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## **SERIALS CATALOGING IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT: FAST, FASTER, FASTEST**

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The digital format has caused major changes in libraries and serials cataloging operations have been affected as much as other areas. But how extensive are the changes? What are the effects on workload? How does the new environment affect production line staff? Finally, what do Electronic Resource Management Systems (ERMs) mean for the future of serials cataloging?

### **What Do Catalogers Do?**

The goal of cataloging is to provide users with access to material by creating a surrogate that is accessible via appropriate search terminology. Searches may be via the card catalog, printed catalog, OPAC, another database such as ContentDM, or any other means. The mission of the individual cataloger focuses on providing access to material their library collects or otherwise makes available. This basic purpose has remained constant from the days of manuscript lists through the integrated online catalog of today. Catalogers organize information. If done correctly, that work facilitates retrieval of the information by those who want to use it. Records may appear in any format, follow any standard, be detailed or brief, and the goal remains the same: provide access to library materials.

### **Continuity In A Time Of Change**

The means of achieving this goal have changed radically through the years. The advent of electronic journals and other online resources, along with how quickly this format was embraced by both libraries and library users, is just one of the more recent impetuses for such change. In many libraries, the purchase of print resources has declined. Libraries increasingly purchase large packages of e-journals and, whenever possible, provide access to these materials via their online catalogs. This access is instantaneous for the end user. As a result, patrons and library staff have new and ever-expanding expectations of both the catalog and catalogers. Formerly, a search resulted in the retrieval of the surrogate, or catalog record, and a few more steps were required to find the needed document. Now, the search often results in the full-text of the needed materials, and the demand for this level of access is only increasing.

Discussions about e-journals generally focus on what is new and challenging about this constantly changing environment. It is important to remember, however, that much of what has gone before is still valid and useful in the present. In many cases, what is considered “new” would more accurately be termed “changed.” For instance, when a new title is received at the University of Oregon Libraries, it is processed first in Collection Development & Acquisitions (CDA). If it does not meet the criteria for our “acceptcat” procedure, it is routed to Metadata & Digital Library Services (MDLS) to be cataloged. A cataloger then goes through a series of steps that result in catalog access to the publication. Until we fully implement our ERM (discussed later in this article), the basic workflow and final goal of staff dealing with particular titles remain the same regardless of physical format. The differences—and there are many—appear only in the details.

### **So What *Are* The Differences?**

Cataloging of electronic journals is, of course, different in several respects from the cataloging of more traditional formats. The difference that most directly affects production catalogers in my team is the high priority given to electronic journals and the type of catalog access that is provided.

#### *Cataloging priority*

Items received in print or another tangible physical format may be routed to the serials cataloging backlog, the priority shelf, or the problem shelf. The identification of an item as priority depends on the final shelving location, the type of receipt (continuing or one-time; purchase, gift, depository, etc.) and whether there is already a record or records in the catalog. Electronic journals are another matter. They are *always* considered priority, with purchased titles ranking higher in the scale than free titles. The primary reason for this is discussed below but, essentially, it is because there is no access to these materials until they are cataloged, unlike print and other materials that typically can be accessed by patrons from the moment they are ordered.

One question that is repeatedly brought up by my staff is: “how priority is priority?” In addition to the categories above, we also take part in both serial and non-serial departmental priority projects. There is only one priority cataloging level, so all priority materials are routed into the same serials cataloging “priority” workstream. Not unreasonably considering our heavy workload, staff want to know which of these continually received categories is the *real* priority.

The answer to this question is electronic journals. We always have multiple categories of priority material to deal with. When e-journals are one of the types, they take priority over everything else. Other work is dropped while staff shift their attention to providing access to these titles. The reason for this is that there are no “in process” records—either with or without URLs—for e-journals. They are not accessible in the catalog until they are processed by catalogers. This is different from titles received in physical form, for which brief records are usually input in the catalog at the time of ordering or acquisition

by the library. Among other things, the brief records input for titles received in other formats show when items have been received by the library and allow patrons to submit rush cataloging requests. There is no such system in place for online journals.

### *The effect of large e-journal projects*

We frequently have projects to catalog electronic journals received in a certain package or packages. Most of these last a few days or weeks. Last year, however, we worked for months on a priority project requiring maintenance or addition of records for thousands of online journals. Everything had to be done quickly because all the changes took effect on January 1, 2005 and error reports immediately started coming in from patrons and public services. Because our workflow depended entirely on the workflow in CDA, we often had to edit records multiple times in order to change information related to a particular package. The result was well over 8,000 e-journal subscriptions added, withdrawn or maintained between January and mid-April 2005. The project had started earlier in CDA, resulting in an increase in catalog maintenance for e-journals as early as November 2004.

### *The current e-journal cataloging process*

So how did we manually add, maintain or withdraw over 8,000 subscriptions in about three and a half months? The answer lies in the standards and level of cataloging applied to online journals. Actually, rather than call it “cataloging,” it would be more appropriate to say we “provide access to online journals through the library catalog.”

We rely on spreadsheets received from CDA to provide basic identifying data, URL and online holdings. If it is a new online title we have at some time received in print, our process is to check access at the site, add a few fields to the bibliographic record already in our database, add item and holdings records for the online version and add a union list record in OCLC. If it is a new title we have never received in physical format, we search OCLC to see if there is an acceptable record for the publication in any format. If there is, we download the record and continue with normal e-journal processing. We only do actual cataloging of e-journals when there is no acceptable record available for the title in any format.

Our standard for “acceptable” copy for e-journals is, by necessity, very different from the standard used for other material. We frequently purchase e-journal packages that contain hundreds of titles. There is no way we can provide our traditional level of cataloging for all of these online journals and still continue with other work. There is also the time factor to consider. It can take a couple months to provide fully cataloged records for a package that we now process in a week. When you consider that we often pay thousands of dollars for an annual subscription to one package and it is common for more than one large package to be added or changed at the same time, it is easy to understand the need for the speedier process. A third consideration is that we usually end up adding e-journal access to a record for the title in another format and we often do not own the title in that

format. We cannot maintain records for formats we do not own so we have to accept what is given.

We do follow the CONSER aggregator-neutral standard when inputting original records that describe the online version. We usually do some level of CONSER authentication (minimal, core or full) for these records. This type of cataloging is rarely needed, however, because almost all e-journals we receive already have copy available for some publication format.

Although it looks simple, our process is often not a smooth one. Problems can—and do—occur every step of the way. Many are taken care of in CDA before they send on the spreadsheets. Others slip through, to be caught when catalogers compare spreadsheet information to bibliographic records or check the holdings noted on the sheet with the online access available at the journal website. Catalogers resolve any bibliographic problems that arise. Notification is sent to CDA if major identifying elements are different than what they have on file. These elements include things such as title of the resource, print ISSN and the split of holdings among bibliographic records. We are more likely to see holdings or access problems rather than bibliographic ones, however, and these must be returned to CDA for resolution. The resolution can take as little as a few hours or as long as several months.

The sheer magnitude of some of the packages and projects means catalogers go on autopilot and a problem may occur several times before it is noticed. Once the nature of a problem is understood, already cataloged titles may need to be spot-checked to see if it affects more titles in the package. It may turn out that an entire package must be returned to CDA for problem resolution before cataloging can continue. At other times, the problem affects only one or a few titles and cataloging can continue for all of the others until the next problem arises.

During the first three and a half months of 2005, serials cataloging staff did very little other work aside from e-journals, problem solving that could not wait, and the occasional rush request. We kept receiving all categories of priority materials throughout that time. New paid subscriptions for material in a physical format still arrived. Titles still changed. Problems of all types continued to appear on our “problem shelf.” Depository material continued to arrive at the same rate as always. We are still digging our way out from under this physical backlog—10 months after the e-journal project was completed. We have maintained the goal of providing catalog records for all material we have received by cataloging e-journals as soon as possible. The trade-off has been that brief, in process records for other “priority” titles remain in the system longer. Thus far, this situation has been considered acceptable by public service departments.

Prior to the project, newly received priority material rarely took up more than half a shelf and we were often completely caught up. Added volumes and cataloging problems were routinely dealt with the same week they were received. That has all changed now. We regularly have full shelves of newly received priority titles, plus added volumes and

problems. Even now, after all these months, we have almost three full shelves of new priority items that need to be cataloged.

This type of priority backlog would have been unacceptable two years ago. It has been difficult for some team members to adjust to the change in expectations related to print material, particularly when we are not yet ready to remove material from the priority category. Personally, I still wince every time I pass the serials priority-cataloging shelves. We all realize, however, that this is simply the way it will be, at least until we fully implement an ERM. With a continual stream of electronic journals and serials staff who are involved with high priority departmental work on digital collections, we have accepted that we will now routinely leave print serials priority material for months before dealing with it.

#### *Effect on staff*

E-journal processing is quick and easy when there are no problems and adequate records are already available. Combine this with the large volume of titles in many packages and there can be a negative effect on accuracy and staff morale. Mistakes happen and problems go unnoticed when staff go on autopilot. This is a predictable, and understandable, result of performing the same few tasks over and over again for hundreds (or, in the case of last year's project, thousands) of titles. The repetition of basic record editing and creation also has an influence on the level of satisfaction staff members get from their work.

My staff have voiced the opinion that anyone could now do their jobs. In reality, this is not true. Much of what we see with e-journals is not straightforward and it takes someone with special knowledge of serials and online publications to not only recognize a problem but also know what to do about it. Similarly, only a specialist can tell when what looks like a problem really *is not* a problem but just requires minor tweaking of records. Morale can become an issue when staff do not realize they are drawing on specialized knowledge developed through many years of experience. The large number of titles and repetition of steps overshadows the fact that they are using analytical and problem-solving skills gained from years of working with serials. They forget how long it took them to hone these skills to their current levels and may also forget that serials knowledge is not second nature to everyone.

Staff satisfaction can also be affected when they find they are referring more problems to others than they are able to resolve for themselves. My staff likes fixing problems within the team and the resolution of one difficult bibliographic problem provides more of a feeling of accomplishment than identification and reporting of dozens of e-journal problems. It is not uncommon for e-journal problems to be referred back to CDA for resolution, however—something that is unusual with print materials.

My staff are happier when we do not have a large e-journal project going on. They can concentrate on work with more variety and different types of problems to solve. Our continued focus on this other work at times when we do not have a large number of e-journals to process is important to the job satisfaction of serials cataloging staff.

It is important for staff morale and the smooth integration of new formats to the work of the unit that the elements of workflow that remain the same be acknowledged and the continued importance of past practices be recognized. To once again take the University of Oregon Libraries as an example, the positive relationships developed between CDA and MDLS staff continue to be a vital element in the success of a workflow that overlaps both departments. Our e-journal processes mean that staff in both departments work with each other in different ways than before, but the solid relationships that have already been formed remain important.

At this point you are probably wondering why we have not automated this “simple” e-journal process. There are several reasons for this, including a long term lack of money and overwork of the people who might be able to come up with an efficient in-house system. The end is in sight, however, as ERM enters the picture.

### **The Effect Of An ERM**

Serials catalogers at my institution are eager to see full implementation of our ERM. We can tell by our growing backlogs that material continues to arrive in tangible format. Departmental projects (usually related to digital collections) continue to increase and become more important. At the same time, progress on serials cataloging and retrospective conversion projects has decreased substantially. All of this combines to mean there will not be any lack of work when we no longer process e-journals manually.

It is hoped that the ERM will get us out from under the continuing e-journal cataloging beast. It will enable us to provide access to hundreds, even thousands, of online journals in the catalog with one upload command. Holdings can be updated and titles withdrawn just as easily. This means we will begin providing catalog access to thousands of titles available within dozens of databases, something we have not done in the past. In other words, we will be better meeting patron expectations as they are able to access many more titles electronically through the WebOPAC.

The purpose of implementing the uploading of ERM data into the catalog is so we can quickly provide access to more titles without having to touch every record manually. This does not mean, however, that serials cataloging staff will no longer work with online journals. What it does mean is a change in the type and level of work. Instead of spending a lot of time performing the same tasks over and over again, staff will be engaged in problem solving and clean-up of the database after each load. System reports will help us identify many types of errors, some of which will be corrected using automated processes. Many more will need to be fixed manually, on a title-by-title basis. It is assumed this work will take less time than adding each title individually to the catalog but we will not know for sure until we are closer to full implementation. Regardless, serials cataloging staff will be able to focus more on bibliographic issues and bibliographic problem solving. This is the work they enjoy and get the most satisfaction out of doing well.