PRODUCTION NOTE

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CENTRALIZED PROCESSING. RECENT TRENDS AND CURRENT STATUS: A REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS OF THE LITERATURE

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Centralized processing, in fact, centralization and cooperation at any and every possible point seem to be answers to the great problems facing librarians today, such as the rising costs, the selecting and making available of huge quantities of published material, the increasing emphasis on rapid transfer of written information from producers of new knowledge to consumers, and the growing population with a rising level of education and the consequent need for more and better library service.

Although centralized processing cannot be considered new (it has actually been in practice in the United States at least since the Library of Congress began to distribute cards just after the turn of the century), it has taken on many new faces in the years since World War II. What had been a spark appears to have become a prairie fire since the passing of the Library Services Act in 1956. New processing centers for public and school libraries have sprung up in nearly every state, either as full-fledged, going concerns or as demonstration projects. These centers vary tremendously as to organization, types of services rendered, and methods of financing. Some of the factors which determine the character of a center are: (1) population to be served, (2) size of individual library budgets, (3) amount and types of state aid available, (4) amount of federal aid available, (5) types of services desired by members, (6) ages of member libraries, (7) standards of previous cataloging, (8) special individual developments or modifications of classification schemes or of cataloging rules, and (9) number of professional librarians in the group.

The purpose of this paper is to show what has been written on centralized processing. The bibliography attempts to cover, rather fully, the literature published on this subject from 1950 to the summer of 1963. Some earlier articles of note are included. It is hoped that this will be of value in providing sources of ideas and criteria for those interested in establishing centers and in assessing the permanent worth of centralized processing.
For purposes of this paper, centralized processing is defined as any part of the whole range of technical services, including ordering, cataloging, and physical preparation of materials, which a group of libraries arranges to have provided by some outside agency. Its main and most costly elements are cataloging materials and preparing catalog records.

Due to growing interest, several professional journals have devoted entire issues to various aspects of centralized processing. Library Resources and Technical Services gave full attention to problems in this area in the issues for Summer 1958 and Winter 1961. Each issue contains an excellent bibliography as well as a survey article on progress made. Also included are articles describing activities of outstanding individual centers.

Junior Libraries, February 15, 1957, and PLD Reporter, November 1956 devote large sections to articles on centralized processing, written by people actively engaged in work in centers.

In April 1955, News Notes of California Libraries published "Centralized and Cooperative Cataloging; a Bibliography" by Beulah Mumm, listing sources of information available at that time, with annotations for some items. This was published in conjunction with "Centralized and Cooperative Cataloging" by Carl R. Cox, an article describing aspects of this subject from both historical and international viewpoints, as well as current efforts in the United States. He discusses both centralized cataloging and ordering. The article lists advantages and disadvantages which are generally applicable, and thus valid for consideration by anyone interested in establishing such a center. Advantages given are elimination of duplication of work, concentration of catalogers, reduction of duplication of expensive reference tools, freeing of local librarians for other fields of library work, provision of a better catalog than before or of one where none had previously existed, encouragement of standardization of rules and a sustained policy in classification and subject headings, improvement of efficiency in administration, and lastly, opportunity, through a union catalog and interlibrary loan arrangements, for making the total resources of the system available to each member, thus increasing materially the breadth of any individual collection in the system and reducing need for duplication.

Disadvantages arising in connection with processing centers are also listed by Cox. Although most of these have been overcome in one way or another by librarians in established centers, Cox gives those interested in all aspects of the subject an idea of the problems. Standardization may require older libraries to modify their policies a great deal, even requiring some lowering of previous standards. Local control of subject approach may be lost, except for special materials—a serious problem for larger libraries. There may be a delay in receiving books at local libraries unless the central cataloger works without them. Although these disadvantages are not numerous, they are serious problems, requiring objective consideration and extensive cooperative effort in order that the greatest advantage may be gained by all from the joint effort
with a minimum of sacrifice on the part of individual members. Resolution of these problems may lead to a new look at technical services in general and may lead to a clearer definition of the necessary parts of the current local procedures as opposed to those which are rather like frosting on a cake for all but the most scholarly and largest libraries, where more detailed cataloging is really required.

In 1954, the American Library Association published *County and Regional Library Development* by Gretchen Schenk. In it she outlined procedures for operating a centralized processing service as part of the work of a large system. She stressed the value of a union catalog for current use and possible future expansion of service to include centralized reference service. Thera F. Cavender, in 1955, wrote on plans and proposals concerning regional processing and problems of establishing centers in "Regional Processing," published in the *Journal of Cataloging and Classification*. In the same issue Elizabeth Tarver discussed the advantages and disadvantages of such a program from the point of view of college and university libraries. At that time there appears to have been little interest in centralized processing for college and university libraries. The same month John Rather's article "Library Cooperation: A Bibliographical Essay Prepared for the California State Library and the California Library Association" appeared in *California Librarian*. This looked into cooperative acquisitions schemes.

Public Library Service: a Guide to Evaluation, with Minimum Standards deals with cooperation among libraries in Paragraph 158. The 1959 supplement to this publication gives tentative costs of several types of libraries, based on size. The increased cost of living and the general nature of these figures tend to make them only indicative. More specific standards and accurate determinations of costs are needed for centralized processing.

Orcena Mahoney gave a talk on "Centralized Cataloging; Developments and Problems" which appeared as an article in the *Oklahoma Librarian* in October 1956. Historical information and a statement of problems and developments to that time are given. Mahoney has expressed special interest in centralized processing and is a major writer on the subject. In the *I.L.A. Record*, July 1956, she published "Problems and Trends in Technical Services."

As previously mentioned, *Library Resources and Technical Services* for Summer 1958 was devoted almost entirely to this area of interest. "Regional Processing for Public Libraries; A Survey" by Dorothy Bendix describes progress to that time and contains a good bibliography. General considerations in establishing a processing center are outlined in "Guidelines for Establishing a Centralized Library Processing Center" by Evelyn Mullen. Mullen defines a processing center as "... a single agency which processes materials for a wider group of libraries."

Within a year of the passage of the Library Services Act, its impact on centralized processing was seen in the increased number of articles written on the subject and in the tremendous increase in the number of centers in
existence. In Public Library Processing Centers: a Report of a Nationwide Survey, Mary Lee Bundy reports that only four centers were more than ten years old in 1961. None of the others had been in existence before 1953, and eighteen were established in 1959 and 1960 alone. Because of the impact of the Library Services Act on the increase in interest in processing centers and in the number of centers in existence, a section of the bibliography of this paper has been devoted to selected articles on The Library Services Act. To conserve space, none of these will be discussed here.

Other articles of general interest include "Centralized Processing, Cost and Methods" by Margaret Klausner. She discusses the gains to be expected from a centralized processing program, the services best centralized, and those best left to the local library. Costs, she feels, are directly related to the amount of work done by the center; the more titles processed, the lower the total cost--a generally accepted concept.

In the Winter 1961 issue of Library Resources and Technical Services, two noteworthy articles appeared: "Centralized Processing Centers" by Orcena Mahoney and "Regional Processing for Public Libraries" by Evelyn Mullen. Mahoney describes and lists the various centers then in existence. She points out that the then fairly new commercial services available might be given serious consideration before a decision to establish a center is made. Due to the fact that the number of these services has grown, and their scope is increasing, this statement may be even more applicable today than when she made it.

Two articles by Shirley Hopkinson, also published in 1961, are informative and of general interest: "Centralized Cataloging and Indexing Services" and "Centralized Cataloging; An Annotated Bibliography." She discusses general trends and gives a good account of what has been published on the subject up to that time.

Although there had been some interest on the part of other types of libraries in the early stages of the development of centralized processing centers, most of the activity has been among public libraries or in systems which included both school and public libraries. Most of the literature, therefore, deals with public libraries. Of late, however, there are indications that interest in the establishment of centers exclusively for school systems or for combinations of various types of libraries, including college libraries, is on the increase.

Since Mahoney's study of processing centers, previously mentioned, there have been several other surveys of general interest; four, each dealing with a particular system, and one general study of centralized processing centers. Frances D. Carhart's study of the Southwest Missouri Library Service, Inc., Mauric Tauber and Robert Kingery's survey of the Nassau Library System, and Henry T. Drennan's report on work in Idaho give emphasis to administrative considerations of centralized processing, although other aspects are also covered. Donald E. Oehlerts' feasibility study of centralized technical processing for Colorado considers mainly the administrative problems, as well as serving to indicate continuing growth of interest in centralized library services. Mary Lee Bundy's national study shows organizational patterns, membership, services rendered, and trends in operation and general policies of the centers in existence in 1961. In 1960, Brown University received a grant from the Council on Library Resources to study the possibility of coordinating the services of school, university, and public libraries in Rhode Island. John E. Humphry was made director of the project. His report, recently published, recommends increased cooperation and centralization, to be accomplished through a strengthened state library, and greater use of LSA funds. He says little of centralized processing, but suggests that the smaller libraries cannot meet recommended ALA standards without cooperative selection, cataloging, organization, and servicing of their collections. He believes that college and university libraries of Rhode Island cannot realize their full potential as centers of information without some similar cooperation. Drawing analogies from the situation in Rhode Island and applying them to that in another location is dangerous, and should not be done without thorough study. This book is of general interest, however, in showing the trend of current thinking; it may well hold a prophecy of future cooperation in library service in all types of libraries.

There is a definite trend in the direction of cooperative development for libraries, and there is growing acceptance of the concept of all types of libraries in a region forming a network for provision of information services of all types to the public. The implications of this concept for libraries are vast, and fascinating, and will affect all phases of library work. It is a tremendous challenge to the whole library profession. One question for processing centers, in connection with this concept, is whether the services of such centers are really an intermediate step between a completely localized and a completely nationalized program of information dissemination. Some librarians associated with centers see this as a possibility, but feel that the work of the center has been worthwhile in the interim and has filled a need which could not otherwise have been met.

The principal contributors to the literature of centralized processing are those directing the work of centers or those with long-standing state and national interest in library service. As can be seen, the general literature of this subject includes historical background material, several bibliographic essays, and several survey articles which describe activities, as well as give sources of additional information. In addition there is valuable material in the annual reports of state libraries and those of established centers, as well as a wealth of articles describing activities of particular centers. Little
statistical information is available. What is found is hard to correlate into a true picture because of the many variations existing from one center to another and the fact that the figures are not necessarily comparable.

One impression gleaned from all the material written on centralized processing is that the people involved in the work and doing the writing about it are enthusiastic about what has been accomplished and optimistic about future developments. There are frank discussions of problems, none of which are small, which have been or are expected to be solved. Another impression is that LSA has been the power that has moved many libraries in this direction, as well as promoting progress in other areas of public library service. There are libraries where there were none before; libraries that were in existence, but without catalogs, now have professionally prepared catalogs; and librarians who have not been able to obtain formal professional training now can avail themselves of the help and consultation, if not the actual cataloging services, of professionals.

As determined from the literature, centralized processing has a multitude of organizational arrangements. The service may be offered by a state library in the form of procurement of books and furnishing of cards, as in Georgia; the state library may furnish cards for books bought via local acquisition arrangements, as in Arkansas; or the state library may aid in establishing a center using state and LSA funds. Independent centers may be organized by contracting for processing of materials by one library for several others; a group of librarians may form a non-profit corporation to establish a processing center for their libraries; there may be informal agreement between smaller libraries and a larger one to have processing done.

Financing, as mentioned above, may be independent, or dependent on state aid, or dependent on both state and federal aid. Costs may be prorated according to the various budgets of the member libraries, or a flat fee per book may be charged to provide operating funds for the centers.

The types of service rendered are as varied as the local situations, including ordering, paying invoices, cataloging and classification, assigning subject headings, card production, marking, putting on plastic jackets, or any combination of these. In addition, some maintain a union catalog of the holdings of member libraries, or a union shelf list, or a union catalog of holdings in a field of particular interest to all members. There is little mention of processing of materials other than books, although some centers hope to add this type of service when their other work is better established.

Methods of card reproduction include addressograph, xerox-multilith, mimeograph, typing, and photographic reproduction. Addressograph seems to be the most popular, although some libraries have changed from it to xerox-multilith or automatic typewriters. Machine-produced catalogs have come into use in Washington State and in California, displacing local card catalogs already in existence or substituting for card catalogs in new libraries. In both cases, local collections are changed often, and use of the IBM printed catalogs
has eliminated production of catalog cards for each collection, as well as frequent filing and pulling of cards when collections are changed. In both cases, time on the IBM equipment was sub-rented.

Two areas of development which should be most interesting to observe in the near future are the further uses of machines in libraries, and the increasing business being given to commercial agencies for ordering and cataloging books. Developments in either area may serve to outdate processing centers, which may become a temporary solution to a pressing problem -- faster, better provision of information materials and service to library patrons.

At this time, however, the opposite seems to be the trend. Interest in centralized processing for school and possibly college libraries is growing. Also, librarians outside the United States are showing increased interest in the activities of processing centers.

There are still many questions for which the literature now does not provide answers:

1. Which is preferable from the point of view of speed, economy, and maintenance of good cataloging standards? a. cataloging and card reproduction at a center; b. purchase of cards and services from a state library; c. purchase of cards from L.C. or Wilson; d. use of a commercial jobbing and cataloging service.

2. Can some reasonable area of costs based on percentage of former cataloging costs be established to guide in planning expenses of a new center and to measure the success of established centers?

3. Can these centers become independent financially, so that they could continue in the event federal aid ceases? (Miss Bundy's survey shows that the majority believe they could not.)

4. What qualities should be sought in a person who is to head a processing center where there is to be only one professional person? Which is more important -- cataloging or administrative background and ability?

5. Can a standard of cataloging be established and maintained which will keep the catalog a good, useful tool which will not require a great deal of revision should there be a sudden, unexpected increase in the population of the area served by the library, with an accompanying upsurge of use, or the requirement that it serve more and more in an educational capacity as well as a recreational one? If this is not the case, might not present economies bear a second look to see whether they are really as great as was first supposed?

6. How much of a problem is question 5 for public libraries where weeding should be frequent and fairly extensive?
7. How much expense in time, money, space, and equipment should be allowed for maintaining some type of union catalog at a center?

8. What equipment is best for processing cards in a center? What factors should determine selection of equipment for various groups and situations?

9. Should the center provide analytical entries, extra added entries? How much can the local librarian afford to do in this direction without losing the economic and time-saving advantages afforded by membership in a center?

10. What is the scope of use of IBM catalogs? Should they be only second catalogs, with a full card catalog maintained at the center? Does this defeat economy in some ways? What are the "hidden" costs in use of IBM catalogs, as maintenance of a file of punched cards as well as magnetic tape records of the catalog?

11. What implications does the growth of centralized processing service have for library school training? (Carlyle Frarey discusses this problem in *Journal of Education for Librarianship*, Winter 1962.)

12. What contributions can be made by authorities in the fields of cataloging and classification?

13. The library's collection should mirror the character of the community it serves. How much of the image is lost when centralized selection and purchasing forms the major basis for new acquisitions? Has the use of standard book selection tools and reviewing journals already fairly standardized collections of similar size and budget?

14. How can an economic compromise be found between need for speed in ordering for larger libraries and the desire to "wait and see" for smaller libraries with less money to spend, in a center which includes both large and small libraries?

Centralized processing, although not new, has re-emerged in the past few years with tremendous possibilities for improving library service at much lower cost than might otherwise be possible and requiring far fewer professional librarians than would otherwise be necessary for the same level of service. Centralized processing is rightly causing a considerable stir in library circles. Those in the centers are in most cases very enthusiastic as to the results of their projects to date. As many are quite new, there is caution as well as enthusiasm in many evaluations. There is also concession by some that centers may be a temporary thing, an interim step to even more centralized activities.
In any cooperative plan, individuals make certain sacrifices for the good of the whole group. In this case these sacrifices may include loss of individuality in cataloging, need for special modifications of the classification scheme, loss of subject headings for analytical entries which bring out parts of the local collection that may be of particular local interest, limitations of choice of books by the individual library, omission of detail in the descriptive cataloging done by the center as compared with former local standards and practice, and discontinuance of use of Cutter numbers.

The losses involved in membership in a processing center must be carefully balanced against the gains in time and money. The first objective of a library is to supply service of the type expected and appreciated by its patrons. It should be at least as good as the public expects; ideally, it should be better. If, as time goes on, this proves to be the case with libraries using centralized processing, we can only be grateful to those whose effort and ingenuity have helped libraries take a major step forward during a period when it was urgently needed. Even in the event that the establishment of such centers proves to have been a temporary measure, or interim step between local control and greater centralization on a national scale, the general consensus in the literature is that it has been a worthy accomplishment in the annals of the library profession.

FOOTNOTES


12. Ibid., p. 171.


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