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Librarian Hacks: Introducing the Virtual Theological Library Project

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For the librarian serving in small academic and church libraries, finding an effective, low-cost library catalog is imperative. Between the cost of the software itself, hosting, tech support, and routine upgrades, librarians in these settings are often discouraged from pursuing such an endeavor. Even the most basic integrated library systems (ILS) for small libraries can cost several hundred dollars. For example, the cheapest package for the integrated library software system ResourceMate costs $295.00. [1] Given the lack of formal training among church librarians (Eliceiri, 2013, p. 33), librarians in these settings often lack the expertise to implement an online library catalog. There are, however, a number of alternatives to using proprietary software which have their own merits and weaknesses. Some librarians use an Excel spreadsheet or Access database to inventory their collections, while others use web 2.0 tools like *LibraryThing* to make the collections available to the public. The first option helps library professionals to record precise bibliographic data and track circulation of items while the latter option makes collections publicly accessible. Neither Excel nor Web 2.0 tools however can store the records in MARC format. Nor is it easy to integrate the vast corpus of theological texts on sites like Project Gutenberg into local collections. In short, there is no comprehensive solution for church libraries and small academic collections that does not require significant investments in software, hosting, and technical know-how.
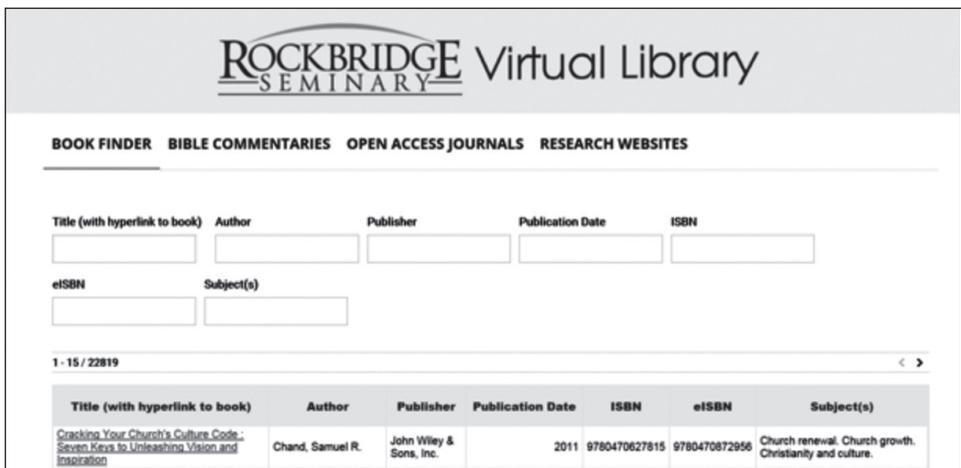
My Own Dilemma

As a member of the Association of Christians Librarians for four years, I have noticed periodic requests on the ACL mailing list from librarians seeking to catalog church or small academic libraries with minimal technology. As a theological librarian for Rockbridge Seminary, I understand the challenges of making learning resources accessible to students at the point of need. Most ILS systems are too costly and scaled for much larger library collections than ours. Therefore, it was not feasible to

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1 This price was found on ResourceMate's web-site: http://www.resourcemate.com/order/New-FOP-ProductComparison.html.

purchase one for our library. While the library portal had a series of hyperlinks to open access e-book collections like Internet Archive, simply posting links to sites does not 'save the time of the reader' as famed librarian R.S. Raganathan advised in his Five Laws of Library Science (1931). Library users would want to replicate the same search in several sites, such as *Internet Archive* and *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, to find relevant resources. As a love of technological 'hacks' or shortcuts, I began brainstorming creative ways to connect users with the learning resources they needed, whether it was from our collection or the millions of books on the open web.

A Possible Solution

Hacks, as I've written about in Volume 58 of *The Christian Librarian*, are shortcuts that programmers and developers use to make their lives easier. After researching 'do-it-yourself' library catalogs, I found a blog post that demonstrated how two Google tools, Google Sheets and Google Sites, could be harnessed to create searchable online inventories. Google Sites is a website builder and Google Sheets is a cloud-based alternative to Excel Spreadsheet. Essentially, one would catalog their holdings on a Google Sheet, with a bibliographic record on each row of the spreadsheet. Each column of this spreadsheet would correspond to a searchable field, such as the book title statement. This spreadsheet would then be uploaded online and embedded in a Google Site. Using a tool within Google Sites called Awesome Table, this online spreadsheet can be queried. I decided to pilot this idea with my employer, Rockbridge Seminary, in early 2015 with much success. The screenshot below is the virtual library catalog I created using these tools from Google. There are search boxes for title, author, publisher, publication date, ISBN, eISBN, and Library of Congress (LC) subject headings.

Screenshot of Rockbridge's Library Catalog

Within a few months, I was able to consolidate our seminary's e-book holdings and those available on the open web on a single online portal. The good news is that many of these open access e-book collections have freely-available MARC records so that librarians can integrate them in their library catalogs. I have included links to several open access e-book collections in the Links section. I should note that I used MarcEdit, a free tool to edit MARC records, to convert these files into an Excel (.xls) format. Once converted, I could add them to the Google Sheet and these records would be searchable by patrons. The final product was a catalog that mirrors the functionality of a commercial online public access catalog (OPAC).

Going Viral with a Hacked OPAC

Around the same time, I piloted this catalog at Rockbridge, I was finishing a Master of Arts in Educational Technology at Appalachian State University. The final course in this program was a portfolio course where I had to tangibly demonstrate my knowledge of technology. For this portfolio course, I had to partner with a client in an educational setting to identify a need. I would have to implement a technological solution and assess its effectiveness. Given my success at Rockbridge with a homespun library catalog, I contacted the Association of Christian Librarians to see if they were interested in letting me use them as a client for this project. Janelle Mazelin, Executive Director of ACL, graciously consented in October of 2015 and we discussed the goals and ways of sharing it. I named this project the Virtual Theological Library Project and articulated the following goals:.

- Supporting librarians with minimal resources in creating their own virtual library catalogs
- Enriching library collections with freely accessible digital resources
- Saving the time of researchers by consolidating the best open access resources in one online portal.

Mazelin and the ACL board kindly consented to let me create an instructional website that explains how to set up a library catalog and link it to the ACL website under the 'Resources' section: http://www.acl.org/index.cfm/resources/. The board members gave me helpful formative and summative feedback as I designed the project. The final project includes bibliographic records to over 20,000 open access books with links to the websites where they can be read or downloaded. Anyone who finds this site useful can either direct their patrons to it or copy the records and set up on their own catalog using the tools and instructions I have created. Using video tutorials and step-by-step instructions, I explain in plain language how to create a Google Site, set up a Google Spreadsheet, and add the querying function (i.e. to find the title, author, subject). I am hopeful that librarians in church and smaller libraries, regardless of their technical expertise, can use this site to launch their own online

public access catalog (OPAC) for their library. I am grateful for the cooperation of the ACL board in this project. This project has been providential, allowing me to combine my passion for libraries and technological hacks while fulfilling a degree requirement. I believe that this catalog embodies S.R. Ranganathan's admonition to 'save the time of the user' by consolidating local holdings and those on the open web in a single online portal.

You may view the Virtual Theological Library Project online at https://sites.google.com/a/acl.org/virtual–theological–library–project/?pli=1

Future Considerations

Since the goal of this project is to empower librarians to create their own library catalog, I plan to augment the instructions for further customization. I would like to include instructions on adding logos, changing fonts, and making other cosmetic changes. I would also imagine that some libraries will ultimately transition to a full integrated library system (ILS). In this case, I will record tutorials on how to use the MarcEdit utility to translate Excel records back into the MARC format. Since the bibliographic records from several sites are incomplete, I would like to enlist the help of other ACL members to ensure the accuracy of bibliographic records. Most importantly, I would like for ACL members to visit the site, offer feedback, and share this project with church librarians whom they think would benefit from it.

Conclusion

Acquiring a low-cost library catalog is problematic, but there are a number of tools to 'hack' a library catalog. While no free product rivals the usability and searching sophistication of proprietary ILS systems, I believe that the Virtual Theological Library Project presents a solution is that is affordable and easy to implement. Using tools freely available on the web, librarians in churches and small academic libraries can created a cloud-based library catalog that is searchable to the public and supplement their local holdings with millions of theological texts on the web. Using Google Site and Google Sheets to create a catalog combines the accessibility and precision that other DIY cataloging solutions do not. ☦

Links	
Awesome Table Documentation	https://sites.google.com/site/scriptsexamples/available-web-apps/awesome-tables
Virtual Theological Library Project	https://sites.google.com/a/acl.org/virtual-theological-library-project/?pli=1
Rockbridge Library Catalog	https://sites.google.com/a/rockbridge.edu/rockbridge-library/
Marc Edit	http://marcedit.reeset.net/
Google Sites	https://www.google.com/sites/help/intl/en_GB/overview.html
Google Sheets	https://www.google.com/sheets/about/

Theological E-Book Collections	
Open Library	https://archive.org/details/texts
MARC records for Open Library	https://archive.org/details/ol_data
Christian Classics Ethereal Library	http://www.ccel.org/
CCEL Library Subscription Program (to download MARC records)	http://www.ccel.org/subscription
Directory of Open Access Books	http://www.doabooks.org/
Also, search for 'Books in Public Domain' or 'Open Access Books' for more sites that host books freely available online.	

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Ranganathan, S. R. (1931). *The five laws of library science*. Madras, India: Madras Library Association.

Are you interested in library hacks? Do you have thoughts or ideas regarding technology that might assist other librarians? Please consider sharing your ideas with others in ACL by submitting to this column. Contact Associate Editor, Jeannie Ferriss (jfluvsbks@gmail.com) for information.