# When systems fail

## Does your library have a back-up plan?

### by Stephen Walker

It is said that information is power, but what happens to a library when the power fails? How is a reference librarian to handle clients' questions when the online system goes down unexpectedly and the card catalog has been abandoned? There should be backup strategies that allow the library to continue its directing function.

In my experience, temporary disruptions of the online system or of the electrical system have been caused by old equipment, new equipment, storms, cables being accidentally cut, and a squirrel shorting out the power lines.

Provided a library can still handle clients during such an inconvenience—for example, if there's enough light—then the following non-electronic patches suggest temporary strategies for locating materials. This prevents a library from becoming dead in the water, whether for five minutes or five hours.

Although the measures are based on the premise that a library has an LC system, Dewey libraries could also adapt some of the ideas.



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T. OHR-CAMPBELL

**When the power fails . . .**

1) If the old, out-of-date card catalog is available, unfreeze it. Finding new material by author or title is impossible unless the work sought is a reprint or later edition, then the catalog might have the call number for the original or an earlier edition. However, looking under a subject will give an idea of what range of call numbers to browse.

2) Many libraries have customized bibliographies or help sheets of their holdings, typically arranging them by subject or theme, with call numbers. During emergencies librarians should impress them into service.

3) Be familiar with keystone bibliographies and catalogs that contain call numbers. The mammoth *Guide to Reference Books* (11th edition, 1996) gives the LC call number for each of its entries, which are arranged by subject categories; a title and author index is in back. For a work not confined to reference titles, *Books for College Libraries* (3rd edition, 1988) is useful. Volumes are arranged by broad subject categories, such as "Humanities," and then the arrangement of the titles
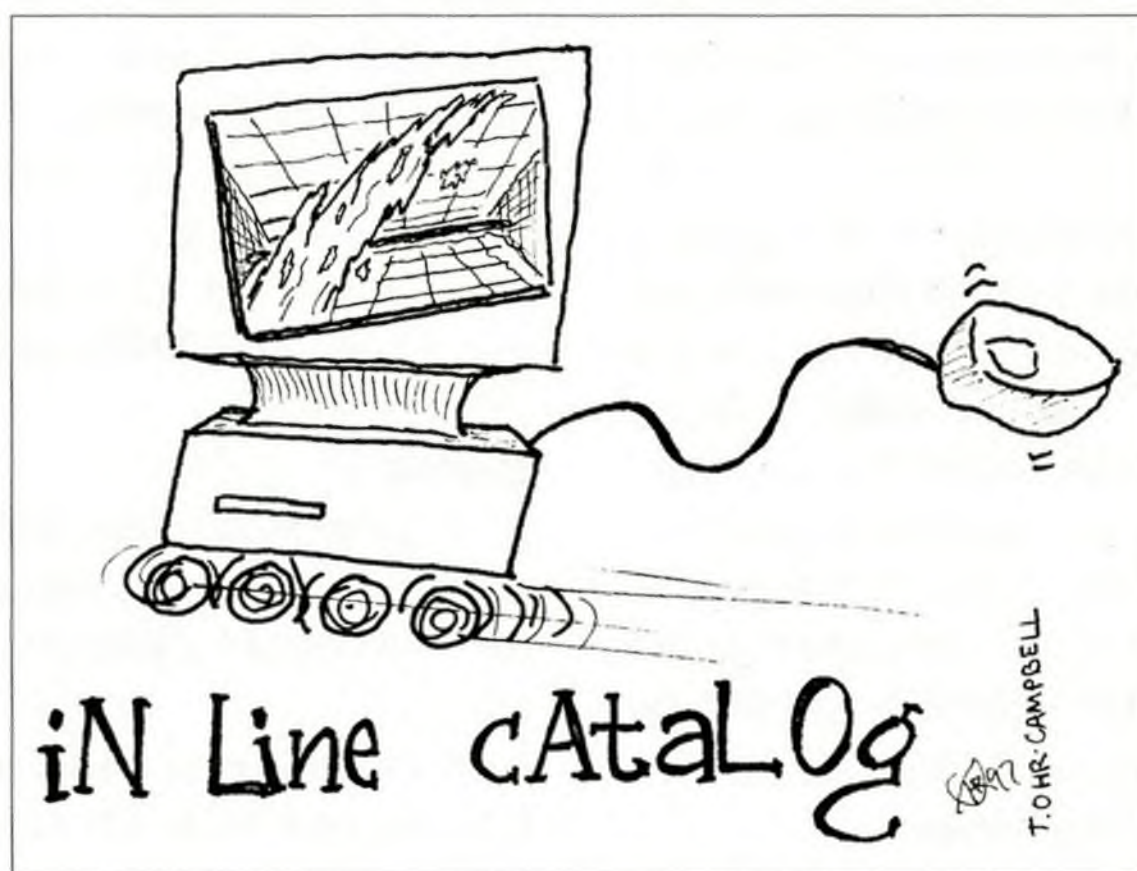
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is by LC call number, though a Dewey number is also given as part of the citation.

Since *BCL* is like the LC schedules illustrated, an ability to reasonably navigate through the schedules adds usefulness to this title. Even for one unfamiliar with the schedules, its separate volume of author and title indexes can be valuable for subject access if one knows a specific book that deals with the same subject that the client is seeking. It is up to the librarian to determine whether the possibility of a power failure makes it worthwhile to expend the time turning *BCL* or something similar into the library's own union list by marking its contents against the library's holdings.

4) Likewise, make stack landmarks out of judiciously chosen, heavily-used reference sources. This is easiest in the case of mega-multivolume sets because of their monumental visibility.

5) Small collections can act as schedules to larger collections. A library's ready reference collection could represent all the major subjects, such as business and literature. Titles could be added with this secondary use in mind.

6) Take the client in pursuit of a subject to *Library of Congress Subject Headings* and see if the subject has a call number, or if a related subject has one. At Rider College, the online catalog was down for an entire semester, and "the method chosen most frequently by students for locating books was by checking for the LC call number in the *LCSH* volumes."[1] This probably should be expected, for the volumes offer a simple and brute means of finding books.

7) Keep a copy of the *LC Classification Outline* as handy as a flashlight and be acquainted with its general organization. Unfortunately, it has no keyword index. Supplement the *Outline* with a graphical library map locating the more significant classification letters and their subjects. This could be either a poster or a handout.

8) Even for those who have followed the *Outline* to the stacks, browsing for a specific subject among books can be a challenge, but it is occasionally possible to cheat. For example, large chunks of English (PR), American (PS), and other literatures are organized within chronological ranges (for example, the nineteenth century), then the authors are by alphabetical order. Knowing an author's nationality and century could eventually bring a dedicated browser to the appropriate number without reference to a catalog. The size of the collection would affect the outcome.

## Have a back-up plan ready

Downtime in an online catalog should be rare. For example, at the Ward Edwards Library in January 1997 downtime was 0 percent; February .33 percent; and March 1.19 percent. This covered 24 hours daily, so the catalog could have been down when the library building was closed, thereby making this a non-problem for everyone except dial-in users. From November 1 to April 25, the library has been open 2,025 hours, during which time the system has been down six times, for a total of two hours and twenty-eight minutes, leaving an uptime of 99.88 percent.[2]

Despite such reassuring figures, reference librarians should be Luddite enough to never depend solely on an online catalog. They should have a basic understanding of their library's classification scheme and be acquainted with the whereabouts of key books, which are not only important in themselves, but are fingerposts for browsing. There should always be a backup plan.

## Notes

1. John Buschman, Kathryn Holden, and Dorothy Warner, "Coping without a catalog for a semester," *C&RL News* 57, (April 1996): 223.

2. Figures from Information Services, Central Missouri State University. ∎

keep their library books too long and act possessive when asked to return them; who take library books along on out-of-town excursions; who refer students to the library for things that aren't there; who seldom use the expensive index bought just for them; and who freak out when they find out ILL will take a week or more to fill a request. In any case, a little self examination can provide insights to the experience of other researchers and help you as a librarian experience the library with the innocence that zen teachers call "beginner's mind." ∎