Italian OPACs: a tool to retrieve documents in Italian libraries

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Italian OPACs is a section of *AIB-WEB*, the website of Italian Library Association [1]. It contains the *Directory of Italian OPACs*, founded by Professor Riccardo Ridi in 1997 and maintained by a mostly voluntary editorial board. The directory is available at **www.aib.it/aib/lis/opac1-e.htm**

The directory aims to provide an inventory of all online catalogues (OPAC) present in the Italian territory and neighbouring Italian-speaking areas (Vatican City, Republic of San Marino, Swiss Canton Ticino). It includes either single-library or collective catalogues, metaOPACs and multiOPACs. During the last few years OPAC systems have been steadily spreading across Italy, and now exist in 42,5% of the Italian municipalities (there are approximately 8000 municipalities in total).

Each OPAC is catalogued in a database accessible through the Web. In the directory, each OPAC is displayed in an *infoopac card* containing the following information:

-   OPAC name;
-   catalogue type (status of the participant libraries: municipal, national, academic, school libraries, etc.);
-   links to information web pages about catalogue contents and to the list of participant libraries;
-   geographical coverage (according to the Italian administrative organization: national, regional, provincial and municipal);
-   type of material included (monographs, serials, other);
-   access interfaces.

The directory is subdivided according to catalogue type, and geographical coverage **www.aib.it/aib/opac/repertorio.htm**.

Additionally, there are sections displaying *lists of Italian periodicals* **www.aib.it/aib/opac/opac2.htm** and *OPAC software* **www.aib.it/aib/opac/sw.htm**.

The OPACs catalogued on the database are the foundation of *MAI, MetaOPAC Azalai italiano*. OPACs included in the directory, which comply with a set of minimum requirements, are connected by the Azalai software [2], in order to allow their simultaneous search **www.aib.it/aib/opac/mai2.htm3** .

The team

The work is carried out by an editorial board of varied composition **www.aib.it/aib/opac/op1red.htm**: the AIB team [1], composed of volunteers, is responsible for cataloguing the OPACs and updating the database (tasks are subdivided according to geographic region); the CILEA team [3] builds and updates the database, maintains *MAI*, develops the software application and processes statistics.
Within the editorial board there is a technical committee whose members make decisions about goals and functional requirements, discuss and solve technical hitches, ensure the smooth functioning of teamwork and act as a reference point for the editors.

The tool for editorial work is the *aw-opac* mailing list, subscribed to by all editors. Notices of new OPACs coming into the directory, corrections to cards just inserted, problems with cataloguing or any requests for information are all sent to the mailing list; each time an editor changes an *infoopac card*, or catalogues a new OPAC, a message is sent to the mailing list. Technical coordinators also subscribe to the *aw-opac-tecn* mailing list, in which technical and organizational issues of no relevance to other editors are discussed.

The two mailing lists serve as powerful and dynamic tools for communication, underpinning the *Italian OPACs*: they allow the editors to notify work completed or to be carried out on each catalogue, exchange opinions, suggestions and discuss technical problems.

The mailing lists work according to specific rules: subject captions are always expressed in a standardised form, in order to highlight the message topic in a concise yet exhaustive way. In one message thread, for example, the subject caption is kept unchanged; notices on an OPAC display subject caption with indication of geographical coverage followed by catalogue name and, possibly, by specific problem. The use of standardised messages allows immediate identification of their content and of the person who should provide an answer, making the work of editors more efficient.

For the editors the mailing list presents an on-going opportunity to learn and a means of enhancing their skills: any question raised is analyzed and discussed, since difficulties and solutions found for a specific case can often be applied to general problems and help set the rules for cataloguing OPACs in *MAI*. Those editors more skilled editors often

participate in the mailing list to direct and assist the new ones and offer their expertise. The assistance given by the skilled editors is fundamental as the personal contact between editors is only occasional due to geographical distances. There is a working page for staff on the Web, which contains the OPACs cataloguing guidelines and several articles. [4].

The mailing list operative approach and the absence of bureaucracy allow the working group to act efficiently and quickly. This kind of communication characterized the creation and promotion of the *MAI* MetaOPAC, which is now well-used and appreciated as a tool by Italian librarians. OPAC masters and managers of bibliographic services can contact *MAI*'s editors at the mailing list address **aw-opac@aib.it**, while requests for technical assistance and comments about functions can be sent to **azalai@cilea.it**.

The "virtual catalog" of *MAI*

The aim of *MAI* is to become a metasearch tool as complete as possible, containing links to all the relevant catalogues and offering comprehensive coverage of the documents owned by the Italian libraries. OPAC inclusion guidelines follow logic of non-duplication of information: for example, if a collective catalogue includes data from a single library, the former is connected and rather than the latter. The two major Italian collective catalogues are excepted to join: the Italian union catalogue of serials (ACNP) [5], and the SBN Index (national service for libraries) [6] (SBN has a hierarchical structure, and individual regional SBN poles have already been connected). At present approximately 260 Italian OPACs have been connected to *MAI*.

A most important activity carried out by the technical staff concerns the network of contacts with OPACmasters and library software developers. This aims to provide them with information about software configurations, so that their catalogues can be connected to *MAI* (technical requirements for OPAC connection are published at **www.aib.it/aib/opac/connect.htm**), an approach which has been successful and met with strong interest from OPACmasters: indeed, software applications not yet connectable are currently very few.

From a bibliographic point of view, in the last few years, the catalogues connected to *MAI*'s metasearch have augmented their own data and improved their retrieval systems: the virtual bibliographic indexes, the "metaindexes", subject, publisher, year of publication, series, Dewey's classification, standard numbers and keywords have all become available in the *MAI*'s metasearches.

Using *MAI* to search documents

Three interfaces enabling access to *MAI* content have been created:

- *selective search*, acting on a set of OPACs previously selected by the user according to typological and geographical criteria **www.aib.it/aib/opac/mai.htm3**;
- *regional search*, a subset of the previous one, but sent to all the OPACs of an Italian region previously selected by the user **www.aib.it/aib/opac/mai3.htm3**;
- *global search*, sent to all OPACs simultaneously, and therefore suitable for quickly searching rare or not readily available documents **www.aib.it/aib/opac/mai2.htm3**.

The same infrastructure of *MAI* is also used to create specialized MetaOPACs based on catalogues established for specific interests or within collaborative projects with other agencies. Limited sets of OPACs are connected to it, selected according to disciplinary or typological criteria. The agency becomes the owner of the project and promotes it within their community. Agency's web site hosts the homepage of the specialized MetaOPAC, while technical (software, server, data) and human resources needed to prepare and use the metasearch are CILEA's. The agency organizes the group of specialized librarians, and seeking further specialized libraries to include in its project, therefore expanding the potential of the metasearch. The agency also promotes the upgrading of OPACs in order to make them connectable to *MAI*. At present, about ten specialized metaOPACs have been created; they can be accessed from the directory home page [7].

In all these search functions filters on monographs or serials are set, and search can be executed in several bibliographical fields. Although only the title index is active on all the connected catalogues, when the MetaOPAC user chooses a subset of OPACs, the Azalai search engine computes all the fields available and these are shown to the user on the results page.

The user of MetaOPAC compiles the fields of the bibliographic form where all terms and fields are combined by the implicit Boolean operator "AND". The exact term search method (neither truncation nor proximity operators are used) helps to reduce "noise" in searching both known and less retrievable documents, which is the chief goal of the system.

When a request is submitted to *MAI*, the system translates the request into many dynamic URLs and activates them via the web; it then collects incoming responses from the OPACs and immediately sends them to the user (synchronization). The results from the databases of OPAC systems differ, but the user can select the relevant document from the compound list and activate its corresponding web link, thus connecting to the

public functions of the OPAC (availability, reservation, loan and inter library loan). One of the more useful functions of *MAI*, in particular for anyone non-Italian speaking, is the opportunity to retrieve obscure documents, locate them in Italian libraries, and apply for inter-library loan.

Usage statistics for *MAI*

The goal of *MAI* is to make all kind of documents retrievable, and locate them in Italian libraries. The use of the virtual catalogue is considerable (daily requests average 6000) and, in respect to the retrieval objective, is comparable with other options: the SBN Index (national service for libraries) [6] and the Italian union catalogue of serials (ACNP) [5].

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[1] AIB: Italian Library Association **www.aib.it/aib/aib-e.htm3**

[2].*Azalai* is the name given to camel trains traveling through the desert, and represents the act of parting and joining again; similarly, *MAI* search is sent separately on several OPACs, but their answers are re-united in the results page.

[3] CILEA: *Lombard Inter-University Consortium for Automatic Computation* **www.cilea.it/.**

[4] *Bibliography on OPACs* **www.aib.it/aib/opac/op1bib.htm***: some texts on OPACs, metaOPACs, virtual libraries and related directories* (in particular: *Il repertorio degli OPAC italiani e il MetaOPAC Azalai Italiano = Italian OPAC directory and Italian Azalai MetaOPAC*; *MetaOPAC specializzati derivati dal MAI = Special metaOPACs derived from MAI*; *Il software Azalai per la realizzazione di metaOPAC = The Azalai software for construction of metaOPACs*).

[5] Italian union catalogue of serials (ACNP) **acnp.cib.unibo.it/cgi-ser/start/en/cnr/fp.html**

[6] SBN Index (national service for libraries) **www.internetculturale.it/moduli/opac/opac.jsp?s=4&1=en .**

[7] *MAI Aerospaziale = Aerospace MAI, MAI Architettura = Architecture MAI, MAI Biologia = Biology MAI, MAI Slavistica = Slavic studies MAI, MAI Biblioteche dei Consigli delle Regioni = Regional board libraries MAI, MAI Biblioteche delle Pubbliche Amministrazioni = Public administration libraries MAI, MAI per N.I.L.D.E. (Network Inter Library Document Exchange) = MAI for NILDE , MetaOPAC scolastico = School MetaOPAC, MetaOPAC Azalai Regione Lombardia = Lombardy Region Azalai MetaOPAC.*