 6(4), December 1987. p. 266-271.

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INFO

*** INTRODUCTION TO THE LIBRARY ***

PAGE 001 OF 01

WELCOME TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY LIBRARIES ONLINE CATALOGUE

TO PROCEED, SELECT ONE OF THE NUMBERS BELOW AND PRESS ENTER:

- | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|---|---------------------|
| 1 | DOBIS (BOOKS) | 4 | DOBIS INFORMATION |
| 2 | NOMADS (GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS) | 5 | NOMADS INFORMATION |
| 3 | SERIALS LIST (JOURNALS, MAGAZINES) | 6 | SERIALS INFORMATION |
| 7 LIBRARY INFORMATION (HOURS, LOCATION CODES) | | | |
| 8 SEND/READ A MESSAGE TO THE LIBRARY | | | |

CODE: 7

Figure 1a

LIBINFO

*** LIBRARY INFORMATION ***

PAGE 001 OF 01

THE FOLLOWING SCREENS INCLUDE GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT SOME OF
THE LIBRARY'S POLICIES AND SERVICES, AS WELL AS ANSWERS TO OUR
MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FROM THE MESSAGE SYSTEM.

- 1 LIBRARY LOCATION CODES
- 2 LIBRARY HOURS
- 3 BORROWING FROM THE LIBRARIES
- 4 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

SELECT ONE OF NUMBERS ABOVE OR CODES BELOW AND PRESS ENTER:

D DOBIS N NOMADS S SERIALS I INTRO

CODE:

Figure 1b

LIBHOUR

*** LIBRARY HOURS ***

PAGE 001 OF 01

- 1 MACKIMMIE LIBRARY
- 2 EDUCATION MATERIALS CENTRE
- 3 GALLAGHER (GEOLOGY) LIBRARY
- 4 LAW LIBRARY
- 5 MANAGEMENT RESOURCE CENTRE
- 6 MEDICAL LIBRARY
- 7 REMOTE ACCESS
- 8 STATUTORY HOLIDAYS

SELECT ONE OF THE NUMBERS ABOVE OR A CODE BELOW AND PRESS ENTER:

D DOBIS N NOMADS S SERIALS I INTRO M MENU-LIBRARY INFORMATION

CODE: 1

Figure 2a

MACHOUR

MACKIMMIE LIBRARY
1989.04.29 - 1989.05.14

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INTERSESSION OPEN HOURS

MON-FRI	07:45 - 17:45 (5:45 PM)
SAT	CLOSED
SUN	10:00 - 17:45 (5:45 PM)

CIRCULATION/RESERVE HOURS:
(BOOK CHECK OUT)

MON-FRI	08:30 - 17:45 (5:45 PM)
SAT	CLOSED
SUN	10:00 - 17:45 (5:45 PM)

. . . FOR STATUTORY HOLIDAYS CHOOSE M, FOR MORE LIBRARY HOURS CHOOSE F

SELECT ONE OF THE CODES BELOW AND PRESS ENTER:

D DOBIS N NOMADS S SERIALS I INTRO M MENU-LIBRARY HOURS F FORWARD

CODE:

Figure 2b

MESSAGE

*** LIBRARY ELECTRONIC SUGGESTION BOX ***

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WE WELCOME YOUR POSITIVE SUGGESTIONS ON HOW WE MIGHT BETTER SERVE YOUR LIBRARY NEEDS. MESSAGES SENT USING THIS SYSTEM WILL BE FORWARDED TO THE APPROPRIATE LIBRARY DEPARTMENT FOR INVESTIGATION AND ACTION.

WE REGRET WE CAN NO LONGER RESPOND ONLINE TO MESSAGES. IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS WHICH REQUIRE AN IMMEDIATE ANSWER, PLEASE ASK AT THE REFERENCE DESK ON 2LB OR, AS APPROPRIATE, AT THE GALLAGHER, LAW, MANAGEMENT, EDUCATION OR MEDICAL LIBRARIES. YOU CAN ALSO CALL 220-5962.

- TYPE 'Q' AND PRESS ENTER TO WRITE YOUR MESSAGE
- TYPE 'M' AND PRESS ENTER TO READ ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
- TYPE 'R' AND PRESS ENTER TO READ ANSWERS RELATED TO REMOTE ACCESS
- TYPE 'I' AND PRESS ENTER TO RETURN TO THE INTRODUCTION TO THE LIBRARY

CODE: Q

Figure 3a

Send message to library
Type in message below

Date: 1989 05 03 Time: 09 46

Type your Library-related message below. To exit, press ALT and Clear

To send your message, press ENTER

e end

Figure 3b

FREQUES

***** FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS *****

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THE FOLLOWING SCREENS CONTAIN A LIST OF THE MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED
QUESTIONS ON THE LIBRARY MESSAGE SYSTEM.

MESSAGE: HOW DO I BORROW A BOOK FROM THE LIBRARY AND WHAT IF SOMEONE
ELSE HAS SIGNED IT OUT?

RESPONSE: WE HAVE RECEIVED MANY QUESTIONS ON HOW TO BORROW BOOKS, HOW TO
PLACE REQUESTS FOR THOSE ON LOAN, ETC. PLEASE CHECK WITH
STAFF AT THE LIBRARY REFERENCE AND CIRCULATION DESKS FOR
INFORMATION. YOU CAN ALSO CONSULT THE INTRODUCTION TO THE
LIBRARY SYSTEM (TYPE 'I' AND PRESS ENTER) UNDER THE
BORROWING FROM THE LIBRARIES SECTION TO SEE SPECIFIC
INFORMATION ON BORROWER CARDS, FINES, PLACING HOLDS, ETC.
THERE IS ALSO A PRINTED HANDOUT ENTITLED "BORROWING FROM
THE LIBRARIES" AVAILABLE AT SERVICE DESKS.

SELECT ONE OF THE CODES BELOW AND PRESS ENTER

F FORWARD

D DOBIS N NOMADS S SERIALS I INTRO M MENU-MESSAGES Q MESSAGE

CODE:

Figure 4