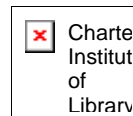


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Behind the screens

Make it easy

Research into how online catalogues for Scottish public libraries are presented on Council websites has found many obstacles to access...

SPEIR is a SLIC-funded project based at the Centre for Digital Library Research (CDLR), standing for 'Scottish Portals for Education, Information and Research' (<http://speir.cdlr.strath.ac.uk/>). SPEIR will develop an environment to underpin Scottish portals, creating the basis for "a coherent virtual learning, information and research landscape for all Scottish citizens, collaboratively built and maintained via an agreed country-wide, standards-based, globally interoperable, co-operative infrastructure".

The primary focus of SPEIR is 'Scotland's Culture' (See feature on [Scotland's portal](#)), but other aims include:

- Bringing public and further education libraries, cultural 'players', and other institutions that are properly equipped into the CAIRNS, SCONE and SCAMP framework.
- Establishing an infrastructure capable of supporting the creation and continuous development of a 'Scottish Distributed Digital Library' (SDDL), based on Scotland's Culture, BUBL LINK, SLAINTE, Glasgow Digital Library, Public library 'white pages', and other services.
- Developing these into central support services for distributed portals.

Integrating public libraries into the CAIRNS, SCONE and SCAMP framework lies at the centre of SPEIR, and negotiating the creation of the SDDL necessitates the application of interoperability standards, particularly with reference to Z39.50, bibliographic practice, and taxonomies. Whilst the emerging Web Service Technologies SOAP and UDDI do offer the prospect of improved networked information, Z39.50 remains the most functional and richest form of integrating disparate sources and services.

So where does this leave Scottish public libraries? A survey conducted by SPEIR for possible CAIRNS integration revealed some interesting statistics. Of the 31 library authorities surveyed, only 9 (29%) reported having their Opac Z39.50 enabled. SPEIR can take some comfort in that 8 (26%) of the 22

authorities without 'Z' have made compliance a matter of urgency. But this will still leave 17 library authorities (55%) isolated, particularly as the majority of Scottish academic and research libraries are now connected by CAIRNS (FE libraries will soon follow).

Given this, is SPEIR viable? The fact that only 16 library authorities (52%) have Web enabled Opacs isn't encouraging. But SPEIR is also about laying the foundations to foster Scottish digital library development and facilitating the dispersal of expertise.

Yet, if information is to be shared, why do Council websites (the most basic repository of local public information) erect so many obstacles to access? SPEIR is improving access to library resources by updating the links to online catalogues and websites available in SCONE, the Scottish Collections Network (<http://scone.strath.ac.uk/service/>). During the course of this work, we were struck by the wide range of routes, and barriers, to discovering public library services on the Web.

We used Google searches for the names of services, taken from Scottish Library and Information Resources (<http://scone.strath.ac.uk/slir/index.cfm>). We also tried to locate local authority homepages, and navigate from there to the library web pages. Our aim was to identify a specific URL for pages pertinent to individual branch libraries and, if available, the online catalogue.

The quickest and easiest route was provided by those services with a Google hit in the top five. Unfortunately, some of these linked to the homepage of the Council instead of to library services, and we encountered difficulties in accessing service pages within these websites. Some were very helpful, with a clear label for library services on the site navigation bar. The next best thing was the provision of a simple site search facility. Things began to get frustrating when we had to use A-Z guides to Council services. Some only listed the names of individual branch libraries, so looking under 'L' was doomed to failure.

Using navigation menus when library services were not listed at the top level turned into a guessing game: Education? Community? Leisure? Arts? Learning? Expecting users to know the Council hierarchy does little to foster access. Many websites offered more than one of these navigation routes, often exposing their limitations.

CILIPS, SLIC, and other organisations put considerable effort into developing and improving access to public information, recognising that there will always be differences between locally administered services, reducing the effectiveness and reliability of automatic search engines in providing access for a wide range of users. SCONE seeks to provide a detailed route map to Scotland's distributed digital library, but there is one particular feature of Council and, indeed, library service websites which severely impairs its value: the use of frames, which present an identical URL for every page, thus rendering them indistinguishable in cyberspace. They are also difficult to use by visually impaired people and automatic reading devices.

While recognizing that constraints may be imposed by the software, standards, and policies involved, we suspect that immediate and long-term improvements might be possible with more of a "think globally before acting locally" approach. After all, some public library websites are actually quite good.

These issues should not detract from the immense progress that has been made in recent years in providing greater access to networked information in Scotland. Indeed, in many ways there is little to be despondent about; Scotland remains further ahead than the rest of the UK and (given that we are small but perfectly formed) we are in a better position to develop in the information environment of the future.

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