

Instant Gratification!

The Z39.50 Gateway to Searching, Cataloging, and ILL

by Joe Thomas

The "Z39.50 Gateway to Searching, Cataloging, and ILL" program presented compelling testimony both to the benefit of the Z39.50 protocol and the need for ongoing cooperative development between the interested parties. **Mary Jane Kelsey** (Associate Director for Technical Services of the Lillian Goldman Library of Yale University) coordinated the program and opened it with a discussion of the Z39.50 basics. Z39.50 is the name of a protocol, a standard of communication of electronic information, that essentially allows library online catalogs to talk to each other. A user in Library A may, using a familiar Library A search strategy, look for records in Library B's catalog, even if libraries A and B operate different online systems, as long as both libraries use the Z39.50 protocol. Client A and Server B translate the search into a language common to both catalogs based on Z39.50 "core facilities," one of which, the search facility, contains six "attributes," each with a variety of options. This allows great specificity in setting up the kind of search a local system will send out or allow in, but it also means that local systems could potentially offer such wide-ranging differences within allowable Z39.50 settings that communication might be compromised. Kelsey pointed out that Z39.50 does not exist to standardize *user* interfaces. Whatever set of searching capabilities your library has chosen should be able to work with Z39.50. The protocol itself makes no specific demands on that interface.

But standardized settings *within* Z39.50 would ease communication roadblocks between libraries. **Larry E. Dixon** (Library of Congress Network Development and MARC Standards Office) reviewed the history of the development of Z39.50 and its eventual establishment as an official ANSI/NISO standard. There is an active and formal operation undergirding the protocol. The Library of Congress is the "Z39.50 Maintenance Agency"—which puts LC in close contact with the "Z39.50 Implementor's Group," (ZIG). For historical reasons, vendors were not given a unified vision of Z39.50 functionality within systems at the outset, so there has been a wide variety of communication capabilities between

systems. Several projects to profile Z39.50 in agreed-upon ways have been implemented in an effort to provide systems vendors and libraries with standardization of Z39.50 settings. This will help libraries gain a clearer understanding of the Z39.50 capabilities offered by vendors and facilitate better and more consistent search results between libraries. Perhaps the best profile model so far is the "Bath Profile" developed in the United Kingdom. Z30.50 products from vendors that agree to abide by Bath Profile requirements will operate according to guidelines for basic search and retrieval—including specifications both for the way a client's search is formulated and a server's execution of that search. The Bath Profile also requires that a search support level be designated. A library will then know if its vendor supports searches at Level 0 (basic), which includes required searching capability for author, title, subject, and keyword; or at Level 1, which includes those searches plus 15 others and the ability to browse index screens. Level 2 has not been officially defined yet but will include more searching possibilities.

Ed Glazier of the Research Libraries Group (RLG) then provided some examples of Z39.50 capabilities in action in several RLG products and services. Zephyr is a service that uses Z39.50 to allow users of other online systems to search the RLG Union Catalog; The English Short Title Catalog; Hand Press Books; CitaDel citation files; a variety of authority files. Access to several foreign library services are also available through the RLG Z39.50 Gateway. A significant upcoming development at RLG includes Z39.50 access to holdings information in member libraries' local records.

Mary Jane Kelsey ended the session with a hypothetical ethical question: should a library whose records are being used by other libraries (who are able to download those records via Z39.50) charge for their use?

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