BibliOpass – An Open Library Network in Switzerland

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INTRODUCTION

The idea underlying BibliOpass is very simple: extending borrowers' rights to all libraries participating in the network. As in other countries, users of Swiss libraries are more and more mobile, especially the categories of students, teachers or researchers. Universities and technology institute have become more specialized and less general, aiming to improve their reputation at an international level. Students often need to visit different universities during their studies. BibliOpass supports this trend regarding library use in relation to this new mobility. Strangely, similar projects in other countries are not so frequent: Sconul Research Extra in Great Britain which groups together more than 150 higher education institutions is the best example.

Basically, BibliOpass makes it simpler for a borrower to use other libraries. More than 600 libraries throughout the country are at present involved in the BibliOpass network. A patron registered as a 'normal user' in his or her main library (called 'Home library') may borrow items in any other library (called 'Guest library') without needing to obtain a new user card or paying extra fees. The user must observe the rules of the guest library (for example number of items and duration of loan). Items must be returned to their originating library for management reasons. BibliOpass is a new, complementary service to Inter Library Loan (ILL), the traditional way to obtain books from other libraries.

ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

In 1994, the committee of the Library Network of Western Switzerland (REseau ROmand, Réseau des Bibliothèques de Suisse Occidentale - RERO) decided to change the network's shared computer system. At the same time the committee suggested taking advantage of the migration to the VTLS system to introduce a library card valid in all network libraries. Besides offering a new service, the purpose was to reinforce the users' sense of belonging to Rero. Rero is a large library network founded in 1981, bringing together all the research and University libraries of French-speaking Switzerland. It operates a union catalogue of 6 million items held in 200 libraries. The Schweizerischen Landesbibliothek (SLB), the Swiss National Library, agreed with Rero very early on to take part in this project of a multi-institutional library card. From 1994 a working group (in which the authors of this article were involved) began study more closely the three parts of the project henceforth called BibliOpass:

- Technical aspects;
- Partnership agreement;
- Practical organization and procedures

Something must be strongly stressed here: the working group was firmly convinced that the success and acceptance of the project would be greater if 'light' solutions in organization, technical areas and costs were proposed. Now that some time has passed, we can confirm the soundness of this approach.

Technical aspects

The only absolute prerequisite for the project was to guarantee the uniqueness of patron identifiers in the whole BibliOpass network. Fortunately this was easy to achieve, inasmuch as all the libraries of Rero and the SLB were migrating to the VTLS system and were in the process of changing the identifiers according to the VTLS scheme. In this system the patron identifier is a 10 digit number, the first one being "2". Each local site responsible for patron management was given a unique prefix. For example:

201xxxxxxx	State library of canton Valais
204xxxxxxx	University of Neuchâtel
290xxxxxxx	Swiss National Library.

The sites have complete freedom for attributing the 7 other digits. In this way identifier uniqueness is easily ensured. Each library must have the possibility to decode the number with standard technical means. Consequently, the group recommended that the bar code standard Code39 be printed on the cards.
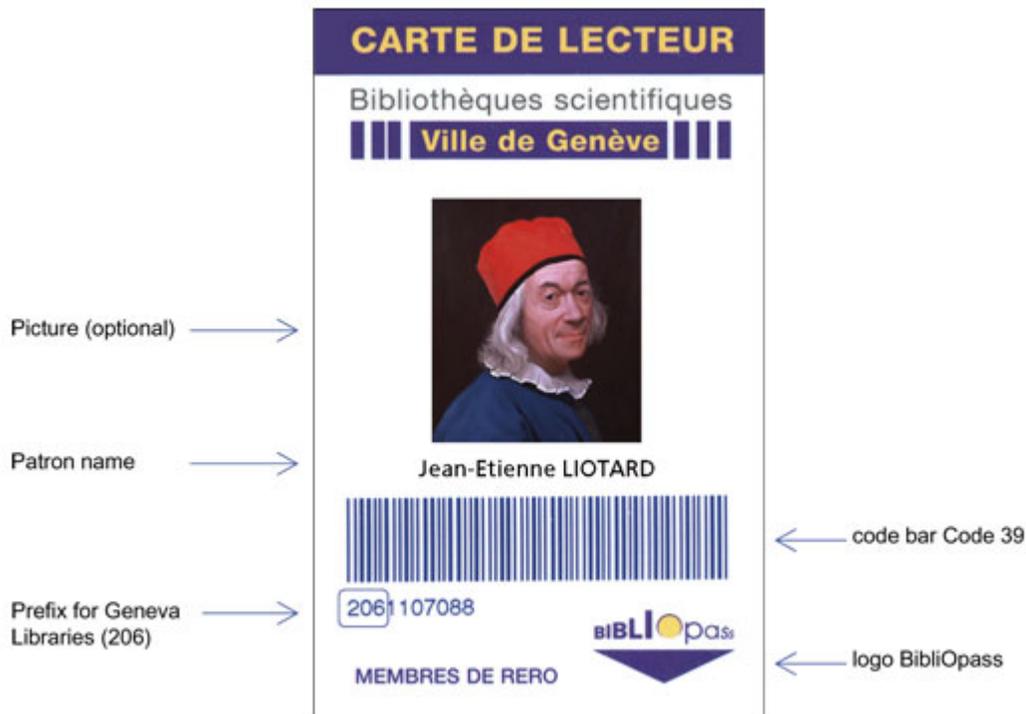
Partnership agreement

The working group has drawn up a partnership agreement to organise ways of co-operation among the libraries (in case of conflict with a patron for example). The Swiss National Library has been designated the administrative centre of the network. New candidate libraries are accepted, irrespective of their library system, on the condition that the structure of patron identifiers always ensures the number is unique in the network. From the very beginning, it was planned to be able to expand BibliOpass to all Swiss libraries interested in joining.

Practical organization and procedures

Some procedures were written for library staff. BibliOpass does not require that all patron files be interconnected. When a user enters a new 'guest' library for the first time, he or she presents the card of his or her home library, then he or she must be registered again in the local computer system with the same identifier. In general, registration is a simple process.

BibliOpass was promoted to the libraries and their users in order to give it a certain visibility. A logo was created and is available for libraries on different media: stickers for the library entrance and the circulation desk; a computer file for integration on the library card, for flyers or for Web pages (see illustration below).

A typical library card within BibliOpass network

EXTENSION TO OTHER SWISS NETWORKS

The Alexandria library network (which links the Swiss federal administration libraries using the same type of VTLS system as the Swiss National Library and Rero) joined BibliOpass in 2001.

In June 2002, the University Libraries' Commission (CBU) decided that in theory a library user should only need to sign up once to a library in order to be able to use both the services provided by the BibliOpass library members and those of the IDS network. The IDS network (Informationsverbund Deutschschweiz) is made up of 6 local networks: IDS Basel/Bern, IDS Luzern, IDS St.Gallen, IDS Zürich Universität, IDS Zürich Zentralbibliothek as well as the NEBIS network of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. It provides access to more than 7 million documents in over 300 libraries.

A working group was set up to investigate how to ensure that the IDS network user cards were recognised in the BibliOpass network and vice-versa. All cards in the IDS network were already compatible with each member network.

In this case also a pragmatic approach was adopted : each user ID number had to be unique. Once this was achieved, it was not difficult to ensure that the user cards were recognised in each system and from January 1st 2003, users in any one of the 600 member libraries of BibliOpass could use the services provided by all the other member libraries.

Recognising this success, other libraries and networks asked to join : the Geneva University library network, the Sbt (Sistema bibiotecario ticinese) with 60 libraries from the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, the Liechtenstein National Library, the CERN library in Geneva etc.

BibliOpass network, Main Libraries

Most of the libraries involved have added the BibliOpass logo to their user cards following the design laid down at the beginning of the project.

FUTURE PLANS

The CBU mandate specified that at a later stage a pool of Swiss users should be set up along the model of the planned IDS user pool. The IDS pool is now operational and allows a user to sign up to any IDS site and be able to use them all.

The 'national' user pool has been studied and technically seems feasible to set up. However it is not a priority at present for certain members of the current networks who are involved in analysing their medium term IT strategy and so no work will start on this until 2007 at the earliest.

SANCTA SIMPLICITAS

Thanks to the partners' willingness to co-operate, and the use of simple practical tools, users in the BibliOpass member libraries can access the resources of all the major libraries in all the linguistic areas of Switzerland. This pragmatic approach has enabled libraries to set up a solution that respects partners' branding, identity and practices. The experience has also shown that it was an illusion to imagine harmonising lending rules and conditions across the member libraries before the network was fully in place. Such an approach would have condemned the project to failure from the outset, as would have insisting on ambitious technical developments.

The creation of a pool of Swiss users remains a short to medium term option since no technical barriers exist once the data protection requirements laid down by Swiss law can be respected.

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

Alexandria library network. http://hei.unige.ch/bib/catalogues.html

BibliOpass. http://www.bibliopass.ch/

IDS - Informationsverbund Deutschschweiz. http://www.zb3.unizh.ch/ids/

RERO - REseau ROmand, Réseau des Bibliothèques de Suisse Occidentale. http://www.rero.ch/

SCONUL - Society of College, National and University Libraries. http://www.sconul.ac.uk/

SCONUL Research Extra. http://www.sconul.ac.uk/use_lib/srx/

SLB - Schweizerischen Landesbibliothek. http://www.snl.admin.ch/slb/