

THE ONCE BIBLIOGRAPHIC SERVICES'S DIGITAL LIBRARY

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ABSTRACT

The ONCE provides its membership with a cost-free online library service, through which they can obtain books in both print and DAISY format. The present paper contains a brief description of the structure and growing popularity of this service.

1 Background and launch

From the very outset, when we began to digitize our book collection, one of the Bibliographic Service's goals was to institute an online library accessible to all its members.

The project was finally undertaken in 2004, when we began to study the library's structure and future content. June 2004 saw the first large-scale upload of books to the Digital Library, which became generally accessible in late 2005. At this time, all ONCE members have access rights. This means that any ONCE member can now access library content from his or her home or any other terminal external to the organization's intranet.

2 Structure

2.1 Content

The ONCE's Digital Library provides books in both text and DTB format, at this writing, 10,571 in the former and 12,670 in the latter.

2.1.1 TEXT FORMAT

The library's text works are in ".tlo" format. These files are standard .bra or Braille files that have been encrypted and converted with "TELEO" proprietary software developed by the ONCE. They can only be accessed with the specific "teleo" application. When retrieved on a normal computer screen, the texts are illegible, for both the font and background are black and they are protected against printing and Braille embossing. The software is distributed cost-free to ONCE members.

2.1.2 DAISY FORMAT

The DAISY books presently in stack are formatted to DAISY standard 2.02.

These books can be downloaded from the Digital Library for oral playback directly from a computer with suitable software such as AMIS, or for recording on to a CD or other memory device for subsequent reproduction on portable DAISY players running on either system. The Digital Library presently has 23,241 books in its stacks.

2.2 Interface

Continuous efforts have been made to keep the search system as simple as possible. A brief description follows of the Digital Library interface, in particular as regards book searches. It features two search systems:

- **Simple search:** for queries by author, title or subject or any combination of the three.
- **Advanced search:** with this option, queries can be made by publisher, ISBN, new acquisitions, format, publication date and others, in addition to the three simple search criteria.

The general catalogue can be downloaded or queried directly with any of the following links:

- **Works available:** when the user selects a letter on the page associated with this link, it lists all the titles or authors that begin with that letter.
- **Most downloaded documents:** shows a list of the most downloaded works.
- **New acquisitions:** this link contains the works included in each Digital Library update that can also be searched by format.
- **Help tool:** this link explains the questions to bear in mind when using the Digital Library.
- **Utilities:** the software needed to read the works acquired can be downloaded from this link.
- **Catalogue download:** this is the link to download the library's two catalogues, one for each format (text and audio).

2.3 Digital library updating

The Digital Library is updated monthly, although the organization's two large book production centres upload their weekly output to the ONCE servers. These works are subsequently added to the library's stacks once a month, to give staff time to update and confirm all the data, including the catalogue information.

Users are informed of the new acquisitions by an e-mail message sent to the library's distribution list, in addition to the website option described above.

2.4 User downloads

Members access the Digital Library through either the ONCE or the Bibliographic Service website.

The huge demand and existing network limitations have necessitated the institution of a ceiling of 30 downloads per month per user. This is not a permanent ceiling, however. Rather, it depends on the technical facilities available to the service.

3 Book requests received by the Digital Library

The Digital Library's popularity among the ONCE membership has led to a rapidly rising number of requests. The following chart shows the number received yearly from 2004 to 2008:

As the graph shows, the number has risen steadily, amounting to a total of nearly 75,000 last year. The graph also shows that a very tiny percentage of requests could not be fulfilled, for various reasons.

Obviously, not all visitors download a book: some merely enter queries or visit the page out of sheer curiosity, although the number of these "no download" hits is declining, as the next chart shows. This is important, for such visits subtract from the bandwidth available for downloading. The chart showing trends since the service was launched confirms that, fortunately, they are on the decline. In any event, the question is worth studying, for if we find that there is a more or less steady stream of visits for queries only, we may need to consider the possibility of using a separate page or address for that use.

The next chart illustrates user preference for DAISY over TLO, with the number of text downloads decreasing and the DAISY retrievals growing substantially.

The data on TLO downloads in 2009 are not shown due to network problems when this report was being formulated. In any event, the figure was not lower than in the preceding year.

3.1 Changes in reader habits

While it is still too early to identify any material change in access to books by our members, certain modifications have been observed.

The total number of requests for books on CD has grown steadily, although the percentage with respect to the preceding year declined. By contrast, the percentage of downloads continued to rise year after year. The chart shows that the requests in the first quarter of the year amounted to nearly 2/3 of the total in all of 2008.

Indeed, in 2008 74,080 downloads were recorded, whereas the number of requests attended to directly by the SBO in that period came to 64,535.

The following chart shows the trends for the two distribution systems.

Note that downloads increased at a much faster pace than requests lodged with the ONCE's Bibliographic Service. Beginning in 2007, as the Digital Library steadily gained in popularity and number of users, the total number of downloads first equalled and then exceeded the number of requests.

For the time being, outside the spectacular rise in 2007, library downloads can be said to be climbing at a yearly rate of around 150%. The increase in downloads from the Digital Library is obviously related to its accessibility. While we are experiencing growing pains, primarily the need for more bandwidth to ensure greater access, the constant rise in the number of Digital Library users is a clear indication that it constitutes an essential tool for book distribution. At the same time, while our output continues to rise, the rate of increase in the number of requests for works filed with the Bibliographic Service is declining.

All the foregoing stands as proof that by instituting a Digital Library, the ONCE has contributed enormously to popularizing the distribution of digital talking books. As a result, a large majority of the ONCE's membership routinely accesses information through this facility, which is fast becoming a highly effective distribution tool. Like any service of this nature, it is used by a certain percentage of readers only sporadically, but the vast majority of our members who read as an intellectual or cultural pursuit or for mere entertainment turn to the Digital Library to access books.

I should add that we continue to distribute books on CD ROM, particularly for reasons of celerity in filling student requests, for this is the medium commonly used to deliver books section by section. Narrators record several hours and send the respective CDs to the centre for shipment to the end users. This process is repeated until the entire book requested is recorded. This shortens the turnaround time for users, who can begin to study without having to wait for a whole textbook to be recorded, although the final delivery includes the whole book.

But things change and we may need to seek new solutions, particularly with a view to simplifying shipping procedures and enhancing versatility, solutions that may involve using today's MP3 players or mobile telephones or very small memory devices.

In any event, quite beyond such considerations, I believe that with digital libraries we are preparing the ground for the book distribution system of the future. It is very difficult to compete with online distribution in terms of both time and costs. Once the bandwidth limitation-related problems mentioned above and the security issues inherent in downloads are solved, such libraries are certain to become the primary distribution channel. We firmly believe in their utility and also in the possibility, in the short or medium term, of synchronization with other countries to build a genuinely universal library.