

## Social Networking the Catalog: A Community Based Approach to Building Your Catalog and Collection

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### **Introduction before the Introduction**

You came to hear about the Chicago Underground Library. As of this month, a lot is changing for the library. The most important thing is that we are changing the name: we are now known as the Read/Write Library. I will go into this further later to explain the rationale behind this. We also have been without a space since March, but in a few weeks will move into a brand new custom built space that will finally allow us to arrange the collection and programming in the way that works best for us (images on page 2 of slide).

### **Introduction**

We all know that we are in the business of libraries to get people involved with the material that we collect, no matter what type of library we work at. Lately, we want more than that—we want their comments, tags, opinions, and reviews. That’s a good thing. Why? It helps people who use the materials learn about what is available, it helps you understand how people are using your material, and everyone benefits from richer metadata.

I will be discussing the philosophy behind the Read/Write Library, describe the history and future plans for the catalog, and explain how every library can take something away from our model.

### **A Bit About the Read/Write Library**

First, the reason we changed the name to the Read/Write library is to more accurately reflect what we are trying to do. The Chicago Underground Library was founded in 2006, and at first focused mainly on small press and independent works—hence, “Underground,” though it was never meant to be a zine library or similar highly specialized collection. Rather, it was meant to connect artists from disparate fields, e.g. bringing

together poets with painters, sculptors with writers. The books in the library were partly just a lure to get the people in the door that needed to talk to each other. The collection consists of items about Chicago or published by Chicago authors. The basic mission was, and is, to illuminate connections that show how ideas have spread throughout the city between different neighborhoods and communities, and to provide a venue (physical and theoretical) for new connections to emerge. Our method of collection development and cataloging is comprehensive—we collect everything, and we treat all contributors as equally important. We also allow anyone who is interested to participate in the governance of the library as much as he or she is willing. This may remind of you of something else--the internet, or more specifically, the World Wide Web (this, and the following paragraph is illustrated on Slide 4).

We often think of the Internet as a system for global connectivity. It is that, but in lowering the barrier for entry into publishing and participation, it made new types of networks possible. It allows communities to flourish through self-moderation, and captures cultural or intellectual trends in real time. There have been numerous books on this topic, a list is provided later in suggestions for further reading, which you can find in the conference materials page. Of course, while people with access to servers and some technical skill could take advantage of the possibilities of the World Wide Web, we all know that it was not until the past decade that it finally became possible, easy, and fun for visitors to websites to participate. The web, which for the vast majority of people was read only, now became the read/write web. We suggest that libraries need to become read/write libraries. We are currently in the era of the semantic web, or at least the semantic web as practical for the average person. The web will begin to function like a well organized library, but with anyone able to read the web, write to it, and categorize data meaningfully.

The Read/Write library follows this model, and allows visitors to the library or the catalog to realize that they too can create and participate in culture. While this is no judgment on the traditional library, it is read only. This is a read/write library. We seek to take all that is possible in the Read/Write web and recreate it in a physical library and its catalog. We connect users with content, the library, and each other.

Programming of various kinds remains part of our central mission. (Some events are illustrated on slides 5 and 6). One other new aspect of the library is our experimental business model that will pay for our new space. We are taking a cue from the technology world by offering coworking space. This will play off the nostalgia people have for doing homework at the university library. We will offer a top tier of membership that will allow continual access to the library space, limited to a fairly small number of people. We will charge a much lower rate than companies, because the space will also be available to the public during regular open hours and programming. This model will allow us to cover the rent and other overhead, as well as to expand collection development budget and give back to the communities who have supported us through donations over the years. We think that this model is in keeping with the way the world works, and other libraries might want to consider it.

### **Getting into the Catalog**

Clearly for this model to work, we need to have a system that allows, and actually preferences, connections between items, the creators of those items, and their contents. Cataloging is done by members of the community—regular volunteers and people who just drop in off the street. Some are librarians, but most are not. (Slide 7/visit [readwritelibrary.org](http://readwritelibrary.org)) We instruct catalogers to list every contributor to the publication, whether the author, editor, typesetter, or illustrator. They are provided with several controlled taxonomies for defining the format of the item and subjects, but then are also asked to contribute their own tags and write a very short abstract. Another key component of the metadata is that we ask catalogers to assign a geolocation tag to describe either where the item was published or what it describes, which supports navigating the catalog by neighborhood. We also collect email addresses and websites for publishers where provided, which we hope will allow more connections to be made. One of our event series in the past is called "Orphan Works," which usually artists from another medium to adapt an orphan work from our collection into another work of art to give it new life. In one case, however, two experimental theatre artists were really taken with a publication for which we did have an author with an email address. They got in touch with the author, who gave them

permission to adapt her zine into an experimental theatre production, and some members of her family who still lived in Chicago were able to attend the production. This was a time in which we were able to create a wonderful new connection that resulted in more art--and some income for the zine author who was able to sell copies of her zine to theater goers.

Now let's take a look at what happens once an item is cataloged. While we do have traditional faceted search, when someone clicks on "Catalog" they are taken immediately to a random display of items—very similar to the feeling of walking through the library. We also have an "Obscurity Meter", which ranks items by how few page views they have, which again asks us to reconsider what it means for something to be "popular." We also encourage anyone who has additional information about an item to share a comment. Over time (probably once we are more caught up with getting everything in the catalog to begin with), we will start to incorporate these comments into the record to share more of the story. Our tagging system means that our records end up highly ranked in search engines, which allows people who search for themselves to find the catalog record and therefore leave us a comment or get in touch with us some other way (see Slate & Marrow for a recent example). Occasionally authors will find that we have one of their books and offer to send us all the rest. High search engine rankings also mean that as we gather items that provide alternate narratives to well known events that these will appear next to more mainstream media in searches, and provide greater context and connection for these events.

The point of this is to build a network of items, subjects, and the people who have worked on them. We sometimes call it "Yelp for books," but the important thing is that it is not meant to create social experiences based on popularity or recommendations, but rather thrives on the random interconnections that happen in a city or in an artistic movement. It is, again, about the connection, and asks visitors to the library to imagine their own role within the library and the catalog.

### **How Does It Work?**

First, an important question to answer is: why create our own system rather than adapting a current one? (Slide 8). We wanted to take advantage of the social networking

features built into Drupal, and not have to hack a system meant for something else. The most important thing to realize about this system is that it is not meant to be a secure repository or anything like a traditional ILS. The system is built using Drupal 6, though we would like to upgrade to Drupal 7. While it would absolutely be possible to build an ILS in Drupal, we do not need this functionality--but perhaps something to think about! It is an extremely simple system, and one that can exist in other content management systems as is. However, we do hope to eventually provide a Drupal install profile or module that will allow other organizations to quickly set up a Read/Write Library style catalog in Drupal. I have a list of the modules we use in Drupal 6 and how we see this mapping to Drupal 7 (these are listed on Slide 9). In Drupal 7 the major differences are that we will use the RDF module to begin using linked data to link our data out to other data and begin some more formal authority control. Users will be given additional fields to vote on or rate (not the quality of the items, as that is not the point of the catalog or collection). We will also switch to a responsive grid theme that will allow any size of screen to easily access the catalog. In addition several modules have changed between versions 6 and 7.

### **Social Catalogs For Everyone**

To understand how to transfer the model to another system, it's important to understand what our system is not. It's clearly not an ILS (our collection is acquired mainly through donations and it's non-circulating). We don't recommend items based on ratings, though in future developments it will become easier for users to vote or rate on features in items. It also does not follow any library standards—there is no AACR2 cataloging, no LCSH, limited authority control, and definitely no MARC. We don't see this as a problem, given that much of our collection would be exceptions to the rule for standard cataloging procedures. But we also know that this model doesn't immediately transfer to other more conventional libraries. The technical hurdle of creating a social layer to the catalog is a relatively trivial problem--creating a social library takes much more work. We hope that our model creates a theoretical framework from which your library can draw inspiration when choosing the appropriate technical solution.

## Social Cataloging Projects

Social cataloging exists in several realms. I want to consider several models.

### *i. Social networks and e-commerce websites*

The idea of socializing via reading or books is not new. The big player in this is, of course, Amazon. Many people rely on Amazon as a discovery platform: they rate books, write reviews, create lists, and participate in forums. Two other popular social cataloging and reading sites are LibraryThing (which recommends books to users based on analytics of their book collections) and Goodreads (which recommends books to users based on review and ratings, similar to Netflix). There are several other popular services, including several tied in with e-reader devices and e-reading platforms. These services are more fun than any library catalog, and I predict that when the Facebook Timeline model is rolled out even more people will participate in social reading via their e-reader or a social cataloging site, since it will be easier than ever to share with friends. People who “like” (in a Facebook sense) to read will be happy to “read” in a Facebook Open Graph Protocol environment.

If social networking platforms have captured the fun and social aspect of cataloging, where do libraries fit in?<sup>1</sup> Libraries have two markets cornered: special or local collections and specialized research collections. They also have the specialized knowledge that comes through expert use of such collections, as well as wealth of local knowledge among its patrons. These are the the collections and expertise worth cultivating--in fact, crucial to cultivate since it would otherwise be lost. Along these lines, I would like to invite a thought experiment: imagine a library in which the catalog for standard items is a mapping of ISBN or other standard number to an RFID tag. This information is provided by an easily installed bookmarklet or other automatic finding tool. When someone discovers a book socially, this guides them to the nearest location of the book--right down to the appropriate shelf using geolocation in the patron’s phone. This may sound a little grim and impersonal, but now add another layer, in which the library provides a Read/Write style library catalog, in which community or other special collections are cataloged. Patrons are invited to share

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of social cataloging sites as they relate to libraries, see Spiteri, “The Impact of Social Cataloging Sites on the Construction of Bibliographic Records in the Public Library Catalog.”

in this catalog, whether by donating items to the collection or cataloging them. Perhaps an ambitious library would additionally allow patrons to catalog the standard collection in this system.

*ii. Crowdsourcing*

The Read/Write Library is, as I have said, possible because of the internet. It is really easy for anyone to find one of our items and then immediately participate in the discussion--no user accounts or library cards required. We do ask that people who wish catalog attend a cataloging orientation, but after that they are free to work as they please. People can log on from home and fix metadata. We do hope to offer even more opportunities for visitor response and interaction in the future.

Distributing the work among interested volunteers is a good way--and often the only way possible--to run any type of metadata generating project. This goes for traditional as well as experimental projects. In records management, Steve Bailey argues that corporate records also benefit from tagging by the expert users of the documents.<sup>2</sup> Archivists are recognizing that researchers who use the material can contribute valuable item-level information that would not be gathered in a traditional description. There is ample evidence for how popular this model is generally--a model made possible only by the internet. There are many examples (Several are illustrated on Slide 12, please see the bibliography for links to these). A list of suggested resources for learning more about crowdsourcing projects is provided in the bibliography. This does not entail the end of the expert. Experts in information management must always be at the head of such projects, and monitor them along the way. We know at the Read/Write Library that we will constantly need to fix volunteer contributed metadata. So far this has been done by LIS interns and volunteers with LIS degrees, and we expect this will always be a part of the project. Traditional cataloging is difficult to do properly and requires years of training. These skills need to be the backbone of crowdsourcing, but allowing everyone to participate gives the catalog life.

*iii. Next generation catalogs, both proprietary and open source*

Next generation catalogs are the solution that most libraries generally use. These are overlays to ILSs that give a social look to the system. These allow commenting, rating,

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<sup>2</sup> Bailey, *Managing the Crowd*.

pulling in reviews from other systems, sharing of items, and tag clouds, among many other features. These vary in complexity, price, and feature set. Additionally, discovery layers are not always next generation catalogs, but often function as one.<sup>3</sup> (Some of these are illustrated on slide 13)

I would argue there is no point in offering a social experience in the catalog without a social experience in the library. This is why we want to offer the Read/Write Library as a new model for libraries. We allow everyone to share in the creation of the library collection and catalog, and we believe that this intersection of community and collection offer the connection possible in a hyperlinked world of information.

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<sup>3</sup> For the most recent and up to date information on next generation catalogs and discovery layers, see Marshall Breeding's Library Technology Guides.

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