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Advancing Library Systems: The Impact of OPACs on Research and Learning

V. Senthur Velmurugan*

Abstract

The Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) has emerged as a transformative tool in library science, reshaping the landscape of information access and retrieval. This abstract explores the historical evolution, functionalities, and broader implications of OPAC systems in modern libraries. Initially conceived as digital replacements for traditional card catalogues, OPACs have undergone significant advancements, leveraging internet technologies to offer users unprecedented access to library collections. From basic search functionalities to sophisticated query options, OPACs have evolved into dynamic platforms that facilitate efficient exploration and retrieval of diverse library resources, including books, journals, multimedia materials, and digital assets. The abstract examines the key features and functionalities of contemporary OPACs, including advanced search capabilities, personalized user interfaces, and seamless integration with other library services. Furthermore, it highlights the role of OPACs in promoting information literacy and supporting diverse user needs by providing remote access, real-time availability status, and tailored recommendations. Moreover, the abstract discusses the broader impact of OPACs on library management practices, user engagement, and the dissemination of knowledge in the digital age. It underscores OPACs' role as essential tools for fostering lifelong learning, research, and intellectual discovery in academic, public, and specialized library settings. In conclusion, the abstract emphasizes the significance of OPACs as foundational components of contemporary library infrastructures, driving innovation, accessibility, and collaboration in the pursuit of knowledge dissemination and enrichment.

Keywords: Advanced Search, Boolean Operators, Database, Subject Headings, Search, Interlibrary Loan, and Reserve Materials.

INTRODUCTION

An Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) is a digital database that provides access to the collection of resources held by a library or group of libraries. It serves as the primary interface through which users can search for and access books, journals, multimedia materials, and other resources available within the library's holdings. OPACs have evolved from traditional card catalogues to sophisticated online systems, offering a wide range of features to enhance the search and retrieval experience for users. These features include keyword searching, advanced search options, subject browsing, sorting and filtering capabilities, as well as integration with external databases and digital repositories. The introduction of OPACs has revolutionized the way patrons interact with library collections, enabling remote access to resources, facilitating efficient discovery of materials, and streamlining the borrowing and renewal processes. OPACs have become indispensable tools for both library users and librarians, providing centralized access to vast collections of information resources [24].

***Author for Correspondence**
V. SenthurVelmurugan
E-mail: srisenthur85@gmail.com

Librarian, Kongu Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Nanjanapuram, Tamilnadu, India

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The Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) (Figure 1) represents a fundamental component of modern library services, providing users with virtual access to a library's collections and resources. OPACs have revolutionized the way patrons discover, locate, and access materials within libraries. They offer a user-friendly interface where individuals can search for books, journals, multimedia items, and other materials available in the library's holdings from any location with internet connectivity. Initially developed as electronic alternatives to traditional card catalogues, OPACs have evolved significantly over time. They now incorporate advanced features such as keyword searching, Boolean operators, faceted searching, browsing by subject or category, and personalized user accounts for managing borrowing history and preferences. OPACs also frequently integrate with other library systems, including circulation management and interlibrary loan services, to provide users with a seamless experience. The introduction of OPACs has transformed library services, empowering users to efficiently locate resources tailored to their needs and interests. By offering remote access to library collections, OPACs have expanded the reach of libraries beyond their physical confines, enabling individuals to engage with scholarly materials and educational resources from anywhere in the world [25].

Figure 1. Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC).

OBJECTIVES OF ONLINE PUBLIC ACCESS CATALOGUE (OPAC)

The "best" objectives of an Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) are those that align closely with the needs and expectations of users while also supporting the mission and goals of the library. Here are some key objectives considered essential for a successful OPAC:

Accessibility Compliance

Ensure that the OPAC adheres to accessibility standards (e.g., WCAG) to make it usable by individuals with disabilities, including those using assistive technologies such as screen readers.

Accessible Anytime, Anywhere

Ensure that the OPAC is accessible online 24/7 from any internet-enabled device, offering users the flexibility to search for resources at their convenience.

Comprehensive Search Capabilities

Provide robust search functionality that allows users to search across various parameters such as author, title, subject, keyword, publication date, and format, enabling them to quickly locate relevant materials.

Enhanced Discovery Tools

Implement advanced discovery tools such as faceted search, relevance ranking, and federated

searching across multiple databases or catalogues to improve the accuracy and efficiency of resource discovery.

Integration with Library Services

Seamlessly integrate OPAC with other library services such as circulation, interlibrary loan, reserves, and digital repositories to provide users with a unified platform for accessing library resources and services.

Multilingual Support

Offer multilingual support to cater to the diverse linguistic needs of users, enabling them to search and access resources in their preferred language.

Personalization Options

Provide features for users to personalize their OPAC experience, such as saving searches, creating reading lists, setting preferences, and receiving alerts for new acquisitions or relevant updates.

Promotion of Information Literacy

Support information literacy initiatives by providing instructional materials, tutorials, and guidance within the OPAC to help users develop effective search strategies, evaluate information critically, and become informed researchers.

Regular Updates and Maintenance

Maintain the OPAC with regular updates to the catalogue database, software patches, and improvements based on user feedback to ensure optimal performance and reliability.

User-Centric Design

Design the OPAC with a user-centric approach, focusing on ease of use, intuitive navigation, and a visually appealing interface to enhance the user experience.

By focusing on these objectives, libraries can create an OPAC that effectively meets the needs of users, enhances access to information resources, and contributes to the overall success of the library's mission.

WHAT IS OPAC

The term "OPAC" stands for Online Public Access Catalogue (Figure 2). It refers to a computerized system utilized by libraries to provide users with online access to the library's collection of materials. Users can search for and locate books, journals, multimedia items, and other resources within the library's holdings using various search criteria such as author, title, subject, keyword, or ISBN/ISSN. Detailed bibliographic information about each item in the collection, including titles, authors, publishers, publication dates, and subject headings, is typically provided. Users may also have access to additional features such as placing holds or requests on items, renewing borrowed materials, and managing library accounts online [1].

Specifically, an OPAC is defined as a computerized database system that allows users to access and search a library's collection of materials over the internet. Users can perform searches based on various criteria such as author, title, subject, keyword, or ISBN/ISSN to locate specific items within the library's holdings. OPACs provide detailed bibliographic information about each item, including titles, authors, publishers, publication dates, and subject headings. Additionally, users may have access to features such as placing holds on items, renewing borrowed materials, and managing their library accounts online through the OPAC interface [2].

DEFINITION OF OPAC

The term "OPAC" stands for "Online Public Access Catalogue." An OPAC is a computerized system that enables users to access and search a library's collection of materials via the internet. Users can search for specific items using various criteria such as author, title, subject, or keyword. OPACs typically provide detailed bibliographic information about each item in the collection, including titles, authors, publishers, publication dates, and subject headings. Additionally, users may be able to perform functions such as placing holds on items, renewing borrowed materials, and managing their library accounts online through the OPAC interface [3].

An Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) is a digital system used by libraries to help users search for and access library materials via the internet. It provides information about books, journals, and other resources available in the library's collection, allowing users to find and borrow items easily [4].

An Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) is an internet-based system that allows users to search for and access library materials, such as books and journals, electronically [5].

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OPAC AND WEB OPAC

The difference between OPAC and Web OPAC lies primarily in their accessibility and interface design. Here's a breakdown of the distinctions:

OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue):

1. OPAC refers to a digital system used by libraries to catalogue and provide access to their collections of books, journals, multimedia materials, etc.
2. It is typically accessed through computers within the library premises and may have a traditional interface resembling a search terminal or kiosk.
3. OPACs were initially developed as standalone systems, providing access to library collections via local networks.

Web OPAC (Web-based Online Public Access Catalogue)

1. Web OPAC (Figure 3) is an evolved form of OPAC that is accessible over the internet via web browsers.
2. Unlike traditional OPACs, Web OPACs offers remote access to library resources, enabling users to search and access materials from anywhere with internet connectivity.
3. Web OPACs has a user-friendly interface designed for online access, often featuring advanced search capabilities, interactive features, and customization options.

They are accessed through library websites or dedicated OPAC portals, allowing users to search for and access resources without physically visiting the library [32].

Figure 2. Online Public Access Catalogue.

Figure 3. Web OPAC's

USES OF ONLINE PUBLIC ACCESS CATALOGUE (OPAC)

Online Public Access Catalogues (OPACs) serve as indispensable tools in libraries, offering a multitude of functions that streamline access to information resources. These functionalities include:

Access to Digital Resources

Many OPACs integrate digital resources such as e-books, online journals, databases, and multimedia content alongside physical holdings, providing seamless access to diverse materials across different formats.

Availability Checking

Users can quickly determine the availability status of specific resources, including whether they are currently on loan, their location within the library, and their due dates, facilitating informed borrowing decisions.

Browsing and Exploration

OPACs offer browsing features that enable users to explore resources by categories such as subject headings, genres, formats, or curate lists, promoting serendipitous discovery and exploration of the library's collection.

Citation Management

Researchers can generate citations for resources found in the OPAC, simplifying the process of citing references in academic papers, presentations, and other scholarly works.

Information Retrieval

Detailed bibliographic information about resources, including summaries, tables of contents, publication details, and subject headings, can be accessed through OPACs, aiding users in evaluating the relevance of resources to their needs.

Personalization

Some OPACs offer personalized user accounts, allowing users to save searches, bookmark resources, track reading history, and receive recommendations based on their preferences, thereby enhancing the user experience.

Requesting Materials

OPACs facilitate the request and reservation of materials, allowing users to place holds, renew loans, and request interlibrary loans for items not available locally, thereby enhancing access to desired resources.

Resource Discovery

OPACs enable users to search for materials within the library's collection using various search criteria such as title, author, subject, keyword, or ISBN/ISSN [6].

TYPES OF OPAC

Online Public Access Catalogues (OPACs) can vary in terms of their design, features, and functionality based on the needs and resources of the libraries implementing them. Here are some common types of OPACs:

Discovery Layer OPACs

Discovery layers provide a unified search interface that combines the functionalities of traditional OPACs with access to electronic resources, digital repositories, and other online collections. They offer a single point of access to a wide range of library materials, both physical and digital (Dempsey, 2008) [30].

Integrated Library System (ILS) OPACs

Integrated Library Systems typically include OPAC functionality as part of a comprehensive library management system. These OPACs are tightly integrated with other library services such as circulation, cataloguing, acquisitions, and serials management (Alire & Evans, 2010) [26].

Mobile OPACs

Mobile OPACs are specifically designed for access from smart phones and tablets, offering a responsive interface optimized for smaller screens and touch-based interactions (Tallman & Day, 2012) [31].

Open Source OPACs

These are OPACs built using open-source software frameworks, allowing libraries to customize and modify the system according to their specific requirements. Open-source OPACs offer flexibility and cost-effectiveness for libraries with limited budgets (Bibliotheek, 2009) [27].

Social OPACs

Social OPACs incorporate social networking features such as user-generated reviews, ratings, tags, and recommendations to enhance the discovery and sharing of library resources (Casey & Savastinuk, 2006) [28].

Web-based OPACs

These are OPACs accessible through a web browser, allowing users to search and access library resources remotely. Web-based OPACs are the most common type in modern library systems due to their accessibility and ease of use (Connaway & Dickey, 2010) [29].

FEATURES OF OPAC

Online Public Access Catalogues (OPACs) provide a range of features to facilitate users' access to library resources. Here are some common features of OPACs along with a reference:

Keyword Search

Users can search for resources using keywords related to the topic, title, author, or any other relevant information (Maniotes & Cellucci, 2017) [17].

Advanced Search

Allows users to refine searches by combining multiple criteria such as title, author, subject, publication date, and format (Mao, 2015) [18].

Boolean Operators

Enables users to construct complex search queries using Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to refine search results (Mutschke & Albrechtsen, 2001) [19].

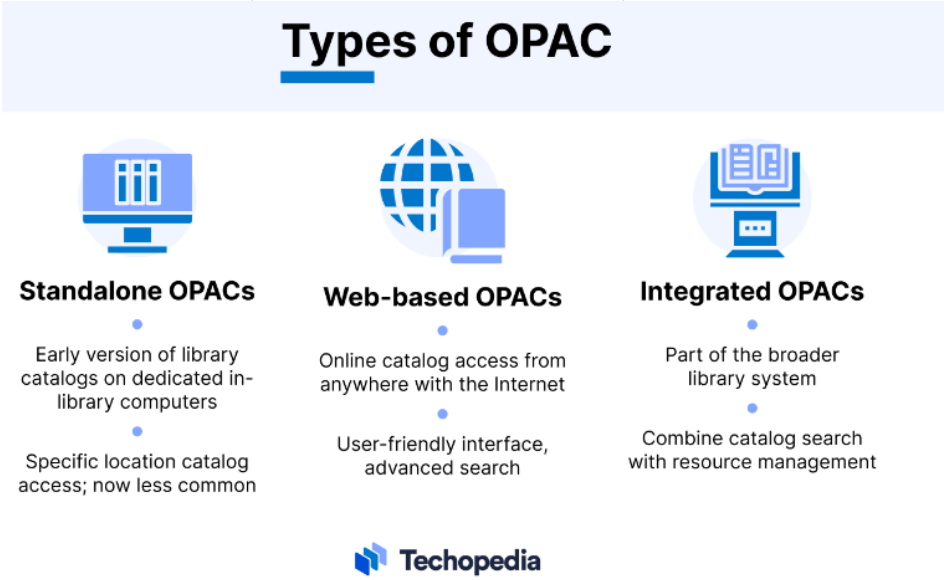

Figure 4. Features and Types of OPAC's.
Source-https://www.techopedia.com/definition/online-public-access-catalog-opac

Truncation and Wildcard Searching

Allows users to broaden their searches by including variations of search terms using truncation (*) and wildcard (?) symbols (Froehlich & Doane, 2000) [20].

Subject Searching

Facilitates exploration of resources within specific topical domains by searching for materials based on subject headings (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2015) [21].

Faceted Search

Offers users the ability to refine search results dynamically by selecting facets such as format, language, publication year, or subject (Tunkelang, 2009) [22].

Browsing Features

Allows users to browse resources by categories such as new arrivals, popular items, or specific collections (Meadow & Yuan, 1997).

Sorting Options

Enables users to sort search results based on relevance, title, author, publication date, or other criteria for better organization (Huang, 2002) [23].

SEARCHING FEATURES OF OPAC

Searching the Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) involves a range of features and strategies tailored to facilitate efficient retrieval of library resources. Below are key aspects of OPAC searching, along with references for further exploration?

Advanced Search

Provides users with options to refine their searches by combining multiple criteria such as title, author, subject, and publication date. This feature enhances precision and allows users to specify their search parameters (Jeng & Hsia, 2015) [13].

Boolean Operators

Allow users to use Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to construct complex search queries and refine search results (Cohen, 2013) [14].

Faceted Search

Offers users the ability to refine search results dynamically by selecting facets such as format, language, publication year, or subject. Faceted search enhances exploratory search and supports users in discovering relevant materials (Tunkelang, 2009) [16].

Keyword Search

Users input keywords relevant to their search query, enabling retrieval of materials based on matches with the entered terms (Buckland, 1992) [12].

Subject Searching

Enables users to search for materials by subject headings, facilitating exploration of resources within specific topical domains (Hudgins, 1998) [15].

ADVANTAGE OR BENEFITS OF OPAC

OPAC, or Online Public Access Catalogue, refers to an electronic database of materials held by a library or group of libraries. There are several advantages associated with OPAC systems:

24/7 Availability

Unlike physical library catalogues, OPACs are typically available 24/7, enabling users to search for materials at any time that suits them. This flexibility accommodates diverse schedules and enhances user satisfaction.

Accessibility

OPAC systems provide users with remote access to library catalogues. This means patrons can search for materials, check availability, and even place holds or requests for items from anywhere with internet access. This greatly enhances convenience for users who may not be able to physically visit the library.

Efficiency

OPACs allow for quick and efficient searching of library collections. Users can easily search by author, title, subject, or keyword, and retrieve relevant results within seconds. This saves time compared to manually browsing through shelves or flipping through card catalogues.

Expanded Search Options

OPACs often offer advanced search features, such as Boolean operators, truncation, and filters, allowing users to refine their searches and locate specific materials more effectively. This is particularly useful in large library collections where finding specific items can be challenging.

Integration of Multimedia

Modern OPAC systems often integrate various types of materials beyond traditional books, such as e-books, audiovisual resources, digital archives, and online databases. This allows users to access a wide range of information resources through a single platform.

Reduced Physical Footprint

By offering electronic access to library catalogues, OPAC systems help reduce the need for physical space to store paper-based catalogues or card files. This can result in cost savings for libraries and allows them to allocate space for other purposes.

User Empowerment

OPACs empower users by providing them with greater control over their searches and access to library resources. Users can customize their search preferences, save search queries, create lists, and manage their borrowing history, enhancing their overall experience with the library [7].

DISADVANTAGE OF OPAC

Certainly, here are some disadvantages of Online Public Access Catalogues (OPACs), supported with a reference:

Dependency on Library Staff for Updates

Maintaining an up-to-date OPAC requires ongoing efforts from library staff to add new acquisitions, update records, and remove outdated materials. Failure to consistently update the catalogue can result in discrepancies between the OPAC and the physical collection, leading to user frustration (He, 2017) [9].

Difficulty in Navigating Complex Catalogues

Libraries with extensive collections may have complex catalogue structures, making it challenging for users to navigate and find relevant materials. This complexity can frustrate users and discourage them from utilizing the OPAC effectively (He, 2017).

Incompatibility with Mobile Devices

Some OPAC interfaces may not be optimized for mobile devices, making it difficult for users to access the catalogue via smart phones or tablets. In an increasingly mobile-centric society, this lack of accessibility can hinder users' ability to search for materials on the go (Wei & Ramamonjisoa, 2018) [11].

Incomplete or Inaccurate Metadata

OPAC records depend on accurate and comprehensive metadata to facilitate search and retrieval. However, incomplete or inaccurate metadata can lead to missed search results or difficulty in determining the relevance of items (Nisonger, 2015).

Insufficient Support for Multilingual Users

OPACs may not adequately support users who prefer to search in languages other than the primary language of the catalogue. This limitation can hinder the inclusivity of the OPAC and limit access for non-native speakers or bilingual users (Nisonger, 2015) [10].

Limited Access to Electronic Resources

While OPACs may include electronic resources such as e-books and databases, accessing these materials often requires additional authentication or navigation through separate platforms. This fragmented access can confuse users and impede their ability to seamlessly explore and utilize library resources (Foster & Gibbons, 2007) [8].

Limited Search Functionality

While OPACs offer search capabilities, they may not always provide advanced search options or intuitive interfaces. Users accustomed to popular search engines may find OPACs less user-friendly, impacting their ability to effectively locate desired materials (Wei & Ramamonjisoa, 2018). These disadvantages underscore the importance of continuous improvement and user-cantered design in OPAC development to address usability challenges and enhance the overall user experience.

SUGGESTION OF ONLINE PUBLIC ACCESS CATALOGUE (OPAC)

Implementing an effective Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) involves considering various factors to ensure it meets the needs of library users and staff. Here are some suggestions for developing and enhancing an OPAC:

Accessibility Features

Incorporate accessibility features such as adjustable font sizes, screen reader compatibility, and support for alternative input methods to accommodate users with disabilities.

Comprehensive Search Functionality

Implement advanced search features such as keyword searching, Boolean operators, truncation, and faceted searching to enable users to quickly find relevant resources.

Customization Options

Provide users with the ability to customize their OPAC experience by saving searches, creating reading lists, and setting preferences for search results display.

Feedback Mechanisms:

Establish channels for users to provide feedback and suggestions for improving the OPAC and incorporate user input into future enhancements.

Integration with Library Systems

Ensure seamless integration with other library systems such as circulation, interlibrary loan, and electronic resource management systems to facilitate efficient resource discovery and access.

Mobile-Friendly Design

Optimize the OPAC interface for mobile devices to accommodate users who prefer to access library resources on smart phones and tablets.

Multilingual Support

Offer multilingual support to serve diverse user populations and improve accessibility for non-native speakers.

Regular Updates and Maintenance

Keep the OPAC software up to date with regular updates and maintenance to ensure optimal performance, security, and compatibility with evolving technology standards.

User Education and Training

Provide training sessions and user guides to help patrons effectively navigate and utilize the OPAC's

features and functionalities.

User-Cantered Design

Prioritize user experience by designing the OPAC interface to be intuitive, easy to navigate, and accessible to users of all abilities. Conduct usability testing and gather feedback from library patrons to refine the design.

By implementing these suggestions, libraries can develop OPACs that enhance user satisfaction, streamline information retrieval processes, and support the overall mission of providing access to information and knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Online Public Access Catalogues (OPACs) play a crucial role in modern libraries by providing users with convenient and efficient access to library collections. Through features such as comprehensive search functionality, browsing options, availability status indicators, detailed item descriptions, and integration with electronic resources, OPACs empower users to discover, access, and manage library materials effectively. Furthermore, the personalization features offered by OPACs, such as user accounts and saved searches; enhance the user experience by tailoring the catalogue interface to individual preferences. Interlibrary loan and resource sharing capabilities expand users' access to materials beyond their local library, while accessibility features ensure inclusive access for users with disabilities. While OPACs offer numerous benefits, there are also challenges such as complex search interfaces, incomplete metadata, and limited browsing experiences that need to be addressed to optimize usability and accessibility. Nevertheless, with continuous improvement and user-cantered design, OPACs remain indispensable tools for information discovery and retrieval in libraries, supporting the mission of providing equitable access to knowledge and resources for all. Overall, OPACs continue to evolve to meet the changing needs of library users in the digital age, serving as vital gateways to the vast and diverse world of library collections.

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