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The Craft of Local Practice: How Catalogers are Gaining Efficiency but Losing Control

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Introduction

Ever since the Library of Congress (LC) began distributing catalog cards to libraries in the early 20th century, catalogers have found new ways to decrease redundancy and improve efficiency. Automation in the form of time saving devices such as bibliographic utilities, outsourcing with third-party vendors, and sophisticated editing capabilities in Integrated Library Systems have moved cataloging light years beyond the days of filing cards written meticulously in "library hand." The Anglo-American Cataloging Rules (AACR2) and LC's companion rule interpretations, LC subject headings, the development of the MARC format, continual revision of the Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress classification schemes, the growth of the Program for Cooperative Cataloging, and the development of Z39.50 are all intended to make it easier for libraries to share cataloging, and, in theory, to catalog things more or less the same way. But with the increased productivity also comes a loss of autonomy. While these advances have allowed even the smallest libraries to boast quality catalogs, the more catalogers rely on centralized cataloging and vendor outsourcing, the less control they wield over their local databases.

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wonder that one is hard pressed to find two catalogers who would catalog the same item in exactly the same way. This is because all the standards in the world are no match for the vagaries that my cataloging professor in library school called "cataloger taste and judgement." It is this taste and judgement, coupled with a solid foundation in the rules and standards, that moves cataloging from being merely a mechanical exercise and into the realm of a craft. Rules and standards can light the way for the cataloger, but strict adherence to these standards does not necessarily result in a catalog record that is helpful to the catalog user. Only the skilled imposition of judgement by a trained cataloger can transform a motley collection of individual records into a coherent, cohesive work more valuable to library customers and staff than most purchased reference books and databases.

At the Stockton-San Joaquin County Public Library in California, we have a tradition of local practices for copy cataloging that have evolved over the years, and that go well beyond just accepting copy found on OCLC. These practices allow us to craft our catalog to be of the most use to our customers. Yet, as is the case with many libraries, a myriad of factors all conspire against the continuation of these practices and threaten to squeeze the craft out of our catalog in the name of efficiency. This paper will look at some of these factors, including loss of staff, a new ILS system, non-English and non-book materials, consortium partners, and authority control, as we attempt to maintain the old craft while maintaining productivity.

Loss of Staff

Much of a catalog's effectiveness depends on the skill and experience of those building it. 1999 saw the retirement of our Head Cataloger, a Margaret Mann Citation recipient who once sat on the Joint Steering Committee for AACR2, was active in the Association for Library Collections and

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Technical Services (ALCTS), and was an early advocate for what became the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC). During her seventeen-year tenure she crafted many of our local practices, and upon her retirement this legacy was passed down to me. One of my biggest challenges is moving forward with efforts to streamline our cataloging work while staying true to the high standards that my mentor instilled in me. We not only lost her experience and knowledge when she retired, but also her productivity. While I received the title of Head Cataloger, we lost a cataloger when her position was not filled.

In late-2002 we suffered another major loss with the retirement of one of our three Cataloging Library Assistants. Most of her thirty-one years of experience in the library system was spent in Cataloging, and not only was she highly trained in cataloging rules and standards, but with formal education and training as a musician she cataloged all of our music materials. Partly as a result of a severe budget crisis, it was decided not to fill her position. Even if we could hire someone, it takes more than just a warm body to replace the kind of skill, experience, and institutional memory she developed over the past three decades.

Integrated Library Systems: With Us or Against Us?

In 2002 my library selected a new Integrated Library System (ILS). As we got deeper into the process, it became clear that many ILS vendors are more concerned with luring customers with sexy bells and whistles than with providing catalogs built solidly upon principles. In our case, it was difficult to separate the promises made by the vendors from the reality of what their products really can do. Attempts at onsite visits and conference calls with other libraries were only moderately helpful since few existing customers have upgraded to the latest versions of software that we were being peddled. While we were being razzle-dazzled with alluring features such as dust

jackets and book reviews in the OPAC, it was only later that we discovered shortcomings of how the catalog works—elements that fly in the face of fundamental cataloging principles. For instance, one vendor's OPAC is completely driven by keyword out of the box. If no local modifications are made upon installation, keyword searches are performed with no obvious option to perform an authority search. Even if the user chooses the author, title, or subject search buttons, the search performed is a keyword search within those fields. Just try doing a subject search for "baseball" in this environment and you'll quickly see how difficult it is to find something useful without the aid of controlled subject headings to help users narrow down their search. With this kind of catalog the years of diligent work that catalogers put into building authority control and useful cross-references is tossed out with the bath water.

More troubles lie in wait for those who manage to navigate their way to authority searching in this particular OPAC. To my shock, no link is made between the MARC 100 and 240 fields when you have a uniform title main entry. If you search for the uniform title for Beethoven's 5th Symphony, the only hits you retrieve in this particular catalog are cases when that work in entered as a 700 name-title added entry. If there is a recording that has that work entered as the main entry (i.e., 100/240 combination) you do not retrieve that record as one of the hits under the uniform title search. Yet, AACR2

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rule 25.1 says that one of the purposes of a uniform title is "for bringing together all catalogue entries for a work when various manifestations (e.g., editions, translations) of it have appeared under various titles." So, this fundamental cataloging principle is undermined by deficiencies in the structure of the OPAC. Examples such as this make it hard to believe vendors who promise that their products are fully compatible with the MARC record and cataloging standards. In the case of this particular vendor, a representative assured me that the 100/240 link would be functional in a future version of the software.

Non-English and New Formats

Our library actively collects materials in Spanish, Vietnamese, Cambodian/Khmer, Laotian, Hmong, Chinese, Tagalog, and Thai. Unfortunately, our catalogers are all English-only speakers, making it a challenge to provide quality access to these materials. Even if we had a Khmer, Laotian, and/or Thai speaker on staff, our current ILS cannot accommodate those non-Roman scripts. As a result, titles in these languages go into our collection uncataloged.

The cataloging for our Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese materials is contracted out to a third party. While this service is a godsend in giving us the ability to load quality records into the database for these materials, and despite careful attention to detail in our written guidelines, there are inevitably inconsistencies with our our own in-house cataloging that arise, both in description and in classification and subject analysis. We do some spot-checking of records to make sure our guidelines are being followed, but close examination of all records would defeat the purpose for contracting out this cataloging. If we have the time and skill to look at the records that closely, why not just do the cataloging ourselves and save the money? While we trust the cataloging is done well, it does not necessarily dovetail consistently with our own in-house cataloging.

Another pressure that challenges the craft we put into our cataloging is the explosion of non-print media. For many years we only had VHS videotapes and audiocassettes to reckon with. Now we have compact discs, DVDs, CD-ROMs, and Web-based subscription databases to contend with. Popular music compact discs are now further complicated by the introduction of "edited" and "explicit" versions of titles, both of which we purchase, and require separate records. As non-print materials receive a higher proportion of our materials budget, it means more attention must be devoted to the more complex and time-consuming cataloging of these formats.

Catalog Partners

In 1998 our library entered into an arrangement with a small public library in the region. That library was not yet automated, but was under pressure to do so in order to participate in our regional consortium's shared Z39.50 catalog. Rather than acquire and maintain a separate system on their own, it made financial and logistical sense for them to contract with our library to share our ILS and receive training and technical support from us.

All the staff at this small system wear many hats, with no one trained or working exclusively as a cataloger. Catalog cards were basically accepted as is from OCLC and their primary book vendor. With such limited resources, it was immediately clear that it would be impractical to expect them to conform to the same local cataloging practices that we developed. We gave their staff some rudimentary training in copy cataloging and some of our local practices, with an emphasis in basic authority control, but with little time or resources on their end to do much more than dump records into our shared database we knew we would see a new era of inconsistencies in our catalog as a result of this arrangement. While their customers now have the benefits of automated circulation and an OPAC, flipping the switch on the long anticipated sharing of

materials through the ILS's request system has yet to take place. Our customers can see the other libraries holding in our OPAC, but still must place an ILL request for those materials. More often, the presence of these bibliographic records and holdings in our catalog is a source of confusion and/or frustration. While only one of countless examples in the trend of new consortial arrangements between libraries, our case has resulted in a catalog less friendly, and as a result less useful, to our customers.

Authority Control

Authority control has been a top priority for our database since it was first automated in our library in 1990. We perform authority control for virtually every heading on every record we download into our catalog, checking for and exporting new and revised headings from OCLC or the LC Authority File. This work is simply folded into our other cataloging work, but can still take a considerable amount of time, especially considering the number of names that can

appear on videos and sound recordings. While there are services that can automatically deliver and update headings in a catalog, we are hesitant to use such a service for fear of losing countless cross-references that we have added locally to authority records over the years. These cross-references are another added value to our customers that make the catalog easier to use for our customers; a value that could be lost if we outsourced this critical aspect of our cataloging workflow.

Conclusion

I do not intend this paper to merely be a forum in which to complain about the woes and troubles we Catalogers face. I merely hope to illustrate how cooperative cataloging efforts, third party cataloging services, and automated methods to make cataloging more efficient do not by themselves necessarily lead to a better catalog for our users. A key to the usefulness and effectiveness of a catalog is in applying our cataloging tools and standards consistently across the database, while adding value to our catalogs locally to meet the specific needs of each catalog's users. That application, which I consider a major aspect of the "craft" of our profession, is what turns the catalog from a potential jumble of individual bibliographic records into a wholly understandable, predictable, and useful tool. Automation alone cannot produce a catalog that can be logically understood and be of maximum utility to all customers. It takes the skill and expertise of local staff to take the building blocks automation and cooperative efforts provide to craft a catalog that provides the greatest and most comprehensive access to our collections for our customers. 🖋

References
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