Centralized Cataloging in Great Britain

A. J. WELLS

The idea of centralized cataloging in Great Britain has perhaps been more talked about than practiced. It is a curious fact that the public libraries which were most active during the pre-war years in promoting the notion of centralized cataloging are turning away from it while the academic libraries which were least interested in such a prospect then are now turning toward it.

A centralized printed card service was begun in Great Britain in 1949 by the London firm of Harrods through its Library Supply Department. This service offered a standard 12.5 × 7.5 cm. catalog card with an entry typographically similar to the Library of Congress card and with similar tracings and other cataloging information. The service survived little more than a year.

In 1949, the Council of the British National Bibliography Ltd. was formed as a non-profit-making company limited by guarantee. It had a capital of fifteen shillings and little else, besides a conviction that a national bibliography for Great Britain was needed and would ultimately prove self-supporting.

In 1950, the British National Bibliography began publication as a weekly list of current British books. In the first year, the entries followed closely the typographical style of the Library of Congress card. They were cataloged according to the Anglo-American Catalog Rules: Author and Title Entries, 1908, with additional rules taken from the ALA Cataloging Rules for Author and Title Entries, 1949.

The entries appeared in list form and they did not contain tracings or subject headings; the class number for each entry was based on the Dewey Decimal Classification, 14th edition, with some extensions and modifications to suit the requirements of a large classified subject catalog.

In an attempt to offer a compromise centralized cataloging service, the entries in the weekly lists were printed on only one side of a
page and spaced out so that they could be cut and mounted onto catalog cards. In a vain effort to induce librarians to adopt this scissors and paste technique, additional copies of the British National Bibliography were offered at half rate. Needless to say, few libraries even attempted this backward-looking method of catalog production, but the ruinous effect of selling additional copies of the Bibliography at half-price crippled the finances of the organization for years. Those few libraries that made the attempt abandoned it after a short while. The British Museum itself strove for several years to make the method workable but it too finally gave up. The practice of printing on one side only of the page was discontinued after a few months for the main bulk of the print order, but a few copies so printed were provided up to the introduction of the Printed Card Service in 1956.

Pressure from public libraries for a printed card service persuaded the Council to seek a method for reproducing the information contained in the main entry, which appeared in the Weekly Lists, onto a standard catalog card, and a technique was developed by the staff of the British National Bibliography in 1956. This involved the use of a photographically produced silk-screen-type stencil. The stencils, one for each entry appearing in the Weekly Lists, were trimmed to a size 4.5 × 3.0 inches and mounted on a cardboard frame measuring 4.5 × 4.0 inches. The frame had an aperture of 3.75 × 2.25 inches and the amount of information that could be printed on a catalog card was determined by the limits of this aperture.

The frames were capable of being passed through what was essentially an addressing machine and thus enabled the British National Bibliography to offer a service of unit catalog cards printed against each individual order. The method avoided the problem of pre-printing and storing quantities of cards and the associated problem of reprinting by conventional methods when pre-printed stocks ran out.

Unhappily, the reproduction lacked the crispness of conventional print, and, in fact, if operators were not carefully controlled, the standard of reproduction fell to miserable depths. In addition, the severe limits on space made it impossible to give tracings or subject headings.

Nevertheless, the service, at its best, provided the raw material for a card catalog. A cataloger, working with the Weekly Lists of the British National Bibliography beside him, could add headings for added entries and construct subject headings—or select them from a
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standard list—from the subject information provided in the Weekly Lists.³

To date there is no other centralized cataloging service in Great Britain. Some 250 libraries regularly use the service and between them they buy approximately 3,000,000 cards a year. This represents about one-third of all those libraries included in the national interlending scheme (i.e. those which are members of a Regional Library Bureau). Compared with the total number of libraries in Great Britain, however, the number is not very significant. Only one or two libraries outside Great Britain use the service and, on the whole, these are libraries in the less developed countries which are setting up library services with a minimum of qualified staff.

The cards are sold at a unit price of 2d. each and are usually supplied within a week of ordering. Those libraries that use the service claim that it is efficient and economical, but those who do not maintain that its deficiencies outweigh its advantages. Its defects are said to be:

1. The service, being limited to British publishing over the preceding ten years, covers only part of the cataloging needs of a library. This argument is most often put forward by the academic libraries which tend to buy a higher proportion of older books and foreign publications than do public libraries.

2. The method of ordering, which involves searching the British National Bibliography for the card order number (cards can only be ordered by number, not by author and title), is time-consuming and involves a matching procedure which cancels out the time otherwise saved.

Of course, it is possible to base the major part of one's book selection on the Weekly Lists of the British National Bibliography when the card order number is readily obtainable and cards can be ordered at the same time as the book order is placed with the library supplier.⁴ In this way, the cards arrive more or less with the books or in advance of them and cataloging can often be completed by the time the books are checked in. For various reasons, however, most libraries prefer to obtain their information about current books from other sources, e.g. publishers' announcements and reviews, and so bring about the matching problem which takes away the benefits of a centrally produced catalog card.

It is probable that, if a card order number were to be printed in the books themselves and the problem of searching the Weekly Lists of the British National Bibliography thus overcome, more li-
brarians would consider using the service. There is a plan to introduce in the British book trade a Standard Book Number. The plan is due to go into full operation in 1968 when it is expected that publishers will include a unique Standard Number in every new book. It would be the intention of the British National Bibliography to adopt the Standard Book Number; it remains to be seen what effect, if any, this will have on the sale of printed cards.

3. The quality of reproduction is less attractive than that of conventional printing and sometimes is quite poor. This is admitted by the British National Bibliography but so far we have not been able to find a technique which combines the flexibility of the present method with a better quality of reproduction. Experiments are now proceeding with other methods, particularly computer-assisted techniques, but it is obviously too early to judge what effect these may have on a conventionally printed card service. Some librarians have even given as their reason for not using a printed card service a dislike for mixing printed cards with typewritten cards already in the catalog.

4. The cataloging information is incomplete and leaves much of the professional work to be done by the library cataloger. This is true in so far as the B.N.B. card gives neither tracings for added entries and references nor subject headings. Its class numbers, those based on the Dewey Decimal Classification, are modified and extended to a degree not required by most libraries. All this is true; some attention is now being given to ways of providing the additional information desired.

5. Because the B.N.B. card service came into existence so late (i.e. 1956), most libraries have already-established cataloging rules which produce entries different from those used in the British National Bibliography. Their use of the Dewey Decimal Classification and of subject headings is similarly established and is often in conflict with B.N.B. practice. There is a natural reluctance to embark on large scale changes under any circumstances and this is heightened by the feeling that the cataloging of the British National Bibliography is not in accordance with an accepted national standard; in fact, there is none.

With the publication of the revised edition of the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, the British National Bibliography has been instrumental in setting up an ad hoc committee together with the British Museum, the Libraries of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the Library of Trinity College, Dublin, the National Library of Scotland and the National Library of Wales, to agree on
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a standard cataloging practice. It is hoped that this standard will be generally acceptable and that libraries will be induced to make changes in their local practices in order to conform to a national standard. (The British National Bibliography is also in touch with the Library of Congress through the Shared Cataloging Project and it is hoped that agreement on cataloging practice will be reached between our two countries. The benefits of this to both countries, considered in the light of the Shared Cataloging Project, would be enormous.)

All these reasons for the ineffectiveness of the B.N.B. centralized cataloging service are admitted. Nevertheless, the growing size of the task of cataloging, the shortage of adequate labor, and the realization by our academic libraries that they are not providing adequate catalogs of their stocks, are re-developing a climate of opinion in favor of a more effective system of centralized cataloging. A great stimulus has been given to the whole concept of centralized cataloging by the United States’ scheme for Shared Cataloging. In Great Britain we see in the very near future a mutual exchange of cataloging data, with B.N.B. offering entries for British books to the Library of Congress and the Library of Congress offering entries for American books to B.N.B.; there is also the very real prospect of similar reciprocal arrangements with other countries.

Already Great Britain has a Government-supported program, directed jointly by the B.N.B. and the Bodleian Library, for investigating the feasibility of adapting the U.S. MARC Project for machine-readable cataloging data to British needs. Great Britain has deliberately chosen to work in association with the United States to ensure maximum compatibility. It seems to us that to work alone in a strictly national context when the Shared Cataloging Project has already dramatically demonstrated the basic similarities in the cataloging needs of every country, would be the greatest mistake of this generation.

Centralized cataloging has been written and talked about at considerable length in Great Britain, but the B.N.B. centralized cataloging services are at present meeting only a small fraction of the country’s needs. We look forward to a re-assessment of the whole problem of centralized cataloging in the light of new techniques, and this time we hope that centralized cataloging will disregard national frontiers.

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References