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Union catalogues: their role in library networking and their continued relevance in a digital age

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Introduction

The ultimate aim of library service is to supply every library user with all the materials that he or she needs in order to do research, become more educated, empower him- or herself, or simply be entertained. One of the fundamental tools that we use in order to work toward that ultimate aim is the union catalogue as an indispensable element of any effective system of resource-sharing. Union catalogues have been so successful and ubiquitous that it is easy to overlook the contributions to library services they have made and are continuing to make. In a way, it is a technological marvel that anyone anywhere in the world with access to a computer and the Web can check on the vast holdings of, say, the large libraries of the University of California system and, working through linked inter-library loan systems obtain items that may not be available anywhere in their own country.

Definition of union catalogues

A union catalogue is, to put it simply, an assemblage of catalogue records from two or more libraries that is primarily intended to facilitate inter-library lending and other forms of resource sharing. Its fundamental idea is the obvious truth that a library user can only take advantage of the resources of other libraries if he or she knows what those resources are. The basic concept of union catalogues as the foundation of resource sharing is as relevant today as it ever was and, because of advances in cataloguing technology and the standardization of cataloguing data provides us with a more powerful and current tool than we have ever had. When talking about union catalogues, we must be clear that the primary purpose of such catalogues is to provide listings of the collections of libraries that are available to a distant library user by inter-library loan (of books, sound recordings, videos, and other tangible objects; by document delivery (of journal articles and other short texts that can be faxed to a remote user); and, by gaining access to databases owned or licensed by the library. Looked at one way, there is clearly no point in listing items to which remote users have no access (reference materials; rare and precious materials that cannot leave the library; and, electronic resources subject to restrictive licensing agreements). Looked at another way, knowledge that something exists can be valuable in itself, even if a library user cannot have direct access to that resource.

Definition of librarianship

In order to understand the nature and function of union catalogues we need to place them in the wider context of the nature and functions of libraries and to answer the questions “what do libraries do and what is their purpose?” In essence, libraries exist to:

- Collect, organize, preserve, and make available subsets of the human record—documents in all formats that are relevant to the mission and goals of the institutions or communities they serve

- Provide assistance and instruction in the use of the human record to the users of the library
- Work with other libraries to give the maximum access to the human record. The union catalogue is a primary tool in this inter-library cooperation

It is very important to understanding the purpose of libraries that we understand the nature of the human record—that vast storehouse of the thoughts of the dead and living that transcends space and time. Writing was invented at least eight millennia ago and the creation of images is even older. In that period, we have amassed an almost uncountable store of texts (often accompanied by images) that constitutes the largest and most important part of the human record. That store of texts has increased exponentially since the introduction of printing to the Western world five centuries ago. The Western printed codex (“the book”) is important not primarily because of its intrinsic value but because it has proven to be the most effective means of both disseminating *and* preserving the textual content of the human record. Texts have always been contained in other formats (hand-written on paper, vellum, or scrolls, scratched on papyrus and palm leaves, incised in stone or on clay, stamped on metal, as microform images, created digitally, etc.) but none of these methods can compare to the book in both dissemination and preservation—particularly when we are thinking about long complex texts. However, it must be emphasized that it is *texts* that are important not the carrier in which they are contained. We call believers in the great monotheistic religions “People of the Book,” but they would be more accurately called “People of the Text.”

The community of learning

The existence of these texts and, increasingly, other manifestations of the human record, led to a community of learning that transcended national boundaries centuries before the much-vaunted commercial globalization of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Long before we lived under the shadow of post-moral, transnational companies and people all over the world felt the effects of modern globalization; there was a global community of scholars and learners united in their search for truth and wisdom in the human record to which the great libraries of the world gave access. The chief allegiance of that community was to learning and the search for truth, not the narrowness of feudal or national entities. In many ways, that community of learning and research is still with us—aided, in many cases, by modern technological innovations that, paradoxically, are seen by some as threatening the culture of learning in which that community is rooted. The community of learning has always understood that no one library can supply everything that is needed in research and has relied for on knowledge of what other libraries hold. For centuries, scholars have travelled to the great libraries of the world in order to carry out their research. In addition, for the last century or so, union catalogues and inter-library cooperation have made it possible for the resources to come to the researcher rather than the other way around.

A revolution in cataloguing: MARC

Almost forty years ago, a revolution in the way in which librarians shared the results of the organization of knowledge (otherwise known as cataloguing) began. The first event was the creation of the MARC format (an abbreviation of Machine Readable Cataloging) by a team led by Henriette Avram in the Library of Congress. MARC was originally intended to be, first, a method of mechanizing the creation of Library of Congress catalogue cards and, second, a means of communicating catalogue records between different databases—in the first instance, between LC and the British National Bibliography (where I had to honor of working). From these relatively modest aims, MARC rapidly grew into an international standard that is used by libraries throughout the world to contain the results of their cataloguing and the basis for almost all online catalogue systems. What we had was a means of sharing standardized cataloguing quickly and efficiently in place of the cumbersome systems based on shipping printed and typed catalogue cards from library to library, from national cataloguing agencies to the libraries of a country, and from libraries into huge card-based union catalogues.

A revolution in cataloguing: OCLC and the idea of bibliographic utilities

In the same year (1968) that the MARC format was made available, OCLC (then the Ohio Colleges Library Consortium) was started by Fred Kilgour. OCLC, then as now, sought to provide two services to the libraries, then of Ohio now of the whole world. The first was a supply of standardized catalogue data, created by LC and OCLC's members, so that they could add items to their catalogues quickly and inexpensively. The second was to aggregate all that cataloguing data into an electronic database that could perform the role of a national union catalogue. In this regard, computer technology was essential to the effectiveness of the OCLC experiment. Today, an original cataloguing record created in an OCLC member library is added to the database (in the MARC format) on the day when the item is catalogued. This means, of course, that the OCLC union catalogue is completely current. Contrast that with the publication of the 754 volumes of the American printed *National union catalog*, which, when it was completed in 1981 had no record that was less than 25 years old.

A revolution in cataloguing: international standardization

International standardization of catalogue data was another important development in union catalogues. With the MARC record and the pioneering work of OCLC we had the mechanisms for sharing data but the purpose of union catalogues could not be achieved if the data transmitted by those mechanisms was non-standard and if, for example, the same item was represented in a union catalogue with different access points and mutually incompatible descriptions. The blueprint for international standardization was set forward by IFLA in the 1970s under the name of UBC (*Universal Bibliographic Control*)ⁱ.

The ideal of UBC was that each item would be catalogued once only in the country in which it was published and in accordance with internationally agreed cataloguing standards. This ambitious idea was very difficult to realize because of different cataloguing traditions in different countries and linguistic groups and because of language differences. To take a simple example of the latter, the organization known to us as the *Red Cross* is called the *Croix Rouge* in French-speaking countries and *Roten Kreuz* in German-speaking countries. One great step forward in

realizing UBC was the creation in the early 1970s of the standard for description of library materials called the ISBD (*International Standard Bibliographic Description*).ⁱⁱ This is the most successful cataloguing standard in history. It covers all library materials and has been incorporated in all national and linguistic cataloguing codes. This means that the descriptive part of any catalogue record is presented in a standard format irrespective of the country in which the record was created.

Standardization of access points has been less successful though the influence of AACR2 (*Anglo-American cataloguing rules. Second edition*) has been felt well beyond the English-speaking world and, as a result, there is much greater uniformity in international databases.

A revolution in catalogues: integrated systems

The remaining component of union catalogues that are effective in resource sharing was the change that took place from stand-alone online catalogues to integrated library systems that married circulation records and journal check-in records to cataloguing data. The catalogue alone answers the question “Which library owns this item?” An integrated system answers the question “From which library is this item available?” The first establishes ownership; the second establishes availability, a matter that is of more direct benefit to the library user.

Necessary conditions for successful union catalogues and resource sharing systems

The confluence of all these developments has meant that we have the mechanisms and standards that enable us to have more effective and current union catalogues than we have ever seen before. This, in turn, makes it possible for more library users to have access to more of the human record than was possible before. That progress is, ultimately, dependent on a number of factors that are necessary to successful union catalogues and resource sharing schemes.

- First, that cataloguing contributed to the union catalogue is done in accordance with national and international standards.
- Second, that every participating library commits to cataloguing according to their means—that is playing their part in doing original cataloguing for the benefit of all—while using already created records according to their needs.
- Third, that cataloguing is not only standardized but also done in a timely manner. No-one, local or remote, can have access to an uncatalogued resource.
- Fourth, a willingness to share local resources with others as well as to take advantage of remote resources through inter-library lending and document delivery. That is, to contribute to as well as take from the resource sharing system
- Fifth, adequate financial support that maintains the union catalogue and the resource sharing system that is based on it.

- Sixth, a reward system that provides funds for those libraries that are net lenders. Inter-library lending is one of the very few services that the *provider* pays for and it is very important that those providers have an incentive to continue to provide the service.
- Seventh, a speedy and efficient delivery system linked to the union catalogue that guarantees delivery of books and other tangible objects; that allows for sophisticated facsimile transmission of journal articles and other short texts; and, that permits easy access to available electronic databases.

Summary

Union catalogues are an indispensable element of local, regional, national, and international cooperation between libraries. Their maintenance is dependent upon continuing international standardization in cataloguing, the use of modern technology (including the continuing development of integrated library systems), and adequate financing that is, in turn, dependent on an appreciation of their value and the contributions they make to individual and societal library service. The future of union catalogues is challenging in the face of all the other demands libraries have for funding, but those are challenges we can and must meet if we are to continue decades of productive inter-library cooperation.

Thank you.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ . Anderson, Dorothy, 1923- . Universal bibliographic control : a long term policy, a plan for action. Pullach/München : Verlag Dokumentation, 1974

ⁱⁱ . ISBD (M) : International Standard Bibliographic Description for Monographic Publications. 1st standard ed. London, IFLA Committee on Cataloguing, 1974.