ONLINE BOOKSTORES AND WEBSITES FOR DEVELOPING LIBRARY COLLECTIONS FOR CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

In the past, the identification and selection of materials for children was a cumbersome task as adequate selection tools are expensive and difficult to obtain in developing countries. The Web has revolutionised the collection development process by providing access to up-to-date information about items, book reviews, and several other value-added features. This paper reviews websites of some selected online bookstores, publishers of children's literature, libraries, and individual consultants, which can be used for selecting materials for children. It also provides an overview of the unique features of these websites, their browsing and searching capabilities, book selection tools and other value-added products and services. Online book shopping and order tracking capabilities of these websites are also discussed.

Keywords: Online bookstores; Children's websites; Collection development; World Wide Web; Children's literature

INTRODUCTION

Like many other library activities and operations, the advances in information technology have greatly influenced the collection development work. The advent of the World Wide Web has particularly revolutionised the identification, selection and procurement of library materials. The Web has provided an opportunity to publishers of children's literature, booksellers, professional associations and other stakeholders to keep in touch with their clients. Developments and the popularity of electronic commerce has also influenced the book industry (Lichtenberg, 1997). Book sales are considered amongst one of the early success stories of Internet retailing (Kim, 1998).

Traditionally, school libraries have been using various collection development tools such as print lists, publishers' catalogues, flyers, and reviews for the

identification and selection of materials. Often these tools were either inaccessible or expensive for most school libraries in the developing countries and as a result, they were often unable to acquire the most appropriate library materials swiftly and economically. The rapid growth of online bookstores and websites has altogether changed this situation by providing tremendous opportunities for the identification, selection and acquisition of needed materials. It is estimated that nearly 80% of the established booksellers, numbering in hundreds, are using the Web for selling books and other products (Kipling & Wilson, 2000). In addition to several mega online bookstores, many speciality book retailers are catering to the needs of special customer groups (Pack, 2000; Fryxell, 1997).

Online bookstores and other related websites provide a variety of products and services, which significantly enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the collection development process (Todaro, 2000; Henderson, 1996). The Web bookstores provide broad and comprehensive coverage in terms of specific formats (books, journals, audio-visual materials and educational games), target groups (babies, children and young adults), subjects and themes, and literary forms and genres (poetry, prose, crime, science fiction). The information available is often very current and frequently updated (Mattos & Yue, 2000), even changed on an hourly basis for best-sellers. Most websites provide some unique and value-added features that distinguish them from traditional print-based selection tools. Such features include annotated links to other websites related to literacy, childcare and development, teaching methodology, student projects and storytelling. These websites may even provide supplementary materials for teachers, in addition to using a particular textbook (Bauer, 2000).

Versatility and flexibility of online bookstores and websites have transformed book buying into the fastest, easiest and enjoyable shopping experience (Mellahi & Johnson, 2000). According to the InfoComm Literacy Survey 2000, books and stationery items accounted for 39% of the products bought by Singaporeans through the Internet and were the most popular items for online shopping. It was also revealed that generally online shopping was more popular among young, educated, working and affluent individuals (IDA, 2001). However, the use of online bookstores by libraries in Singapore is still in its infancy. A survey of six libraries of tertiary academic institutions in Singapore showed that only one-half of them have ever made purchases from the online bookstores (Majid & Hoon, 2002).

A survey of 14 school libraries in Singapore showed that none of these libraries were using online bookstores and websites for the identification, selection and purchase of library materials. A majority of them were solely depending on publishers' catalogues and vendors' lists for developing their collections (Majid

et al., 2002). The study concluded that it might be due to the lack of proper training of teacher-librarians in developing library resources as well as their limited knowledge of online bookstores.

Selection of library materials for children needs special care due to legitimate concerns regarding the format and contents. This paper reviews various features, products and services provided by some selected online bookstores and websites for the identification, selection and acquisition of library materials for children. In the following section, important features of these websites are summarised under broad categories.

WEBSITES FOR DEVELOPING LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

Online Bookstores

Almost all established bookstores have developed their websites and provide several useful features. Some of the online bookstores do not have physical outlets and just concentrate on online book retailing. Often individual buyers are the focus of their products and services, although some of these are equally useful for libraries and other information agencies. This paper has only reviewed Amazon.com, as it provides more comprehensive and sophisticated online book buying features.

(a) Amazon.com (http://www.amazon.com)

Amazon is considered the 'Earth's Largest Bookstore', providing access to over 2.5 million titles to 3 million customers in 220 countries. It is considered the most visited e-commerce website in the USA, and among the top three sites in the UK, France, Germany and Japan (Mellahi & Johnson, 2000). It provides separate areas for books and other educational products for children and young adults. Children's books can be browsed by 17 major categories, including three categories by the age of children whereas books for teenagers are arranged in 12 categories. There are many sub-categories in each category, which make browsing much faster and easier. Amazon.com provides adequate information about each item as well as several tools that can be used for the selection of materials. Almost all titles have editorial reviews, providing a descriptive account of the book, and readers' reviews with their star ratings. In addition, information about the average customer assessment (star-rating) and Amazon.com sales ranking for each item is provided. Similarly, it provides a list of other books bought by the customers of this book as well as a list of similar titles, which could be useful in the identification of other books on the same

topic. Another option, useful in the selection of materials, is a list of '25 Top Sellers', updated daily and a list of '100 bestsellers'.

Amazon.com has several sophisticated e-shopping features with a 'Safe Shopping Guarantee'. It also offers an alternative payment method through which customers, instead of providing online credit card information, can call or fax this information. After placing an order, customers can view, change or remove items as well as track the status of the order. Corporate buyers can open their account by providing their credit card information and the names of authorised buyers. Another interesting feature of Amazon.com is its 'Recommendation Wizard', which keeps track of the customers' interests and purchases made by them. During the next logon, it will not only greet the customers by their name, but it will also show new titles matching the customers' interests.

Websites of Publishers of Children's Literature

(a) Puffin Books (http://www.puffin.co.uk/)

Puffin is one the popular publishers of children's literature in UK. Like many other websites for children's literature, it targets children, teachers and parents. Its bright and colourful interface attracts users, particularly children to this website, although downloading is quite slow. Books can be searched by title, author or ISBN whereas the advance search also allows searching by keyword, publication date and document format. Brief information about each title is displayed with the option to read their reviews, sample chapters or more information about the authors. Puffin has a shopping basket in which selected items can be placed for ordering, changed or removed.

For teachers, it has a special service called 'School Direct' through which teachers can order items, at a discounted price, from publishers such as Puffin, Penguin and Ladybird. Free booklists and catalogues are also provided to the schools. Other free products include posters for decorating classrooms, school libraries and other reading areas. Puffin is implementing many innovative ideas for promoting reading habits among children, such as visits of popular authors to schools, a section on 'Build a Story Challenge', and a very attractive animated presentation on 'How a Book is Made'. Other highlights of this website are the sections on 'Book of the Month', 'Puffin Picks', audio clips 'Listen Up', and separate zones on authors, parents and education.

(b) Kidsbooks (http://www.kidsbooks.com/)

Founded in 1987, Kidsbooks Inc. is a popular small-scale publisher of high quality, non-fiction children's books. Kidsbooks markets its books primarily to retailers, book clubs, school libraries, special markets, and direct to consumers via the Internet. Books are arranged in eight broad categories and information about the book title, author, ISBN, target audience, price and a brief description of the book are provided. Titles can also be searched through a simple search interface. Only a limited number of books have reviews and sample chapters.

Online ordering is quite straightforward and easy to use. Titles can be added, changed and removed. Customers can also check status of their orders through an online order tracking system. Orders can also be placed through telephone, fax and mail. Kidsbooks provides special discounts to teachers, educators and home schoolers.

(c) Children's Book Council (http://www.cbcbooks.org/)

The Children's Book Council (CBC) is a non-profit trade organisation dedicated to encourage literacy and the use of children's books, and is the official sponsor of Young People's Poetry Week and Children's Book Week. This website is an invaluable resource for publishers, teachers, librarians, booksellers, authors/illustrators, and parents.

A unique feature of the CBC website is its 'Hot off the Press' option which provides access to the anticipated bestsellers, either recently published or to be released. Each item contains some basic information about the book and a brief description provided by the publisher. As the presented titles are often very new, most of them are without any reviews. This website also provides access to online CBC publications and bibliographies. For librarians who are new to children and young adult literature or who just wish to catch up with the recently published titles, one valuable source is '75 Authors and Illustrators Everyone Should Know'. Another useful source 'Children's Choice 2002', a joint project of International Reading Association and CBC, provides a list of most popular titles selected by 10,000 children in the United States. Searching of titles is very basic and the shopping cart provides standard online purchasing options. However, users can create their own account (profile) with the CBC, which can be used for all future online shopping transactions.

Library Websites

Several libraries have come up with websites that can be used for the identification and selection of library materials for children and young adults. Being non-commercial entities, these websites provide unbiased and balanced reviews on books and other library materials. In addition, some of them also provide sections on parenting, childcare, teaching methodology, and matters related to literacy and child development.

(a) The Bookhive (http://www.bookhive.org/)

The Bookhive website is developed by the Charlotte Public Library, North Carolina for children, parents, teachers or anyone interested in reading about children's books. This site contains hundreds of book reviews, which can be further narrowed down to the reading level of children and young adults. Parents may find special 'parental notes', attached to some reviews, useful in selecting books for their children. Besides subject browsing, users can also search books by author, title, reading level, interest area, number of pages, and even favourite illustrator.

Book reviews are presented in 22 categories, which are simple and easy to browse. Some of the categories are quite unique and not presented in other websites such as folklore, multicultural, read aloud, and African-American. Readers can also post their brief comments about the books. Presentation of information on this website is quite impressive with attractive colours and animations. Text size and choice of fonts are also appropriate for children. An interesting feature of this website is that, in addition to book reviews, it also offers online storytelling sessions for children.

(b) World of Reading (http://www.worldreading.org/)

Developed by the Ann Arbor District Library, this website presents book reviews for kids written by kids. The World of Reading is designed to be an educational, challenging, and a safe website for children. It only accepts reviews submitted under an adult supervision and each review is examined for its content and language appropriateness, thus resulting in high quality reviews.

Reviews can be seen by 33 subject categories as well as by the location or country of young reviewers. In addition to standard subject categories for children's literature, this site also provides some unique categories such as disability, family, growing up, loss, and survival. Instead of providing a long list of subject categories, it provides a matrix of boxes with a separate box for each subject category. Each box contains text and an appropriate graphic for the

subject category, which makes the presentation very colourful, attractive and easy to understand.

Each review, presented in a very attractive format, is accompanied by basic information about the book and its reviewer. Most of the reviews are brief and often do not provide enough information for making purchasing decision. Links are provided for books getting more than one review. Reviews can also be searched via a simple title and author search interface.

Individually Developed Websites

Several individuals, such as consultants, students, teachers, authors and illustrators, with an interest in children's literature, have developed their personal websites that can also be used for developing children's collections. Many of these sites are very simple whereas others are more comprehensive providing a variety of features. One such website is maintained by Carol Hurst.

(a) Carol Hurst's Children Literature Site (http://www.carolhurst.com)

Carol Hurst, a well-know storyteller, lecturer, author, and a consultant, has developed this website, which is considered one of the best sites for book reviews and innovative teaching ideas. The section on 'Curriculum Area' provides access to children's books, activity books, professional books and links to sites in several major subject areas. It also provides many fantastic ideas for using books in the classroom, covering topics such as class work, research projects and discussion groups. Book reviews are arranged alphabetically by title, author and grade levels. Books can also be searched by using a simple author/title search interface. A star-rating system is used to indicate outstanding, highly recommended and recommended titles. Most of the book reviews are quite comprehensive and also provide information about the recommended grade level of children. In addition, many books reviews have sections on 'Things to Note'; recommended 'Activities' based on the book; other 'Related Titles'; and links to other websites on the same topic. A free electronic newsletter, containing new book reviews, author studies, featured books in depth, classroom and themes is available to interested users by e-mail as well as through the website.

Book Review Websites

There are several websites that exclusively provide access to reviews to children's books. Most of these are non-commercial sites with several value-

added features. Many of these websites are either developed by children or present reviews written by them.

(a) Cool-Reads (http://www.cool-reads.co.uk/)

It is a website for 10 to 15 year old readers maintained by 10-15 year old reviewers. Reviews are organized in 28 categories and for each category two buttons are provided; a green button for reviews written by the Cool-Reads team and a violet button for the reviews written by guest reviewers. Each review is quite comprehensive and presented under the headings 'How easy was it to get stuck into this book?'; 'who is it about?'; 'what's the storyline?'; 'how is it written?', and finally the overall book rating, using a star-rating system. Each title on this website also provides a summary of reviews published somewhere else on this book as well as other books written by the same author. This site also encourages and provides guidelines to new young reviewers. Subject categories or the level of star-rating can be used for browsing reviews. Only the author and title search is available. The Cool-Reads also provides links to other book reviewing and selection websites as well as access to sites of several authors of children's books.

(b) The World Pool (http://www.wordpool.co.uk/)

This site presents reviews of children's books, arranged by 16 topics, and most of the topics have several sub-topics for easy browsing. Each review is accompanied with the book title, author and publisher information, with a link to Amazon.com which pays commission on each title procured through this website. A free monthly newsletter provides articles, reviews and author profiles.

A unique feature of this website is a section on 'Reluctant Readers', which offers reviews to those titles that are considered suitable for children with reading difficulty. Reviews are presented in three sub-categories, i.e., 'Riveting Reads', 'Graphic Novels', and 'Easy Reads'. In addition, this website offers a section on 'Parent's Corner', which recommends books on parenting and childcare with links to several useful sites on these topics. Other interesting sections are: 'Big Books' containing recommended titles for teachers and 'Numeracy' for books on mathematics and number games.

AN OVERVIEW OF ONLINE BOOKSTORES AND WEBSITES

This section provides a consolidated summary of the features offered by online bookstores and websites that can be used for developing library collections for children.

Browsing and Searching

Almost all good websites provide both browsing and searching capabilities for the identification of needed materials. For browsing, either a list of topics is displayed or a drop-down menu is used. Some websites, such as Amazon.com, provide sub-categories, which make browsing easy, accurate and less time consuming.

Most non-commercial websites provide a simple interface for searching author and title information whereas commercial websites often provide both simple and advanced searching options. In advanced searching, users can use several access points such as author, title, ISBN, subject and publisher. Users can also limit and/or sort their search results by the publication date, language, document type, format, binding, reader's age, bestsellers and price range.

Item-related Information

Most of the online bookstores and websites provide adequate bibliographic and other information usually required for selecting and purchasing library materials. Almost all websites provide information about the title, author, publisher and ISBN. Several sites also provide an image of the book cover, price, discounts and type of binding.

Selection Tools

A major strength of the web-based collection development is the availability of a variety of tools for the identification and selection of materials. Almost all websites provide access to book reviews, many titles getting more than one review. A majority of websites encourage readers to write reviews, which are often unbiased, balanced and quite informative. Several sites present reviews written by the children for the children.

Some other useful features offered by many online bookstores and websites include: lists of bestsellers, new arrivals, recommended books, sample chapters, star-based rating system, other books on the similar topic and author interviews. Similarly, some websites also provide access to out-of-print materials, which were otherwise difficult to locate and acquire.

Online Shopping

Some advanced e-commerce features, offered by many online bookstores and websites, have converted book buying into a fast, safe, easy and enjoyable shopping experience. Several websites use the industry standard Secure Sockets

Layer (SSL), which encrypts personal information for secured online transactions. More cautious customers can provide the credit card information through telephone, fax or mail.

Selected items can be placed, modified or removed from the shopping cart (also called shopping bag or basket). Some sites save shoppers' personal profiles, which can be used by these customers for their future shopping. Another useful feature, which is now becoming common, is a tracking system to know the status of the order. Some online bookstores also offer a 'corporate account' to libraries and other institutions interested in frequent purchases through multiple authorised staff members.

It is not uncommon to get different prices for the same title from various websites. The Web has several shopping robots that search and compare prices from many online booksellers (Kruse & Holtzman, 2003). Some robots specialising in book price comparison are: AllBookstores (http://www.allbookstores.com/), Addall.com (http://www.addall.com), Bestwebbuys (http://www.bestwebbuys.com/), and Online-savings (http://www.online-savings.com/). Similarly some robots, dedicated to textbook price comparison, such as Campusbooks (http://www.campusbooks.com/) and Campusi (http://www. campusi.com/), are also available.

Value-added Features

Another strength of the online bookstores and websites, which distinguishes them from the traditional bookstores and library vendors, is the unique and innovative value-added features offered by them. Some of the value-added features found in the above reviewed websites are summarised here:

Alerting Services: Many of the online bookstores and websites, as part of their customer relation activities, offer several free alerting services to their members and customers. Often email alerts are used to inform users about new book releases in their specific areas of interest. Some bookstores also send a list of recommended books based on the customer's interest profile, lists of bestsellers and award-winning books, book bargains and press releases.

Buyer Advising Service: Professional advice is offered for the selection of materials in new and unfamiliar subject areas.

Membership Privileges: Several websites encourage customers to register with them to benefit from exclusive membership privileges such as free gifts, bonus points, special discounts and subsidised shipment charges.

Discussion Groups: Some booksellers have established their bulletin boards and discussion groups to facilitate communication between the community members for sharing their opinions on certain books or subjects as well as to inform others about book discounts, bargains, and interesting events.

Educational and Recreational Features: Some websites provide educational and recreational features such as online storytelling, the process of book production and build a story challenge. A few websites also offer innovative ideas on teaching, students' projects, and classroom activities. Some websites have separate areas for parents, recommending books on parenting and childcare.

Newsletters: Such newsletters provide information about book releases, special features/ articles, author interviews, conference announcements and upcoming events.

Other Features: Many websites also provide information about and sell other products such as educational games, toys, multimedia software and music; free materials and services such as posters, e-cards, wallpapers, email accounts, space for personal web pages and authors' visit to schools. Some websites provide an option on 'Price Comparison', which can be used for comparing prices of the same title offered by different online bookstores.

CONCLUSIONS

Online access to a huge number of books as well as availability of a variety of selection tools has helped public and school libraries in developing high quality children collections. Earlier, the task of finding children's books and their reviews was a tedious, laborious and time-consuming one. Many school libraries, particularly in developing countries, were dependent on publishers' catalogues and vendors' lists, resulting in limited choice and unbalanced collections. Now, a majority of the online bookstores provide access to information which is considered useful in the selection of materials such as book reviews, table of contents, sample chapters, readers' assessment (star-rating), author interviews, email alerts and bestseller lists. Although, web-based book buying is gaining momentum among the individual shoppers, only a limited number of public and school libraries, particularly in developing countries, are making its full use for developing their collections. Besides inadequate awareness about web-based book buying, many libraries are unable to sufficiently benefit from this enormous information resource due to difficulties related to credit card based payments and inflexible government rules and procedures. It is, therefore, desirable that online bookstores should come up with

a more flexible payment mechanism for libraries and at the same time book-buying rules and procedures for libraries need to be reconsidered.

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