Some Aspects of Technical Processes

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The idea of treating the "technical processes" of order work, binding, cataloging, classification, etc., as a unit is relatively recent in American libraries. The term first appears among the entries in Library Literature in the volume covering the years 1943-45. J. L. Cohen, reporting to the American Library Association Division of Cataloging and Classification at Atlantic City in 1948, on a survey of twenty-six libraries with technical services divisions, found only three institutions with such divisions in existence before 1941, two of which were public libraries. The past decade has seen a rapid spread of this type of organization, however, and it is safe to assume that the trend will continue, in spite of Swank’s suggestion that the catalog department is a more suitable partner for the bibliographical than for the order department.

The unified technical processes department has won approval on three grounds. In larger institutions particularly the reduction in the number of department heads reporting to the chief librarian is important for efficient management. Even in smaller institutions the reduction from two, three, or four department heads to one head of technical processes makes possible the hiring of a chief who is better qualified for administrative responsibility. The administrative unification of the various operations represented in these new departments is normally accompanied by a simplification of records and clerical routines, and the resulting reduction in operating costs is frequently the most important aspect of the unification.

Since all of the activities which fall within the realm of technical processes involve large amounts of record keeping and other clerical activities, it is natural that ways should be sought to combine records and eliminate duplication to the greatest degree possible. Duplication of effort appears to be an almost universal accompaniment of a division of closely related activities, since each person along the line

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of flow of materials desires a personal reassurance of the accuracy of the previous steps. The accumulation of these duplications becomes expensive. Their prevention is difficult without having one person familiar with the whole procedure and responsible for its over-all efficiency. The librarian has too many duties to be able to exercise this supervision directly and needs a supervisor of technical processes who can comprehend the whole preparatory work.

This economy of money and effort is being realized in the handling of serials. In one institution the passage of a periodical from first receipt to its final shelving as a bound volume is marked by eleven operations in eight different files. To prevent such multiplicity of records many libraries are turning to a central serial record in which all the information on any live serial can be entered and from which all needed information regarding the serial can be secured. In this central record original receipt of parts, including title-pages and indexes; instructions for binding; dispatch to bindery and return; permanent shelf location; and the number of volumes on the shelf can be noted. A telephone inquiry from any library desk can quickly and cheaply secure information needed. To maintain service the serial record must be adequately staffed and available at all times. If such a central record could be tied to an annotated copy of a Union List of Serials enlarged and kept up to date, the expense of recording and cataloging serials would be cut sharply. Even if, as at present, many serial records had to be transferred to the card catalog as the volumes were completed considerable savings would be possible.

Duplication of effort may also be avoided by the recording, for future use, of information discovered by the acquisition department in the course of preparing orders or of accepting gifts. The fact that an author's name is already in the library's catalog, the presence in the library of other copies or editions, bibliographic citations given in dealers' catalogs, are all pieces of information of value to the cataloger. Noted on a prepared form which may, after passing through the hands of a preliminary cataloger, be used as a cataloger's work sheet, this information can save valuable time for the final cataloger. Such cooperation is difficult to achieve when the persons concerned belong to separate divisions.

The acquisition program of a college or university library must be closely related to the curriculum, the teaching methods, and the individual faculty interests of a particular institution. To prevent the growing library from taking the form of a number of highly specialized
collections, and to cover the fields which overlap or fall between the various courses of the curriculum, it is essential that there be some funds for books of general interest, free from the strings of departmental allotments. However, the fact that a large proportion of funds must be spent for books with direct curricular interest prevents any large degree of standardization in college library collections. The Shaw and Mohrhardt lists are useful guides indicating outstanding works in various fields as selected by groups of specialists. Such lists are of course rapidly outdated, and in any case are to be taken as suggestive rather than prescriptive. The overwhelming proportion of purchases consists of new books, for which no such guides exist. Here the duty of the acquisition officer becomes one of following reviews, of recognizing reliable reviewers, and of seeing the relationships between new books and the curricular and general educational interests of the institution.

Closely allied to the problem of book selection is the problem of weeding a collection. More and more libraries are being forced to face the fact that they cannot continue to hold all the material now in their possession. Whether they unite in creating a storage library, such as those in Boston and Chicago, the proposed center in the New York area, and, on a smaller scale, the newly established Hampshire Inter-Library Center shared by Amherst, Mount Holyoke and Smith; or whether they favor outright disposal of unneeded volumes, librarians must decide on principles for withdrawal as well as on principles of selection. The criteria used in selecting material are applicable, in reverse, to decisions on the weeding of collections. Gosnell has treated the problem in two papers which will grow in importance as the problems they deal with affect more and more libraries. The costs of housing and housekeeping will drive college libraries, and even university libraries, to Hardin’s position: “Let no book remain on the shelves unless someone fights to keep it there.” The worth of the collection will have to be measured not by quantity but by quality available. Through cooperation libraries can secure the benefits of the availability of large amounts of material needed for research programs, while saving on housing costs and gaining in efficient use of materials by keeping collections free from obstructive masses of seldom-used volumes.

In carrying out the routines of book ordering the acquisition department is turning to two new methods which are rapidly ousting the traditional order card. The first of these methods is the use of punched
cards to carry order and bookkeeping information and to enable this information to be transcribed and tabulated rapidly by machine.\textsuperscript{9-10} Unless an institution is using printing and tabulating machines for other purposes also, the cost of the machines would outweigh the saving in clerical time; but the presence and availability of such machines in most universities makes this library use possible. Punched cards prepared originally for acquisition may be used later for new book lists and other purposes where the brevity of information available on a punched card will not be a handicap.

Smaller libraries are turning to the multiple-form order records to reduce clerical work. These give, in a prepared group ready to use with a single typing, order form, order record, departmental financial record, LC card order, and temporary shelf-list or catalog entry. By reducing the need to transcribe identical information several times they speed the work of ordering and help to keep costs down. The Department of Agriculture Library under the guidance of R. R. Shaw has experimented with the use of simple photographic equipment to reduce the time spent in duplicating information for various records. At present a larger experiment in a number of libraries of different size is testing the general usefulness of these methods.

The reaction against the growing mass of cataloging rules and practices which first found a focus in Osborn’s “Crisis in Cataloging”\textsuperscript{11} has not yet spent its force. The simplifications in descriptive cataloging introduced by the Library of Congress in 1947 have generally been well received, even if they did not go as far as some catalogers and administrators had hoped. Since there is no difficulty in interfiling cards which vary in the amount of descriptive information carried, libraries which so desire can simplify beyond the Library of Congress rules; and a study carried on at the Library of Congress indicates that even for the largest libraries no additional description is needed to keep editions separate.\textsuperscript{12}

Description, however, is a minor part of cataloging, even though it can be an expensive one. It does not affect the interfiling of entries made under different rules nor does it ordinarily affect the comparison of catalog entries with other bibliographic sources. An attack on the problem of name and title entries is more difficult. Changes here bring up the expensive matter of recataloging. But successful simplification with a promise of long range savings may easily overcome the fear of immediate costs.

After Taube’s\textsuperscript{13} radical proposal for abolishing all of the present
rules for corporate author, the Cataloging Policy Committee of the American Library Association's Division of Cataloging and Classification agreed that the corporate entry rules should have first priority in a study of author and title entry. This study is just starting and it is impossible to know now what form it will take. It seems safe to believe, in view of the present temper of most catalogers, that some way will be found to produce both simpler rules for corporate authors and entries which will be easier for the untutored public to find. After the problem of corporate entries is resolved, a similar study should be made of possible alterations in other parts of the rules for entry. The twin goals of these studies must be economy in the making of the catalog and efficiency in its use. There is still plenty of occasion for the pursuit of both.

The great wave of cost accounting surveys that struck the catalog departments in the thirties and early forties appears to have receded. Aside from answering the question “How much does it cost to catalog a book?” with a resounding “Too much,” these surveys also called attention to the high cost of many of the subsidiary activities carried on as part of the duties of the catalog department. The direct cost of cataloging has been attacked by a simplification of descriptive cataloging and will be further reduced by expected simplification in rules of entry. Filing costs have led to interest in reducing the size and complexity of the card catalog, as well as to simpler filing rules. The time spent in adding subjects to cards, and especially in altering subjects to make use of more exact and more modern terminology, has led several institutions to file subject cards, without transferring the headings, directly behind a guide card for the specific subject heading. Such a group of cards can be transferred to a different subject heading by means of a simple change in the single guide card without alterations on each separate card.

The preparation of catalog cards has provided a particularly fruitful field for the exploration of economies possible through mechanization. As the typewriter displaced the manuscript card, so various methods of mechanical reproduction are now displacing the typewriter. The addressograph, the mimeograph, and the photographic camera have all been put to use. The addressograph stencil has proved most adaptable for various cataloging purposes, and has the great advantage of being easy to hold in a file for later use if more copies of the card are needed. Not only catalog cards but book cards and pockets can be printed from the same plates. All of these methods share the free-
dom from proofreading which constitutes the great saving of mechanical reproduction. Which one a library will choose will depend on the availability or cost of the original equipment and the cost of the materials used.

The most valuable result of the study of cataloging costs has been the realization that very little is known about the ways in which the information supplied by the catalog is used. Costs were justified or assailed largely on the basis of a subjective belief that the information given was needed or was not needed. The measure of value for the catalog does not lie in its beauty of appearance or its logical construction, but in its usefulness. How, why, and how much are library catalogs used?

One of the outstanding developments of recent years has been the application of survey techniques to the problem of the actual use made of the card catalogs created at so great expense. The catalog rules and practices of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were largely based on a priori concepts of the purposes which the catalog should serve. The reaction against excessive costs which began in the 1930's was accompanied by efforts to discover the real use made of information supplied on catalog cards and the relative needs of different groups in the library’s clientele for specific kinds of catalog information.

The most insistent demand for the fullest possible cataloging has come from reference librarians\(^{18-20}\) who have pointed out that information given on the card is always available, whereas information dug out of the book itself for a reader’s use is lost and has to be unearthed again for each new demand. The argument has validity. Too frequently, however, it is based on a single striking example and calls for a thousand-fold repetition on the cataloger’s part to answer a single reference question. On the other hand a bibliographic scholar\(^{21}\) has argued that, since for his purposes he has to examine each volume for himself, practically all descriptive cataloging is useless. Amidst such personal pleas evaluation of actual needs is difficult. To obtain a more valid basis for decision, recourse must be had to the techniques developed in the social sciences.

By the use of questionnaires, interviews, and special call slips prepared to secure the wanted information, the ways in which different groups of patrons use the catalog have been studied in a number of colleges and universities. Studies so far made have indicated that the descriptive information provided is relatively little used, that advanced
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students tend to start with bibliographies and use the catalog only as a finding list, and that the great use of subject cards is for modern materials in the English language. However, many more studies must be made in different types of institutions before definite results can be secured. Administrators must be prepared to weigh the relative uses by indicated groups of readers before these surveys can really affect cataloging practices. As objective reviews of the actual usefulness of present methods, however, these surveys appear to be the most promising of all current developments in the field of cataloging and should be encouraged for their ultimate benefits.

The card catalog, which attained a commanding place in American libraries at the end of the nineteenth century, has recently found itself under attack as expensive in its creation and upkeep and confusing in use. A variety of alternatives to the card catalog are currently under discussion, and changes in its construction to alleviate its difficulties have been tried with some success. The most successful of these changes have been the division of the catalog into parts and the simplification of filing rules.

One of the first results of a study of the use made of the catalog was the discovery of a different approach to author and to subject entries. The former are consulted chiefly to find out whether the library has a certain preselected work, and a brief inspection is usually enough to determine this fact. The subject cards are used to discover what is available in the library and some time is generally spent in determining which of the various volumes in the library is desired. If the two types of entries are separated, the person desiring a specific title will be served more quickly, the filing problems presented by the use of homonyms as names and as subjects will be avoided, and greater emphasis can be placed on the subject approach. New problems are, however, produced by the division. Titles are used both as informal subjects and as specific entries. Many publications include, in introductions and notes if not in the text, subject material about the author. In trying to meet these problems varying types of division have been suggested. Some libraries have split off subjects only, leaving author and title cards together. Others have divided into three parts, author, subject, and title. Still others have tried a name catalog, which includes all material by and about persons and corporate authors, while placing other types of subject cards in a separate catalog. The variety in the types of division suggests that logical analysis of the use of the catalog has not yet been carried far enough to yield solid results. A
recent summary of experience with the divided catalog, based on re-
ports from a number of libraries which have tried this system, con-
cludes that the divided catalog is more helpful to the staff than to
the undergraduate user for whom it was mainly designed, but it is
to some degree useful to the student also. The sum of the advantages
to both groups will probably lead to a steady spread of the divided
catalog unless some revolutionary change in the whole concept of
the card catalog intervenes.

A different type of division in the catalog would be a splitting off
from the large catalog of entries for the more recent and more fre-
quently consulted materials. In essence this has been accomplished
through a different approach by the creation of separate undergrad-
uate libraries, of which the Lamont Library at Harvard is an out-
standing example. A somewhat similar result might be obtained with-
out the necessity of erecting a separate building by the creation of
an undergraduate catalog containing entries for the hundred thousand
or fewer titles which would be needed for undergraduate use.

Since the complexities of filing have bothered both staff and public
for years it is not surprising that successive filing codes in the past
twenty-five years have turned more and more toward a simple alpha-
betic order. A completely alphabetic arrangement would introduce
almost as many problems as it would solve. Some compromise with
other arrangements, particularly the numerical, is necessary. De-
partures from alphabetic arrangement in the future, however, must
be thoroughly justified if they are to endure. The simplicity of the
alphabetic order has almost completely done away with the various
logical groupings formerly in use, and has proved itself of great use
in all libraries where it has been tried.

More radical attempts to solve the problems resulting from the
cost and complexity of the card catalog have also been suggested.
One suggestion is a return to the book catalog, at least for all older
and less used material. Because of the cost of printing, such catalogs
would have to be made by photo-offset, microprint or microfilm.
While the cost of preparation of such catalogs, including the cost of
reading machines if micro-reproduction is used, would be great, there
would be a continuous saving in cataloging and filing costs, and a
considerable gain in efficiency from use of a smaller catalog. Since the
subject approach to printed materials falls off rapidly with age it
might be possible to remove subject cards from the catalog when
they are photographed, which would reduce the bulk of the card cata-

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log radically. Experience with the printed catalog of Library of Congress cards indicates the desirability of including added entries. Although a book catalog still has all the disadvantages which led sixty years ago to its abandonment in favor of the card catalog, the growing dissatisfaction with the latter may soon lead to an experimental return to the older form.

A different attack on the card catalog has been led by Ellsworth and Swank, who favor the use of bibliographies in place of subject catalogs. This cannot at the present time be a complete solution, since sufficiently good bibliographies exist for only a limited number of subjects and those that do exist are rapidly outdated. As a measure to relieve the size of some subject files, however, the proposal certainly deserves a trial. It is not too difficult to add the location of each title to a copy of the bibliography and to note in the catalog "For other materials on this subject consult the marked copy of..." Although the proposal would not reduce the cost of original cataloging, since it would be more expensive to add a single new acquisition to the bibliography than to make and file a subject card, it would simplify the catalog and make its use easier. A closely related project, the use of a checked copy of the Union List of Serials in place of cataloging completed serials in the usual way, has been found effective at Harvard.

If mechanical bibliography of the sort foreshadowed in Shaw's Rapid Selector becomes a reality, the problem of keeping subject bibliographies up to date will be vastly reduced. Subject catalogs then need be only sufficiently inclusive to answer calls for material on the undergraduate or quick reference level, and could be weeded at intervals to prevent their attaining any unwieldy size.

References


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