Cataloguing Matters

Anne Welsh, Beginning Cataloguing

Introduction

This article considers the value of publication-in-hand cataloguing, from Jewett's investigation of shared cataloguing in the 19th century to the present day, when most catalogues are dominated (quantitively) by metadata produced outside the library and, in some cases, outside the library sector.

Please note that I am *not* asserting that publication-in-hand cataloguing is *more* important than the *equally* important work done to incorporate externally-produced metadata within catalogues and / or discovery systems. Elsewhere in this issue is Emma Booth's article on Metadata Matters, and this one on Cataloguing Matters should be regarded as a companion piece to that. I am 100% in agreement with Emma's opinions on metadata – as she puts it in her twitter bio, "#Discovery drives the #Collection, #Metadata drives #Discovery, #MetadataMatters!"

For my own article here, I'm simply taking a step back and considering the work that many library workers still do, day-to-day, creating metadata from scratch or downloading it at a publication-by-publication level, and editing it to comply with our local needs. Traditionally this was referred to as "book-in-hand cataloguing" and then expanded to "item-in-hand" to accommodate non-book materials such as video and music recordings, sheet music, maps, and computer files.

The word "Item" now has specific defined scopes within IFLA's Library Reference Model (LRM) and RDA's entity model (which adopts the IFLA LRM with a few adjustments), both often referred to as WEMI (Work, Expression, Manifestation and Item). It also has a specific defined scope within Bibframe's bibliographic model, often referred to as WII (Work, Instance, Item). To avoid confusion, in the current article (and more generally), I use the term "publication-in-hand" to include anything acquired by our organization which we catalogue at an individual level. I'm not using any examples of manuscript materials in this article, but please take what I say in reference to "publication-in-hand" to encompass formally published, privately printed and even manuscript materials if they are being catalogued on the library management system (LMS) at an individual level.

Where is Publication-in-hand Cataloguing Taking Place?

It has become a trope that something need only be catalogued once and then its metadata disseminated across the catalogues of all the libraries who hold that publication. In this idealized view, production data can travel with a manuscript from the publishing house to the bookseller(s) to the libraries. Some of this happens fairly commonly for many (though not all) modern publications, with production metadata created in ONiX edited at point of publication for the publisher's online catalogues, and also used as the foundation for booksellers' catalogues. Elsewhere, Concetta La Spada has written about the work she carries out at Cambridge University Press to create good-quality MARC metadata for items being added to its Cambridge Core product.

Leaving aside the many issues around the proprietorship and licensing of metadata, it is often the case that metadata created by library suppliers and other libraries in large consortia are downloaded and used by customers and other consortium members respectively. So, already we can see three groups of people creating new metadata for publications: publishers, library suppliers and cataloguers at libraries within consortia. Beyond these large-scale cataloguing models, there have always been small and solo-librarian institutions who, of course, have to create and maintain their own metadata. And then there are all the books that were already in existence before ONiX metadata was created within publishing houses. Rare and special collections cataloguers have always collaborated with each other while ensuring that the unique elements of the materials in their collections are documented.

So, in summary, the places in which we might predict that publication-in-hand cataloguing is essential are:

1. Suppliers (including publishers and library vendors)
2. Small, specialist libraries who either do not want to purchase metadata from suppliers and / or who cannot afford to do so
3. Any institution cataloguing materials that do not show up as already catalogued by suppliers or other members of a cataloguing consortium.

The rise (Again) of Publication-in-hand Cataloguing in UK Public Libraries

Over the thirty years I've been aware of public libraries as institutions for whom I would like to work (my original ambition as a teenager was to be the Local Studies Librarian at Largs Library), it has become a trope that "public libraries just buy everything shelf-ready."

If you've ever been set the homework of researching how a local tourist attraction has changed over the last 100 years, you too may have observed the wide range of guide books, pamphlets and other published, unpublished and privately printed materials that surely must be of interest in such quantities only within the local studies collection for the area. I can certainly remember years later looking in the catalogues at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow and the National Library of Scotland to see whether they held and had catalogued the same range of tourist information I had accessed in the small glass room that housed "Reference and Local Studies – FOR REFERENCE ONLY; DO NOT REMOVE!" in the small library at Allan Park Street, Largs in the 1980s.

Later still, when my first professional post was as a cataloguer in library supply, I ran a search on Largs in TC Farries' database and although the thousands of metadata on my hometown were impressive, they were not nearly as numerous as those held in branch. Of course they were not. Understandably, the main criterion for materials to be catalogued by that supplier were that they were going to be supplied to customers – either new materials offered for Acquisitions staff to consider or as part of a special project for a client (e.g. if a library asked us to supply metadata for its local studies collections, Farries would do so, charge them accordingly, and then the metadata would be available on the main database for any other customer who needed it later). The more contracts and the wider the range of clients suppliers have, the wider ranging the metadata pre-existing on their system.

However, it remains true that some material available in local studies collections may not be held by any other libraries, or if it is, may not have been catalogued by them or by metadata vendors. At the same time, the longest-serving staff in public libraries, who used to be able to add things *ad hoc,* are retiring. So we are seeing a rise in public library staff who want to be able to catalogue materials they can't simply download. As one said recently, "Why do I want to know about Cataloguing? It's the power I crave."

We Could (and Did) Predict This Ten Years Ago

Looking for material written by cataloguers during the same shift to shelf-ready in public libraries that academic libraries are now making, I came across a report written by Christina Claridge on the Cataloguing and Indexing Group's Shelf-ready event in December 2011, in which she shared these observations:

> "While shelf-ready processes do speed up the time from ordering to shelving, all of the academic libraries still did a lot of work relating to ordering, classifying and cataloguing stock. Shelf-ready stock was checked, usually on receipt, and passed to staff to deal with if the bibliographical record proved to be too brief or there were classification problems …
>
> The use of shelf-ready created more time for staff to work on qualitative tasks such as authority control …
>
> The exception to this theme was the experience of Andrew Coburn (Essex County Council) who spoke about how public libraries had experience with shelf-ready stock over the past 30 years. He described the process of 'direct delivery', where suppliers managed the whole process from selection of stock through to delivery of stock to individual branch libraries …

> Andrew Coburn spoke about the future of staffing in public libraries, and about how shelf-ready practices could work in situations where libraries were privatised or run by volunteers (Claridge, p. 5).

Andrew's paper appears in the same issue of *Catalogue and Index*, and includes the following points:

> "From my observation of current discussion amongst academic librarians, public libraries have been further down the road of 'shelf ready stock' for some time …
>
> Today the best organised libraries are having stock delivered direct to the branch for which it was ordered where staff simply unpack the box, scan the barcode and put the book on the shelf …
>
> [T]he technology now allows bibliographic records to be created and updated at various points in the process. It is possible to receive or create them at the EDI Quotes or Order stage which, as most public libraries can now order ahead of publication, may mean an incomplete or inaccurate catalogue record produced from publisher's advance information. Since this is notoriously unreliable – authors, titles and even ISBNs may have changed when the book appears – it may be updated when the book is received in the library. The direct delivery to branches referred to above does raise issues about whose responsibility it is to verify the accuracy and import the up to date record in these cases …
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>
> [I]t seems likely that public libraries will be looking to eliminate cost in the provision of books while at the same time trying to make their stock attractive and easily retrievable both in person and online. There may yet be more that can be done to make that stock 'shelf ready' "(Coburn, pp. 7-9).

Elsewhere in the same article he highlights the move towards Standard Libraries Classification (SLC) that some libraries were then making and points out that "SLC may not be suitable … for local history material. Many public libraries have local schemes which designate material by parish or locality and may use ancient home grown classification schemes." Writing as an experienced public library manager, he says, "At present I suspect those will remain in use" (Coburn, p. 8).

So we can see from Coburn's testimony that a decade ago, UK public libraries were experiencing the sorts of issues with shelf-ready materials that many academic libraries are facing now. Things were arriving on the

library shelves without much time for local quality control of their metadata. And some materials, in certain areas, were not really suitable or available for metadata purchase.

We Could (and Did) Predict This 170 Years Ago

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose! Even Charles C. Jewett, the man credited with originating the first fully-conceived proposal for shared cataloguing in the Anglo-American tradition never claimed that *all* cataloguing could or should be shared:

> The libraries in any country (to some extent, indeed, in all countries), consist partly of the same books. Professor Jewett states that, in the catalogues of public libraries of the United States, possessed by the Smithsonian Institution, there are embraced at least four hundred and fifty thousand titles. He estimates, however, after a laborious comparison, that among these will not be found more than one hundred and fifty thousand different titles. It follows, that if the plan proposed [to create a shared catalogue using the technology of the time, stereotyping] two-thirds of the expense of printing them, as far as the cost of plates is concerned, would have been saved, by incurring the extra expense of stereotyping the remaining third according to this plan … The title of the same book, in the same edition, will, of course, be cast but once, and will thenceforward serve for the catalogue of every library possessing that book, which may enter into the arrangement (Everett et al. p. x).

There are two things, I think, worth particular note here. Firstly, that Jewett believed shared cataloguing would only work for a third of the materials held by the libraries he examined, and secondly that the major driver towards shared cataloguing was cost.

Some fifty years later, updating his *Rules for a Dictionary Catalog*, Charles A. Cutter was able to report on the growth of shared cataloguing in the USA, opening his preface by declaring

> "On seeing the great success of the Library of Congress cataloging, I doubted whether it was worth while to prepare and issue this fourth edition of my Rules; but I reflected that it would be a considerable time before all libraries would use the cards of that library, and a long time before the Library of Congress could furnish cards for all books, long enough for the libraries to absorb another edition and use it up in that part of their cataloging which they must do themselves" (Cutter, p. 5).

Again, Cutter asserted cost-efficiency as the main reason for libraries to outsource their catalogue card creation, but he also observed the quality achieved by Library of Congress cataloguers - specialists in the art of cataloguing as compared to generalists in some smaller libraries:

> "The Library of Congress has begun furnishing its printed catalog cards on such liberal terms that any new library would be very foolish not to make its catalog mainly of them, and the older libraries find them a valuable assistance in the cataloging of their accessions, not so much because they are cheaper as because in the case of most libraries they are better than the library is likely to make for itself" (Cutter, p. 5).

And, let us be clear, I don't think anyone today would deny the many benefits of acquiring ready-made metadata when it's available for our holdings. Despite the many quality issues shared in the National Acquisition Group's report on *Quality of Shelf-ready Metadata* (Booth, 2020), none of us would want to go back to the nineteenth century situation in which each library was its own world, each cataloguer or cataloguing team indwelling their own professional silo. When we say "Metadata Matters" we imply that "*Shared* Metadata Matters".

When I read Cutter talking of his work on cataloguing rules being useful "long enough for the libraries to absorb another edition and use it up in that part of their cataloging which they must do themselves," I wanted to time travel back and reassure him that not only was there time for his new edition to be needed, but also all that came later – the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR), AACR2,* and, now, *RDA*. There is *still* plenty of cataloguing in libraries which "they must do themselves".

So Who Ever Claimed *All* Cataloguing Could Be *Shared* Cataloguing?

Writing in 2006 in what was to become one of the most significant reports on catalogue workflows, Karen Calhoun asserted that "different research libraries and the organizations that serve them will choose different strategies for revitalizing their catalogs" (Calhoun, p. 12).

Whilst often cited in business cases to cut cataloguing roles in academic libraries, it's worth remembering that the Calhoun Report actually offered "thirty-two possible remedies organized by the type of underlying strategy—extend, expand, and lead" and, significantly, highlighted that

> "An organization's strategic choice will depend on the organization's position with respect to others who supply or produce catalogs, its financial position, its perception of the likelihood and rate of revitalization or decline of the catalog, the actual strength and nature of remaining demand for the existing catalog, the availability of practical alternatives, and the level of difficulty the organization will have diverting its capacity to new uses" (Calhoun, p. 12).

Whenever I've been approached by friends or colleagues who feel their role or, indeed, that of their entire cataloguing team, is being placed under threat, this is the paragraph to which I direct them. When faced with senior management who have forgotten, or perhaps even never seen, the value of publication-in-hand cataloguing, the self-advocacy cataloguers need is that which addresses one or more of these issues highlighted by Calhoun – herself a senior manager with an undoubted strong belief in the necessity of cataloguing.

At the time of writing, and basing her findings on interviews with others in the field, Calhoun observed that

> "The cost-effectiveness of cataloging tradition and practice is under fire. The typical research library catalog's strongest suit is its support for inventory control and as 'last mile' technology to enable delivery of the library's assets into the hands of local users. A new technology for expanding the service model of the catalog to cover more of the scholarly universe – metasearch – has generated much hope but is not meeting early expectations for tying together the fragmented landscape of scholarly information resources" (Calhoun, p. 9).

The last fifteen years have seen strides not only in the development of discovery engines (metasearch and beyond) but also moves to restructure our cataloguing practices (RDA) and data structure (Bibframe) to be more open for reuse as Linked Data. These are good things, I think.

And yet – and *yet* – isn't it the case that we still do need "inventory control and … to enable delivery of the library's assets into the hands of local users"? And for some libraries, outside the cut and thrust of supporting academics and researchers, isn't "delivery of the library's assets into the hands of local users" actually the *main function* of what they do?

Certainly, as I set off into the winter sunshine this afternoon to return my library books, there are two things that I want from my local public library: I want them to be able to tell me what materials they have I can borrow, and I want them to be able to find the more obscure resources they need to answer my local history enquiries. And as a middle-aged woman who likes books and knowing about the world around me, I don't much care which metadata the library staff have downloaded *en masse* (ebooks, audiobooks, my beloved bestseller murder mysteries, I'm guessing) and which they've crafted individually themselves from a publication in hand.

Finding what's needed at the point of enquiry matters, and to enable that, now, as always, Cataloguing matters.

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