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Review of Access and Identity Management for Libraries: Controlling Access to Online Information

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ACCESS AND IDENTITY MANAGEMENT FOR LIBRARIES: CONTROLLING ACCESS TO ONLINE INFORMATION. Masha Garibyan, Simon McLeish & John Paschoud. London: Facet, 2014, 248 pp., 978-1-85604-588-9.

Libraries have always had “two apparently conflicting purposes”: to facilitate access to scholarly knowledge, and to restrict access. After offering that observation on page 2 of this book, the authors delve into the various methods of restricting access, particularly in the context of electronic resources: databases, e-journals, e-books, etc. Their avowed focus is on technical solutions for libraries rather than the underlying needs and desires of publishers, patrons, and other interested parties.

An overview of access management technologies must include IP authentication, widely used by academic libraries because it is straightforward, low-maintenance, and convenient for users – if you’re on campus, you get access. But remote users need another solution; often that’s EZProxy, which makes properly authenticated off-campus patrons appear to be on campus for access purposes. Like IP, it is straightforward, low-maintenance, and relatively convenient for users. Barcode patterns, passwords, “smart cards,” biometrics, virtual private networks, remote desktop services are examined as well, with discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of each. Illustrations in the familiar form of boxes and arrows are intended (with varying degrees of success) to clarify the flow of information.

Having surveyed the field of contenders and found most of them wanting, the authors arrive at the solution that is closest to their hearts, federated access management (FAM). The federated access model separates the authentication function – accomplished via an “identity provider” – from access to the resource itself. This division of labor yields benefits in efficiency

and privacy, and also in the greater degree of granularity of access that can be achieved. (It is not correct to say that EZProxy cannot distinguish between user types, but its capabilities in this regard are limited.) Depending upon the “attributes” associated with a particular user, a FAM product such as Shibboleth can fine-tune the user’s access to specific resources with considerable specificity.

But there are drawbacks as well as advantages. The authors concede that procurement, implementation, and integration of a FAM product can be a complex and often difficult undertaking. They suggest employing a consultant and entrusting the project to the IT department rather than managing it within the library, a course of action that may not be feasible or desirable in all cases. Once in place, FAM systems have left some users confused. And not all librarians will embrace the promise of increased granularity: perhaps certain publishers will be persuaded to reduce licensing costs if access is strictly limited to a small group of researchers with an obvious interest in the content, but scholars don’t always confine themselves to the literature in their own narrow disciplines, and librarians tend to favor facilitating access rather than restricting it.

The authors, who share a background in access management projects (and at the London School of Economics), are optimistic that federated access products – already widely adopted in the academic setting – will continue to evolve and overcome their shortcomings. They note that “[a]ccess management is not going to go away in the short term” (p. 155).

The book is rounded out with chapters on library statistics and internet access in libraries; these chapters seem a bit tangential to the main theme. It has a distinctly British slant, with discussion of the Athens service, Eduserv, and the Janet network sprinkled throughout. American readers will find more familiar situations in the case studies (Appendix 1) from the University of

Chicago, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the USMAI consortium in Maryland. A table of contents, index, glossary, and appendices are included.

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