For years, Prince George's County public libraries administrators have heard a common complaint from many regular patrons: Why can't the library's vast trove of books and videos be searched with Google-like simplicity? Beginning this week, it can, library officials say.

More than a quarter-century after being computerized, the Prince George's public libraries' catalogue has been upgraded. This month, officials retired the obsolescent catalogue system and replaced it with one that they hope will provide patrons the kind of service expected in a 21st-century library. The new online catalogue should be accessible to the public this week.

Not only will the primary search page evoke the simplicity of Google's home page, but the searches will aim to be similarly smart, said Robin Jacobsen, senior administrator for public services, who was among those responsible for rolling out the new system.

"Many people who come to the library want to find things for themselves," Jacobsen said.

Bart Lawrence, 36, of Hyattsville, who visits the library about once a week, said he is happy to see the old system go the way of the card catalogues of earlier generations.

"I don't know technically what made it bad, but you could type in directly the title of a book or a movie, and if there were common words in it, you might get 20 pages of items," he said. "And, almost always, your book appeared at the end. Not having to scroll through all of that will be a nice change."

But as a sample search by Jacobsen showed, the new system might not always produce the expected result. She typed "The Great Gatsby" into the search engine, and factoring in relevancy, popularity and availability, the system came up with a list of "smart" results. Naturally, it listed various editions of F. Scott Fitzgerald's best-known novel. But the publication at the top of the list surprised the seasoned library administrator: the CliffsNotes for "The Great Gatsby."

"Look at that," Jacobsen said, chuckling. "That's very telling."

Developed by a company from Upstate New York, the catalogue cost slightly more than $600,000, library spokeswoman Bridget Warren said. The company, Polaris Library Systems, prevailed in a selection process that involved 40 of the library's employees and ranked each bidder on 600 features sought by the library.

For the past six months, library administrators have been working with the company to set up the system. Jacobsen spent several weeks traveling to the library's 18 branches to train staff members.

"When you work a tool for 27 years, it becomes second nature," she said. "You know exactly how to do what you need to do."

Along with an improved search function, the system will offer lots of touches that the library expects to be popular. For example, patrons will be able to track what they have borrowed, a function that many of them requested, officials said.

Cheryl Pitt, 57, of Adelphi said she borrows books on CD every month and is thrilled that the library will keep her information on file. "I'm absolutely in love," she said of the new system. "I can go in and look at the books I've already read. It's wonderful."

But there is a catch, Jacobsen noted. Ordinarily, the Prince George's library, like many others, does not retain borrower records once the items are returned, making it difficult, if not impossible, for police to track a suspect's library records. But if a patron chooses, those records will be kept on file, not only for the patron, but also for any law enforcement agency with authority to obtain the records.

Another feature will allow readers to review books or other material they have borrowed.

"Readers are by nature kind of social," Jacobsen said. "They always want to talk about their books. They always want to share their insights, so this is a great spot to start making that contact."

Now when library users put holds on popular books or films, they will be able to keep track of where they rank in the queue. "People always want to know where they are in line," Jacobsen said. "Now they'll be able to go online and find out."