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ENHANCING USER AWARENESS OF ELECTRONIC DATA BASES
FOR EAST ASIAN STUDIES

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1. Issues Considered

In today's electronic age, more and more library users are turning to electronic data bases for information retrieval. With the rapid development of electronic technology and the establishment of such large scale national or international bibliographic data bases as RLIN and OCLC, it is possible for researchers to access library materials physically housed in the information centers throughout North America.

In this study, we focus on the scholarly access of Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) for East Asian Studies. We call it the national data base, as opposed to the local data base such as the online public access catalog of OASIS at the University of Iowa Libraries. In particular, we will examine the following issues:

(1) What is the users' response to the access of the national data base?

(2) Is the national data base capable of serving the library users' needs?

(3) How do library users compare the national data base with a local data base?

(4) What are the problems that hinder library users' access to the national data base?

We compare the RLIN data base, a prototype of national data base, with the University of Iowa Libraries' online catalog, OASIS, a prototype of local data base. The comparative analysis is done by tabulating questionnaire responses collected from a selected group of students who had the opportunity to use both systems.

2. Methodology

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the RLIN CJK Roundtable held in conjunction with the 44th annual conference of the Association for Asian Studies, April 3, 1992, Washington, D.C.
Under the assumption that the participants in this study are not significantly different in their experience with and exposure to the RLIN system from the entire population of library users concerned, we attempted to make local observation in a meaningful manner that would facilitate further generalized analyses and identify some problem areas to be examined. Based upon our past unsystematic observation of the user behavior, we developed a list of the research hypotheses as follows.

A. One of the major hindrances to users’ consultation of the RLIN data bases is lack of easy and meaningful access being provided to them.

B. One of the major reasons for students’ non-use of the RLIN data bases is the fee charging structure that is rather prohibitive to those without research grant support.

C. One of the major reasons for which users, once having become aware of the existence of the RLIN data bases, would have recourse to RLIN is the broad coverage and representation of bibliographic data essential to their research projects.

We gave a questionnaire to a group of sixteen graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in a semester-long class on Chinese bibliography and reference works taught by one of the authors. Those students took the course either to satisfy their requirements for Sinological research methods or to learn more about the research resources for Chinese studies. The sixteen students represented a diverse background in Chinese studies: Chinese religion, Chinese literature and language, and Chinese librarianship. The questionnaire (see Appendix) was conducted after each of those participants was taught how to use the RLIN bibliographic data bases as well as the local online catalog. A percentage ratio of response is tabulated in the Appendix, alongside the original questions.

3. Discussion

Regarding hypothesis B, the most commonly shared negative view toward the RLIN system (Question 4 in Appendix), shared by twenty-two per cent of the respondents (Question 9 in Appendix), was the fee being charged when obtaining access from remote sites such as students’ home PCs.

Our first hypothesis was also substantiated. As high as 93 percent of the respondents said they would use RLIN, should better access be provided (Question 6 in Appendix).
RLIN's attractiveness to the users rests on, in addition to the ease of use suggested by participants, broad coverage and representation of bibliographic data. The two most popular RLIN characteristics that respondents appreciated were: (1) reflection of other member libraries' holdings; and (2) broad coverage of bibliographic records (Question 3 in Appendix).

In view of these findings we would like to propose some desired improvements to make the RLIN data bases more accessible to its library users.

First, provision of easier and more meaningful access to the RLIN data bases to library patrons is crucial. On some university mainframe computer systems, it is already possible to have simultaneous multiple sign-on to various information services so that users may, with a single key operation, instantaneously switch back and forth, for example, among the NOTIS-based University Libraries OPAC, INNOPAC-based Law School Library OPAC, RLIN, EPIC, and DIALOG systems. Concerted efforts by information specialists in ensuring availability of such functionality on all campuses would make the RLIN data bases as readily accessible as the local OPAC services. The present RLIN data transmission through Internet is closely related to the issue of better access and should be improved. Under current conditions, CJK vernacular characters are lost and diacritic symbols are transformed to an underscore in transmission. RLIN's long-awaited asynchronous link should be immediately made available to the user community.

Second, in addition to the networking and accessibility issue, financial considerations are also of importance. Thus, the new RLIN patron-oriented search service would be of particular significance. Prompt actual implementation of this service is vital.

Finally, although the broad coverage of bibliographic data in the RLIN system is of merit, it is the responsibility of RLIN member institutions to make it more valuable or beneficial for end-users' consultation. The current cataloging procedure at many libraries, which is changing more and more away from cooperative cataloging and holdings information maintenance in nation-wide bibliographic utility data bases, has direct relation to this matter, as has been repeatedly pointed out elsewhere. Incomplete or inaccurate holdings data that do not inform the data base users of specific volumes or parts ownership hinder patrons' access and speedy ILL transactions.

4. Conclusion

We could identify some obvious needs of the East Asian studies researchers regarding RLIN use: (1) more efforts are needed on the part of the librarians in making the RLIN data bases more readily accessible to the East Asian studies patrons; and (2) there is a need to solve some existing problems, such as incomplete holdings information and paucity of online help, before gaining considerable increase
in RLIN use among Asianists. We would like to point out in closing that more
knowledge of the information-seeking behavior of East Asian studies researchers with
regard to RLIN could perhaps be obtained by further research projects similar to
the one we have conducted.

Appendix: The Questionnaire

(1) In general, I prefer the RLIN data base to University of Iowa Libraries’ online
public access catalog.

TRUE 31%     FALSE 69%

(2) I feel that searching on the RLIN data base is pretty easy.

TRUE 75%     FALSE 25%

(3) The things I like best about the RLIN data base are its (rate your choices by
putting numeric values 1-5 against the choices below, with 1 being the highest and
5 the lowest)

Opportunities to see other libraries’ holdings (1)*
Broad coverage of bibliographic materials (2)
Vernacular display capability (3)
Search methods and search capability (4)
User friendliness (5)

*Ratings based on the numeric values tabulated from each response.

(4) The things I dislike most about the RLIN data base is its (rate your choices by
putting numerical values 1-5 against the choices below, with 1 being the highest and
5 the lowest)

Being charged for a fee to use it (1)*
Inability to find a RLIN terminal when I
want to use it, thus its being hard to access (2)
Its complex search keys (3)
Lack of coverage of bibliographic materials
I want (4)
Long responding time (5)

*Ratings based on the numeric values tabulated from each response.

(5) The reason I didn’t use the RLIN data base before was
I didn’t know it existed (58%)
I didn’t know that our library had it (14%)
I didn’t think it would be helpful to my work (14%)
I didn’t have access to it even though I was very interested in it (14%)

I was not interested in it even after
  I heard about it (0%)
  I didn’t like it (0%)

(6) I will use the RLIN data base more if I have access to it.

  TRUE  93%       FALSE  7%

(7) In future I will use the RLIN data base

  Only if I cannot find things I want in the local online catalog 68%
  If I need to use it, whether I must pay for it or not 25%
  Only if I am not charged for using it 7%

(8) If I am given equal access to both local OPAC and RLIN data bases to locate a particular bibliographic record, I would use

  a. Local OPAC first 87%
  b. RLIN data base first 13%

(9) The reason I will NOT use the RLIN data base in future is

  I want to know more about it before I use it 34%
  I don’t have access to it 22%
  I will be charged for using it 22%
  I feel that it is not worth the trouble 11%
  I can’t understand the search concepts and techniques 11%
  I don’t like it 0%
  It is inferior to our local data base 0%