Today & tomorrow: A brief history (& future) of library systems in the 2020’s

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A brief history (& future) of library systems in the 2020’s

● A brief history of library systems
  ○ Noting the recent history of market consolidation

● Current state of library systems
  ○ The rise of SaaS
  ○ Implications on system choice

● The promises (& pitfalls) of open source
  ○ Theoretical implications for libraries
Some contextualizing thoughts

- Library systems exist in an administrative interzone that contains both patron/institutional needs & vendor/developer decisions.

- Our selection and implementation of library systems have implications for institutional workflows and impact how information is presented & delivered to users.

- Systems, the vendors/developers that create them, and the institutions that use them are not neutral entities.

- I am a higher education librarian, YMMV.
A brief history of library systems

- Initially developed in 1960’s / 1970’s
- Boutique applications, mainframe dependency
- Highly refined by 1990’s
  - MARC support
  - OPAC support
- Market shifts in 1990’s and beyond due to consolidation, changes in library ecosystem, applications refocus

Kinner & Rigda (2009); Gallup Fayen (2010)
The arc of the market

Kinner & Rigda (2009)
The arc of the market

From Kinner & Rigda (2009), modified by Koivisto (2019)
Drivers of consolidation

● Vertical and Horizontal Consolidation -- Breeding

● Resist new entrants [or] advancement of regional companies... uncomfortably narrow... -- Breeding

● Move to Library Management Systems (LMS)

● Software-as-a-service (SaaS)
Is this good? Is this bad?

- Decreased institutional investment
- Quicker integration of enhancements
- Presumption of module interoperability
Is this good? Is this bad?

● Less direct control; Widening gap between system users and system governance
  ○ Vendor paternalism -- Askey & Askey

● Potential to introduce system errors & biases
  ○ Matthew Reidsma
  ○ Safiya Noble “Algorithms of Oppression”
  ○ Frank Pasquale “Black Box Society: The secret algorithms that control money and information”

● Does SaaS align with our professional values?
  ○ “When we look to Silicon Valley to explain the future of libraries, we give up our ability to actively shape it ourselves”

Reidsma (2016); Mirza & Seale (2017); Askey & Askey (2017)
Why open source?

- Designed for libraries by libraries
- Creates opportunities for unmediated, organic growth of system design based on institution-specific or domain-specific needs
- Places systems within reach of institutions that might not otherwise be able to afford it
- “Non-excludable public good” - Eghbal
- Accountability
- “Warm fuzzy factor”

Oberhaus (2019)
Why (maybe) not open source?

- Dramatically increased need for in-house expertise & infrastructural investment
- Free like a puppy, not free like beer
- True value realized not just in implementing, but in contributing

- Which raises questions...
Open source for whom?

- The economics of open source may be less equitable than its ethics
- Major contributors can become limited to a few large key players and corporate sponsors
- “Full Stack Librarians” and hyperfocus on technosolutionism - Mirza & Seale
- Systems reflect people and organizations with the privilege to build them - Kate Dohe

Oberhaus (2019); Information Maintainers (2019); Mirza & Seale (2017)
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NOT FOUND
What is the future for library systems?

- Consolidated market & SaaS models likely here to stay
  - And possibly continue

- Altered power dynamics between users & vendors

- Decisions between vendor-supplied and open-source solutions driven as much by economic exigencies as professional & ethical values

- Intentional approach of using open source to build community, not merely replicating corporate values in higher ed. / cultural heritage arena

Breeding (2019)


