



A Program of the Minnesota Office of Higher  
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# MESSENGER

## **EXTRA**

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### **In My Opinion: Resource Sharing, Then, Now, & Tomorrow** *By Bill DeJohn*

I was skimming a Dec. 1971 article in the University of Minnesota's *Alumni News* that dealt with MINITEX's beginnings and thought it might be helpful to provide my perspective on where we were and where we are now as we integrate MnLINK into the MINITEX service program. From teletypewriters to computers, we continue the evolution of resource sharing in the region using the MnLINK Gateway and, soon, ALEPH ILL systems. Each new system has brought changes that required flexible staff who were willing to make changes. Change continues. If anyone would like a copy of the 1971 article, please contact me.

#### **History — From Whence We've Come**

In this three-state region, we have had over 36 years of effective and efficient resource sharing. Libraries participating in the MINITEX Library Information Network have shared their resources among all types of libraries, starting within local communities, moving to statewide, and then across the three states comprising MINITEX: Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

During the MINITEX project (1969-1971), all resources came from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities Libraries collections and were sent to participating academic and public libraries to fill their requests. In 1971, the Minnesota legislature began to fund MINITEX as a line item in the Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Council's budget. "When the University entered the MINITEX program, it asked all the participants to share their resources in the same way that the University was sharing theirs." (1) In 1972, the first edition of MULS was published; an expanded program of referrals from MINITEX to other libraries began; and MINITEX staff began checking the collections of the Minneapolis Public Library. It was also in 1972 that a reciprocal agreement with Wisconsin InterLibrary Services (WILS) was signed. OCLC was brought into the region in 1976 to provide a method for identifying which libraries owned which books, and referrals began to include books not held by the University of Minnesota Libraries.

In 1971, two overriding principles were stated that guided MINITEX:

- Service as seen in the interfacing of the librarian with the patron;
- Cooperation that would not jeopardize a library's primary patron. (2)

The first bullet had to do with improving the relationship that librarians had with their faculty, students, and other users. To verify requests, librarians and faculty and students had to talk (interface) about what they wanted. "Many librarians feel that their relationships with faculty and students have been enhanced because

these individuals have had to interface with them in order to verify MINITEX requests. Through this interfacing, and with increased contact, librarians have been able to provide better service with the resources in their own libraries.” (2) If the library didn’t have the necessary resources, library staff could send requests to MINITEX where staff checked a large research collection and usually found what was wanted.

The second bullet had to do with ensuring that a library’s collection and services were at a level to meet the majority of their patron’s needs and that the lending of books, for example, would not jeopardize the library’s meeting of those needs. Hence, real-time transmission of requests and overnight delivery Monday-Friday were planned so material would be back on the shelves of owning libraries as quickly as possible.

Up to the time when the MnSCU/PALS ILL system was activated followed by the Place-a-Hold System, interlibrary loan requests were sent directly to the MINITEX Office, which was responsible for handling “load leveling” by ensuring that no one library was overburdened with referral requests by determining which libraries could provide the fastest response to a request and which were on the overnight delivery system.

MINITEX staff corrected bibliographic information and determined the locations of materials. Nothing was requested from a library that wasn’t owned by the library and – later — that wasn’t available for lending by the library. This process has been undergoing major changes as more and more automated ILL automated systems are put in place to route the request with little oversight by local interlibrary loan staff. In the early years, local ILL staff would determine where materials were owned (MULS and OCLC) and then send the request to MINITEX. However, workflow and automated systems shifted the ‘local check on locations’ to the MINITEX Office staff at the same time they shifted requests directly to a lending library from the borrowing library.

With the advent of new automated systems, new technologies, and the Internet, these guidelines are being tested in many ways. Over the past 36 years, MINITEX staff have taken millions of loans and photocopies from the collections of the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Libraries and the Minneapolis Public Library. The Minnesota Office of Higher Education contracted with the state library agencies of Minnesota, North Dakota (1974-75), and South Dakota (1977-78) and helped to establish a three-state infrastructure that supports resource sharing as well as other services.

Within Minnesota, we have shared resources without too much worry about whether things were always equal between lending and borrowing because our objective was to provide resources to the user as quickly as possible. With North and South Dakota, we have a net lending agreement that works for the benefit of everyone. We’ve steadily improved how we initiate requests, transmit the requests, and deliver the materials. The MINITEX staff continues to maintain an objective of filling requests from the University Libraries collections within 24 hours.

In my opinion, one of the reasons that we have been successful in Minnesota is because we followed a philosophy of “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” Local libraries were responsible for their local collections, their staff, and facilities. At the state level, we established an infrastructure to enable libraries to share their resources with one another to better serve their end users. In this way, local resources were leveraged so most requests could be satisfied in a very timely fashion.

Of course, this just didn’t happen automatically. A lot of library staff and others spent many hours discussing, arguing, compromising, initiating, planning, and implementing various parts of this ‘whole’ in order to achieve what we have today. It required:

- Greater collaboration and cooperation than some people probably thought it would;
- Patience and belief that everyone is working together to achieve improved customer services and will not take advantage of one another;

- A lot more meetings than anyone probably thought was possible, which required a lot of traveling on many people's part;
- Increased appropriations from the Minnesota Legislature to the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, as well as increased funding from state library agencies in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota;
- Concentrating on what would result in greater user satisfaction; and,
- A belief that, if we could tell our story effectively, it would result in recognition and increased funding to sustain the gains that libraries made by working together rather than at cross purposes.

So, we have come a long way in the last 36 years, and we continue to strive to rein in technology so it works for the benefit of the user and staff. More effective resource sharing is a goal to strive for in the face of status quo staffing levels and increased volumes of requests generated by growing numbers of users and staff (replacing manual procedures and processes). Unfortunately, as in most technologies, some of the functions promised and desired don't always work out the way we had hoped. Thus, we have staff (and, often, users) who see Google and Yahoo working seamlessly and wonder why their local library systems can't do the same. Of course, we know we are asking and requiring a lot of interoperability and functionality in our local automated systems, and many of these new systems are works-in-progress.

Today, we have over 33 million volumes in the library collections in the three-state region that end users can borrow through resource sharing protocols that provide effective economies of scale and seamless borrowing and lending. Library staff feel comfortable relying on obtaining materials from other libraries and are able to concentrate on purchasing materials that best serve their own clients, knowing that their resources would add to the region-wide collection.

## MnLINK

Minnesota is fortunate because few, if any, other state legislatures would have provided \$12 million to create a "MnLINK Project" on the recommendation of a statewide Library Planning Task Force and the state's library community. But, the Minnesota Legislature did so in 1997. To their credit, they trusted the information they were given and believed that the library community would do what they said they would do to improve upon the automated systems in place at that time. The MnLINK Project is complete (except for a few ILL issues), and MnLINK is now a program within the MINITEX Library Information Network with the MnLINK Gateway operational 24x7. The University of Minnesota and MnPALS are now responsible for the Ex Libris automated systems.

When the history of this endeavor is written, reasonable people will differ on what happened and why it took so long to implement. People new to Minnesota may not realize that we signed contracts in good faith with DRA for the ILS and OCLC for the Gateway. Both organizations failed to provide workable systems, requiring us to revise our RFP and go back out to replace the systems they had promised to deliver. A couple years were lost as well as staff effort expended in this process. But, we persevered, and here we are at the beginning of 2006 with operational systems almost in place with all the original libraries.

- The University of Minnesota Libraries (Twin Cities and Coordinate Campuses) are operational on Ex Libris' Aleph system. Aleph ILL testing is underway, and interoperability with MnPALS is planned.
- The MnSCU/PALS system has converted more than half of its libraries to the Ex Libris Aleph system with all libraries to be converted by April 24, 2006.

- The MnLINK Gateway is operational, providing the latest method through which Minnesota libraries transmit requests among public, academic, and state government libraries; K12 schools belonging to regional library systems; and the MINITEX Office. And, the “Get it!” button, which was implemented in February, has been accepted by users who have taken to it like a duck to water. These users now generate hundreds of patron-initiated, unmediated requests a day.

The Gateway is consistent with what we told the MN Legislature we would do in the MnLINK Project and is consistent with studies that indicate that users want to self-serve and not always go through library staff for interlibrary loan.

- We are beginning to test the interoperability of these automated systems (Gateway and the Ex Libris) with each other and with the North and Dakota Aleph systems. We’ll probably see success in this area sometime during 2006.
- In Minnesota, we are anxiously awaiting the debut of Ex Libris’ Aleph ILL to join current methods of automated interlibrary loan systems and more self-service functionality for end users. North and South Dakota have already implemented Aleph ILL.
- Updated versions of ILL software are expected early in 2006 from Ex Libris and Fretwell-Downing, and the versions appear to have the increased functionality for which many of us have been waiting. 2006 should be a banner year. Becky Ringwelski, Associate Director, MINITEX, and Linda Albee, Trainer, South Dakota Library Network, recently attended a meeting in Hamburg, Germany, of an international task force that is planning Version 18 of Aleph ILL for Ex Libris. These two are the North American representatives to this Task Force. Reports back were that they had a very productive meeting and are looking forward to Ex Libris’ the release of Version 18 of Aleph ILL in 2006.

## Where We Are Now

All of the above doesn’t happen without challenges, concerns, and opportunities.

Ours is a dynamic environment, and the rate of change will only accelerate in the coming years. It is best that everyone realizes that it is onward and upward and that we are not going to have a slowdown in the introduction of technologies associated with the Internet or in others part of our environment. A recent report by Mark Raskino, a research fellow at Gartner, Inc. (an information technology research advisory company) warned Chief Information Officers that they:

*...should pay acute attention to how technologies such as blogging and podcasting will affect their businesses and be ready for innovation with those technologies by their competitors.... Those innovations are driving a second Internet revolution, a time when businesses can’t afford to be content that they are simply online. (3)*

Libraries are not businesses, but are business-like, and Stephen Abram said in his blog entry concerning the Gartner warning: “Yet another warning about another sea change. I’ll bet this one hits the not-for-profit sector first this time. Libraries be ready.” (4)

So, how are we doing in Minnesota? (I won't speculate about North and South Dakota, except to note that both have more electronic resources available to their residents than does Minnesota, and both states are rapidly implementing their shared Ex Libris systems.)

Minnesotans are having an impact on resource sharing as they discover the MnLINK Gateway and are making active use of the "Get it!" button. Increases in requests being processed by all levels compared with last year are in double-digit and, sometimes, triple-digit percentages. Did we anticipate this, I have been asked? Yes, we knew there would be an increase, but we didn't know how much it would be or how fast the increase would occur. Things would have gone more smoothly if we hadn't had several system functionality issues occur along the way. However, dedicated staff worked around and through these issues and concentrated on serving user needs.

Local resource sharing is increasing also. From local reports, libraries are being used more across the board — either to gain Internet access through their computer terminals and/or just to use library resources. We should see this as a positive sign, and we need to do a better job of explaining what is happening to our funding authorities. Statistics are not going to win the day — stories will make an impact. Lots of people are using resource sharing for their jobs, businesses, and school-related work (K12 and higher education) as well as for recreation and entertainment.

Collections and local library staff are stretched, so we have to revisit workflow processes to make sure we are not continuing older processes that are unnecessary under these new technologies. In some cases, because "we have always done it a certain way" needs to be addressed in terms of "do we even have to keep doing it in the future." Questions need to be asked and answered in a positive way.

Delivery needs are increasing especially at the local level. That is, where the material ends up so the patron can pick it up. That last mile from a headquarters delivery place to a branch or local library has become more of a sticking point because the time that materials spend lying on a shelf waiting for delivery or pickup. We have a way to go for solutions, and one solution may not fit the different needs in a state the size of Minnesota. But, we do have to develop some solutions and try them out.

Patron and staff expectations have been raised exponentially as the MnLINK Gateway "Get it!" button has been implemented and more resources are becoming available. Meeting those expectations is a challenge that we need to accept and meet. Staff and user frustrations with the functionalities of current vendor ILL systems continue to be a challenge. However, we should all remember that implementing local automated systems usually requires adjustments and patience because complicated new systems don't always work without delays and problems. Sometimes, even an upgraded version of the same system will cause things to break that were not a problem before the upgrade. The difference with a statewide system is that EVERYONE is affected, usually at the same time and there is a broader impact.

MINITEX staff and the staff at the University of Minnesota, MnPALS, and participating MN libraries are working to implement interoperability among their ILL systems through the International Standards Organization's ILL Protocol. This is complicated because it requires competing vendors to work closely together and even share some information. The Protocol is often implemented differently by different vendors, compounding the issues that need to be addressed. Tests are underway between U of MN (MINITEX) and MnPALS Aleph servers, and we hope to begin transmitting interlibrary loan requests between these systems by Feb. 2006. Then, testing will follow to do the same thing with the North and South Dakota Aleph ILL systems.

## Concerns

Some concerns that I hear expressed in the library community revolve around:

- *Frontline staff:* Interlibrary loan staff (and others) are excited and frustrated with the new automated systems. They have been waiting for them to be implemented because of the dream or promise of a ‘better way to do things.’ They are frustrated because some of the functionalities they had come to rely upon or expect to be there, are not. And, there continues to be problems with implementation and upgrades to these systems. The volume of requests keeps increasing, and there are more patrons asking what about this or what about that, but staff don’t always have the answers, which causes frustrations all the way around.

We haven’t been effective in getting knowledge about MnLINK and ELM and other new services down to frontline staff, especially in public libraries. Lately, we have come across some frontline staff who are unfamiliar with MnLINK and ELM. We need to remember that many smaller libraries are staffed by part-timers and by volunteers, and they never will get to meetings to pick up some of this information. We need to identify new ways to reach these staff with appropriate training. An 800-number for them to call might be one answer. Frontline staff are important exemplars for end-users of what libraries can provide in customer services.

- *The Promises and Shortcomings of New Systems:* There is no easy answer because all North American libraries that have brought up any new automated systems probably have been and/or are experiencing the same frustrations. Everyone is trying to get these issues resolved as quickly as possible. We now live in a global economy. Both major vendors for MnLINK have their home offices overseas, and that is where their developers are located. Ex Libris is in Israel and Fretwell-Downing is in England, even though they both have offices in North America. A different type of ‘patience’ is probably needed. Years ago, you could just fall back to a manual system of some sort. Today, you just don’t have the time to do that. We are dependent upon the technologies that we are implementing, but we need to remember that technologies are still tools. We should keep that perspective.

Library directors and their public service and technical services staff are concerned because they have been waiting for these new systems and touting the opportunities they will bring. We have to keep in mind that these are new systems (only in operation for a year or so), and they are more complicated because we demand more functionality. And, we demand interoperability among different automated systems, which is a challenge for the vendor community in an environment that is competition driven.

- *Telling Our Story Clearly & Effectively:* We still are not telling our story clearly enough and strongly enough to our funding and administrative bodies. We can only continue to do more with less for so long, and I believe many libraries have passed that “so long” timeframe. Statistics don’t tell stories. Information about outcomes in people’s lives, what they used the library for, and how what they gained from libraries benefits them and their local communities tell stories and show the value of libraries.
- *New Technology Tools:* We have spent lots time in the last several years studying and implementing automation systems in all three states, and we may be falling behind in some areas where we should be leading.

Just a few examples are:

Blogs: How do they fit into library communications with other libraries, with staff, with end-users? (see <http://www.infotoday.com/mls/nov03/fichter.shtml> ).

Wikis: How can we use them to provide regular updated information to end-users or to staffs in participating libraries in various types of systems? ( see <http://www.libsuccess.org> )

RSS: MINITEX staff set me up for RSS feeds, and I understand that this does not seem to be a simple set-up, yet it would be valuable to update users of events happening at a library.

Instant Messaging (IM) and Virtual Reference: Ohio, Colorado, Wisconsin, Illinois, New Jersey, Washington, and other states have moved forward on these tools. Minnesota librarians have indicated that they are not a priority. However, there are three public libraries and five academic libraries that I know of in Minnesota and a few more in South Dakota that are using virtual reference software to talk with their users. There are at least two academic libraries in Minnesota using instant messaging.

Here at MINITEX, we hope to implement virtual reference software on the ELM Portal and MnLINK Gateway in 2006. We are using instant messaging within the Office. And, the MnSCU system appears to be interested in moving forward with some type of virtual reference service. From what I understand, some library staff don't feel comfortable using this type of communication, even though most recent studies show that kids, teens, and more and more adults are using instant messaging. Some of the states mentioned above are experiencing a high number of sessions. IM and virtual reference don't replace reference, but they do supplement current reference services that are available over the phone, in person, or via email. Anytime we can increase communications with our users, we should do so even though it may feel more uncomfortable than face-to-face interactions. It is different, but that is not a reason to avoid moving forward with this technology.

I was pleased to see the number of libraries on the following website using instant messaging. (See <http://www.libsuccess.org> and click on [Online Reference](#) (IM, Web-based, etc.) for information about libraries using both instant messages and virtual reference and others.)

## Opportunities as We Enter 2006

As we in Minnesota enter 2006, there are a number of things that are worth celebrating:

- The State Library Town Meetings scheduled to gain information for the State Library Plan have been very successful. Suzanne Miller, State Librarian, and Lars Stelzer, Chair, State Library Advisory Council, have attended almost 30 town meetings, with the last three scheduled on Jan. 4 (Grand Rapids), 5 (Mountain Iron), and 10 (Duluth). Feedback has been positive, and lots of citizens attended the users sessions while librarians attended separate afternoon sessions. From what I've heard, interlibrary loan, ELM, seamless access to resources, and MnLINK were among the issues brought up in a positive light. The State Library Agency will be writing a report on the meetings, and the State Plan Task Force will meet to draw up a State Plan for distribution and discussion. (see [http://education.state.mn.us/mde/Learning\\_Support/Library\\_Services\\_and\\_School\\_Technology/About\\_Us/State\\_Plan\\_for\\_Libraries/index.html](http://education.state.mn.us/mde/Learning_Support/Library_Services_and_School_Technology/About_Us/State_Plan_for_Libraries/index.html) )

- The Minnesota Digital Library (MDL) is operational with start-up grant funding from LSTA administered by the Minnesota State Library Agency. The first project, *Minnesota Reflections*, includes over 6,000 images from the first 50 years of Minnesota statehood. It was one of the most popular exhibits at the MINITEX/ University of Minnesota Libraries/MnLINK/MDL State Fair booth in August, and there has been a steady increase in the number of images viewed since then. A second LSTA grant from the Minnesota State Library Agency will provide for an extension of the Reflections project with the dates for images to be expanded to 1923 and inclusion of 200-250 important Minnesota state documents, which will be text searchable. Finally, the MDL Steering Committee is planning to broaden the digitization being deployed in the MDL to capture unique resources and special collections in Minnesota libraries and cultural institutions and ensure their access 24x7. (see <http://www.mndigital.org/> )
- An ELM Portal has been developed and will be released around Jan. 1, 2006. The site will take the user directly to the ELM databases as well providing links to a user's public library. There were over 9 million searches of the ELM resources by Minnesotans in FY05. Look for the announcements in the usual MINITEX communications. (see <http://www.elm4you.org> )
- MnLINK Gateway is being used by hundreds if not thousands of Minnesotans to request materials they have located by conducting searches among the many library catalogs in Minnesota. If you haven't made a request on the MnLINK Gateway, try it! (see <http://www.mnlinkgateway.org> ).
- LibData and Assignment Calculator are two open source tools that the University of Minnesota Twin Cities Libraries have developed and are being implemented by other libraries. (see <http://www.lib.umn.edu/help/calculator> and [http:// tutorial.lib.umn.edu/](http://tutorial.lib.umn.edu/) )
- Open resolvers are being used more and more by academic libraries in Minnesota, but not by public libraries. These resolvers (e.g., SFX from Ex Libris and ArticleLinker from Serials Solutions) can link users to a library's licensed full text and other resources. Libraries licensing these resolvers report greatly increased use of their electronic resources. In Minnesota, there are approximately 12 academic libraries using SFX through a joint contract with the University of Minnesota Libraries, and seven academic libraries are using Serials Solutions' ArticleLinker. We are not aware of any Minnesota public libraries using resolvers. Both North and South Dakota have included SFX as part of their Ex Libris contracts and will be implementing it at a later time.

(My apologies if I have left out any significant event in Minnesota that others might have included)

- There are opportunities for library leaders, library staff, and MINITEX staff to assist local staff to cope with new realities, to find new ways to provide services to users, and to deal with changes that just won't stop. For instance, from my perspective:
- Can MINITEX, working with local libraries, implement ways to send requested material directly to the user's home address instead of to the library for staff to rehandle and require the user to come to the library to pick it up?
- Can MINITEX help local public library staff better understand the advantages of increasing their use of the MINITEX Electronic Document Delivery (MEDD) service in order to improve the delivery of services to their users?

- Can we figure out ways to create selective purchase plans in response to user demand rather than continuing to place interlibrary loan requests — with the goals of reducing costs and improving timeliness of getting materials to the user? This would mean empowering interlibrary loan and public service staff to make decisions about purchasing rather than requiring them to go through a review and acquisition process? This will take some thinking since current automated ILL systems allow for user-initiated, unmediated requests and removes the review process by the ILL Office. However, we need to keep thinking about how we can get this implemented — even if it is for just a limited number of requests.
- We really have to study ways to increase delivery between local libraries after resources have been delivered to a region's central site. We need to come to grips with the issue of efficient and effective delivery of materials for that last mile.
- What are ways you can think of that could be implemented to reduce work processes, improve services, adjust and improve workflow, reduce repetitive handling of materials. Let me know!

These are a lot of words, but I am hopeful that in 2006 we can become more positive in our outlook, can reach out to each other, and can develop innovative ways to improve services to each other and, especially, to our users. In my opinion, it is important that you and your libraries succeed in the communities that you serve, that you be funded adequately, and that your libraries be staffed to provide the services that users have come to expect your libraries to provide — and that you delight your users by providing services they didn't know they needed.

This can't be done by dwelling on past problems or why some things occurred or did not occur. It can be accomplished by continuing to work together to plan how to serve our users with current and innovative services expected in the new technological age in which we live.

1) "MINITEX: Bringing the University Libraries to every citizen of Minnesota." *Alumni News*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (Dec. 1971): p. 12

2) Ibid.

3) "Gartner: CIOs should prepare for 'second' Internet." *InfoWorld*, (Dec. 8, 2005): p.1.

4) "Gartner forecasts second internet revolution." Stephen's Lighthouse blog, Dec. 9, 2005. (<http://stephenslighthouse.sirsi.com/archives/2005/12/index.html>)