

# Recent system developments of public libraries in Iceland

Iceland is in the unusual situation of having a shared library management system both for cataloging and circulation, which serves almost the entire country. All the leading libraries, including the National Library and scores of municipal, university and school libraries, have chosen to subscribe to the system. The scope of the project calls for increased cooperation between member libraries, and it offers interesting opportunities, e.g. in the field of inter-library loans, of patron privileges, and in cataloging.

## The Icelandic Library Consortium

In November 2001 a group of shareholders, representing several municipalities and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, founded a company to run a new library system for Iceland. At the time, Iceland was estimated to have approximately 400 libraries, and the new system was expected to serve all of them, providing for services such as cataloging, circulation and inter-library loans.

When the company was founded, the Aleph 500 library system from Ex Libris Inc. had already been purchased. The main task of the new company was to implement Aleph 500 and run it under service agreements with the libraries and their owners.

The project was unusual in many ways. This was the first time a computerized library system was implemented on this scale in Iceland. Even if it turned out that it was not realistic to expect all 400 libraries to join, 200 libraries are now participating and a great majority of those that aren't, are small or very small libraries. Each member municipality has the right to use the system for all of its libraries. A look at the number of inhabitants these municipalities indicates that it now serves over 90 % of the population of Iceland.

The project was also extraordinary from the system point of view, since it involved libraries of different types. Our current customer categories are the national library, public libraries, university libraries, primary and secondary school libraries, research libraries, government libraries and association libraries. Among the larger libraries are the National and University Library of Iceland, and the public libraries of all the larger towns. The system also serves around one

hundred school libraries, libraries of the ministries, the ALÞingi (parliament), the Central Bank, the National Museum, and the Árni Magnússon manuscript institute.

Finally, this project was unusual from the organizational point of view, since the company founded to run the system was a shareholders' company, which is currently an uncommon form of cooperation between the state and the municipalities. The company owners intend to assess the structure and results of the company in the near future, and in doing so they may consider some form of privatization or outsourcing.

## A few milestones

In our current work, we have reached a few major milestones. The implementation of the system includes several project phases. Aleph is a client-server based system with a web interface (web OPAC), and one of the first tasks was to translate key components of the Windows-based client to Icelandic. System tables had to be configured based on individual library needs. Designing, translating and coding a web interface came next. Migrating data from legacy systems was a huge task which could only have been completed with active participation on behalf of member libraries. Furthermore, the company had to provide training for librarians, run a help desk, provide statistics on the system and much more.

Here are some of the key milestones on our journey, so far:

- June 2002: Hosting of the system starts, as a result of a public tender
- May 2003: The system, now called Gegnir, is opened to the public as gegnir.is, with data from ten libraries, including the National Library (select English)
- April 2004: Around one hundred public libraries and school libraries join the system
- December 2005: Work on authority control for the system is finished.

And here are some of the tasks we have ahead of us:

- Upgrading the system to version 16
- Adding several secondary school and research libraries to the system

- Setting up a Z39.50 server
- Implementing a link server (SFX from Ex Libris) for member libraries.

### Benefits and opportunities

We all know what an immense role the Internet is playing in the distribution of information and entertainment in our part of the world. Using the web has created lots of opportunities for librarians, but running a country-wide library system like we do in Iceland offers some additional opportunities.

Member libraries generally use the same library card, but the card may or may not give the owner borrowing privileges in a given library, depending on whether the annual fee has been paid or not. Recently a few public libraries in neighboring towns of Reykjavik started sharing their resources by granting privileges to each others' patrons. This means, for instance, that if someone has paid the annual fee in the Public Library of Hafnarfjörður, he or she can borrow books in the Public Library of Kópavogur without paying a fee there too. If these libraries are satisfied with the results of this project, others might follow in their footsteps. Eventually all public libraries in the country might choose to unite in sharing the fees, so paying for privileges in one library would give you automatic access to all public libraries in Iceland. This would certainly make life easier for the general public.

Having one shared library system opens up other opportunities. Obviously, cataloguing is already much more effective than it used to be. Cataloguers now enter the bibliographic data only once for all of the 200 libraries, which saves a great deal of redundant work. However, the cataloguing process needs to be controlled carefully to ensure quality of the data since more people rely on its quality now than ever before. We also hope to make cataloguing more effective through collaboration with SVUC, the Scandinavian Virtual Union Catalog.

Having a centralized library system makes maintenance of the patron records easier. Domicile data are retrieved from the National Registry centrally on a regular basis, so librarians do not have to worry about maintaining patron data in dozens of different locations. The government-sponsored personal ID is also the key ID in the library system, so your patron ID is the same no matter which library you are dealing with.

The system also opens up for more effective handling of 'delinquencies', and the libraries could benefit from defining a collective policy in that area, so they do not end up with time-proven 'delinquents' moving freely from one suffering library to the next.

Inter-library loans have been implemented in the system, but more work is needed in that area. While ILL functions offered by the system certainly need to be streamlined, administrative issues are also involved, since it would be very helpful if all the libraries could agree on a common ILL tariff. If all library users knew that an inter-library loan inside Iceland costs e.g. the equivalent of 5 euros, regardless of library, they would be more likely to want to use the resources of distant libraries. Users, who find books in Gegnir, expect to be able to get these books into their hands, and it would be a poor excuse if the librarian says (s)he's sorry but this book belongs to another library. The customer will simply think: "Okay, I found the book in Gegnir, now I want it!" Thus, the new library system is bound to encourage more cooperation between the country's libraries, which, needless to say, will be a great blessing for the users.

Generally speaking, librarians are knowledgeable users of the Internet. But information sources on the Internet compete fiercely with information in paper format. As long as libraries are not planning to shut down their paper-based operations, they should make every reasonable effort to distribute paper-based information efficiently. When writing literature reviews or working on school papers, most users start looking for information on the Internet, then check out library books, and finally may resort to manuscripts if that happens to be relevant. For most of us, this order describes different levels of ease of access. Now that Icelandic library catalogues are available on the Internet, we should further enhance the ease of access to printed materials – and, for that matter, to manuscripts too. A single and country-wide library fee, a single and universal tariff for inter-library loans and enabling people to order inter-library loans over the Internet are important steps, capable of helping the printed stuff we love so dearly in surviving competition with e-data.

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