



World Library and Information Congress: 69th IFLA General Conference and Council

1-9 August 2003, Berlin

Code Number: 055-E
Meeting: 157. Bibliographic Control - **Workshop**
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

Vascoda - a Portal for Scientific Resource Collections Created by German Libraries and Information Centres

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1. Introduction

Coinciding with the IFLA-conference, vascoda, a new portal for scientific information, will go online in August 2003. Vascoda (www.vascoda.de) will be a central access point for all fields of research covering science, life sciences and the humanities as well as social sciences. The portal will allow interdisciplinary searches and – in a later version - complex navigation and browsing. All types of documents can be obtained through vascoda: born-digital as well as digitised and print materials can be procured either free of charge or through pay-per-view options. The user will get relevant information and materials regardless of their medium. The use of the services of the portal is free of charge and open to everyone while some of the services of the partners will have to be charged for.

Vascoda offers access to full-texts, link-collections, bibliographic and other databases, subject-specific search engines and more. The portal is also a nucleus in the creation of a German Digital Library. The German Digital Library will – in the future – provide scientists, students and all other people interested in quality information, with a central access for all kinds of research.

The idea behind vascoda is to facilitate access to quality information. While a search through search engines like Google will generate a number of hits that can be used for academic or other high-standard research and millions of unusable links, this new portal will only index quality material. This means that the relation between precision and recall will help users to find information more quickly and to find precisely what they were looking for instead of just any kind of information that was accidentally listed by one of the big search engines. Standard search engines index the webpages regardless of their subject and quality. Vascoda allows access to quality information only, so that the user can be sure to find only trustworthy sources. Also, vascoda will not only provide internet resources but all types of documents and information relevant for research. It gives access to many documents which are –so far – part of the so-called hidden or invisible web. This means that metadata and important documents can be accessed through the internet but are not indexed by search-

engines because they are part of databases or other complex structures and are thus “hidden” from the inexperienced searcher. Making the invisible web visible is achieved by integrating library OPACs, databases and other bibliographic information into the searches. Librarians know how to do metasearches of several different library catalogues at one time and how to find other “hidden” information but many users do not even know that they can not find the content of library catalogues through a common search engine. One of the exceptions is the virtual library shelf produced by the HBZ.¹ In this case HTML-pages are generated from the OPAC entries so that search engines can find the content of the catalogue. However, apart from this example, the content of library catalogues and databases can usually not be found by search-engines. Furthermore, if certain information has not yet been digitised, one can still find the bibliographic information on printed material through vascoda and can initiate a document delivery service or an interlibrary loan through the same portal.

2. Sponsors and Institutions Behind Vascoda

Two of the most important sponsors of subject-information in Germany, the BMBF (Federal Ministry for Education and Research) and the DFG (German Research Society) are working together to make this portal a reality and to benefit from a combined portal instead of sponsoring two or more competing access points.

More than thirty German institutions - with co-operation partners worldwide – are working together to offer users an actual one-stop-shop for all scientific information. The partners of this project are libraries as well as information centres and other institutions providing quality academic information.

The first release will be realized through the co-operation of the network of subject-based Virtual Libraries and the Electronic Journals Library sponsored by the DFG as well as the Information Alliance sponsored by the BMBF. Together, these institutions will make it possible to combine the search for information and the access to full-text documents. Links and short description will allow easy navigation to all other services. The second release will also include browsing options and more complex search options.

The target user-group will be the higher education and academic research community but also researchers working for large-scale businesses and industries as well as all other people interested in high-quality information.

3. The Associates

The first release of vascoda will be realized through a joint effort of three major partners. In the future, many more partners will be integrated into the project.

3.1. Electronic Journals Library

The Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB (Electronic Journals Library) offers an effective use of academic journals found on the internet. This service has been developed at the University Library of Regensburg (Germany) in cooperation with the University Library of the Technical University of Munich. (<http://rzblx1.uni-regensburg.de/ezeit/>). Meanwhile, 212 libraries and institutions make use of the EZB's services.

The EZB offers fast, structured and standardized access to scientific and academic full text journals. In April 2003, it contained 14,594 titles, among them 1,729 online-only journals, covering all subjects. 4,475 journals can be read free-of-charge. The number of titles grows steadily as more and more institutions get involved and as more and more journals

¹ http://www.hbz-nrw.de/produkte_dienstl/virkiv.html

publish an online-version as well as a printed volume. The participating libraries offer full text access to the respective journals they subscribe to.

Integrating the services of the EZB into the joint portal will allow access to all the information that is held by the EZB. It will thus be possible to give users the licence information of the respective journals. This means, the user will be able to find out immediately if the journal can be obtained free of charge and can be accessed directly or which institution has a subscription for the journal and how it can be used. If the user accesses vascoda through a subscribing institution he or she can also directly access the full-text of the journal.

3.2. The Information Alliance

The Information Alliance focuses on providing digital full-texts, published materials and grey literature. Partners of the information alliance are information centres and specialized libraries. Together they make an effort to combine the search results of databases with the electronic full-texts provided either by publishers, grey-literature- or preprint-servers etc. The combined services of the EZB, the Virtual Libraries and the information alliance will make it easy to have direct access to many full-texts.

Partners of the information alliance are EconDoc (www.econdoc.de), GetInfo (www.getinfo-doc.de), infoconnex (www.infoconnex.de) and MedPilot (www.medpilot.de).

EconDoc is the information alliance of the major institutions offering documentation in the field of economics and business administration in Germany. Together, these partners offer more than 2 million references to articles in their subject-fields, suitable for research as well as for business practice. References selected from more than 150 journals are provided with links to the full texts of the articles. More than 600.000 full-texts are accessible.

GetInfo is a one-stop-shop for a broad range of electronic documents in science and technology. It also offers access to literature which is not yet available in electronic form (e.g. print or microform). Through GetInfo you can access a wealth of specialist information that has not yet been digitised via the services of e.g. TIBORDER (<http://tiborder.tib.uni-hannover.de/>). The services - integrated in GetInfo - deliver the material to the user. Ideally - if the resource that is requested is available in electronic form - the scientific full-text is only two clicks away from the initial search.

Infoconnex covers and combines the subject fields of pedagogy, psychology and social sciences and will soon offer its services online.

MedPilot is a partner of the Information Alliance and the Virtual Libraries at the same time. This project makes searching and the ordering of documents related to medicine easy.

3.3. The Subject-Based Virtual Libraries

The Subject-Based Virtual Libraries (Subject Gateways) offer access to information and documents relevant for research in a specific field of study. Searching and the delivery of documents - stored and scattered around the world - are integrated by these Virtual Libraries.

The search covers electronic as well as printed material. If the content is relevant for research the document will be included. At the moment, most individual Virtual Libraries offer different subsections for searching different collections like databases, websites, journals etc. In the long run, the aim is to offer search engines which will be able to search different data-collections at the same time and which will present structured results. A metasearch of the search-results of all individual Virtual Libraries can then be included in the vascoda portal, thus offering integrated access to distributed resources. At the moment, there are 23 individual Virtual Libraries, of which 15 are already online and can be accessed through <http://www.virtuellefachbibliothek.de/VLibEnglHome.htm> and through www.vascoda.de . The Virtual Libraries cover a broad range of subjects and appear in many different shapes.

One example for a Virtual Library is the Virtual Library of Anglo-American Culture. It offers access to special collections of Anglo-American literature and history. A metasearch integrates the most important databases, catalogues and electronic full-texts. So far, many special databases can only be accessed from the IP-range in Goettingen, because they are only licenced by this library. In the future, licence-agreements may enlarge the group of users who can benefit from research in these databases.

Another example is the Politics- and Peace Guide. This Virtual Library offers internet resources, electronic full-texts, articles, databases and an online-tutorial to help people improve their information competence. A metasearch will soon be implemented. The tutorial of the Politics- and Peace Guide teaches students and researchers how to search for information effectively. It can be downloaded so that users can test and improve their information skills offline. (So far, it is only available in German but it will soon be translated into English.)

A third and again quite different example of another Virtual Library is ViFaTec, the Engineering Subject Gateway. ViFaTec offers structured access to relevant technical online information for engineers, technicians and scientists. It offers access to printed as well as electronic documents from various sources. The ViFaTec Subject Guide allows the combination of resource types and subjects. This enables users to do very specific searches, like - for example- searching only for conferences on mechanical engineering or only for research projects in chemical engineering and so on.

Together, the Virtual Libraries, the Information Alliance and the Electronic Journals Library will make it easy to obtain trustworthy quality information through searching and browsing options. An easy and convenient access for users to all types of documents in all academic fields is the most important aim of this project.

The single subject-specific entry points will be the fundamental components of this interdisciplinary service. Their services have to be standardized – at least in parts - in order to make complex cross-searching and browsing possible.

4. Standardization

Document Types

The services of all partners cover a wealth of documents which also means that there are a number of different document types like monographs, journal articles, preprints, reports, conference proceedings, manuals, statistics, websites and so on. This means that a huge effort needs to be taken to standardize metadata.

Metadata

Before the co-operation of all the partners was established both, the subject-based Virtual Libraries and the members of the Information Alliance wanted to build their own portals with search and browse options. For their portal the members of the information alliance agreed on a minimum standard of four metadata-fields while the Virtual Libraries agreed on the VLib-Application Profile based on Dublin Core.² One problem in standardizing the metadata is the fact that a certain amount of the metadata is created and delivered by different publishers. A lot of work still needs to be done to find solutions for this problem in order to standardize the metadata and to make complex searching and browsing options possible.

² For details of the VLib-Application Profile: Hans Jürgen Becker, Christel Hengel, Heike Neuroth, Berthold Weiß und Carola Wessel: Die Virtuelle Fachbibliothek als Schnittstelle für eine fachübergreifende Suche in den einzelnen Virtuellen Fachbibliotheken: Definition eines Metadaten-Kernsets (VLib Application Profile); BIBLIOTHEKSDIENST 36. Jg. (2002), H. 1 http://bibliotheksdienst.zlb.de/2002/02_01_03.pdf

5. First Release and Future Plans

First Release

The first release of vascoda in August 2003 will include a simple search over the products provided by the Information Alliance and the internet resources provided by the subject-based Virtual Libraries combined with links to information and resources provided by the EZB. For the first release the partners agreed on six metadata fields (title, journal title, creator, date, ISSN, source, identifier). In addition there will be links to all the other services provided by the three partners.

Second Release

The second release will offer complex search and browsing options that can be realized through a standardization of metadata, the implementation of metasearch-engines and possibly (at least in some parts) a joint cataloguing database for internet resources.

6. Co-operations and Vision

Vascoda will be produced by German institutions, but like everything else published on the internet, users from all over the world can access the portal and benefit from the multitudinous services. Of course, local, regional and national licences can in some parts limit the possible service or users from outside will have to pay for certain services, but on the whole most segments can be used free of charge.

Providing quality information and ensuring the long-term accessibility of documents demands a lot of time and money from everybody involved. In order to save resources, the workloads need to be shared. This means that co-operations on a national and international scale are vital for the growth and long-term development of such a large-scale project.

In March 2003 vascoda was introduced to members of the German library and information community, in order to talk about possible co-operations. The details need still to be discussed but the desire to co-operate was expressed by everyone present.

Everywhere in the world, information specialists and scientists are working on gateways and portals to create access points to quality information. The Resource Discovery Network, the WWW Virtual Library and science.gov – to name just a few – already offer an impressive service. Some of their aims and services are the same as vascoda's while others differ. The exchange of knowledge and experiences with these and other networks will be vital to developing a high-quality product that can later be combined with other international products. In order to make a later co-operation possible metadata, interfaces etc. need to follow international standards right from the beginning.

A lot of work in many different fields still needs to be done to realize a version of vascoda with truly complex search and browse options, with easy access to all materials desired by users, with international co-operations and services. If, however, the vision becomes a reality, we will have a genuine one-stop-shop for all kinds of research.