The Master Key to Information

By Ellen Cha, Head, Cataloging/Processing

The Cataloging Department of the WMU Libraries lies behind a wall of shelves filled with multiple volumes of The National Union Catalog on the lower level of Waldo Library. However, don’t let this sequestered location fool you. What goes on behind the double doors is the heart and backbone of WestCat, the University Libraries’ online public access catalog! Two large rooms bustle with activities, both physical and mental, that create the master key to unlock access to the millions of recorded items found in Waldo and the four branches.

The pace of technological change in academic libraries during the past two decades, as well as the world of cataloging in general, has undergone dramatic shifts in the way that library catalogs are developed and organized. Cataloging has always been the main tool by which librarians have organized and managed access to their collections, whether recorded on clay tablets, papyrus, paper, or electronic circuitry. For the last two centuries, two basic principles provided a foundation for the catalog. First, each bibliographic item or series, regardless of format, is described uniquely, so that each item, e.g., printed book, CD-ROM, government document, map, slide, online journal or WWW site, cannot be mistaken for another, similar item. Second, different access points permit the user to search for the material’s objective features (e.g., author, title, etc.), and its contents by means of cross-references, subject headings, and classification codes (call numbers). In the past two centuries, book catalogs, and then card catalogs, offered a way for the user to search by author, title or official subject heading.

Today’s sophisticated technology has replaced the majority of the card catalogs of the 20th century with online, usually Web-based, catalogs and indexes that offer all of the original access points and more. Right now, online catalogs offer searches in “fields” such as ISBN’s, publishers, keywords, title phrases, and others.

The task of constructing an academic library catalog relevant to a given collection and establishing accurate bibliographic control has always been difficult to achieve, and harder to maintain. Today, because of the ever-changing technology, and an expanded capability to search every facet of a descriptive record, the job of every staff member in WMU’s Cataloging/Processing Department has become more complex. And, of course, since the University Libraries’ collections or its access to information is no longer limited to physical volumes or other recorded formats, WestCat is open to an infinite number of directly-linked WWW sites and licensed databases—each “cataloged” for WMU users.

The experienced staff who work in this area are ultimately responsible for the actual catalog entry, assignment of a classification code, subject analysis, and the physical processing of library materials in all formats. This means that the Department oversees WMU’s online integrated Voyager system (known to users as WestCat), and assures that the online catalog has functionality, quality, and integrity. Few individuals know that this WMU unit has six work areas: Non-print Materials Cataloging, Print Materials Cataloging, Fast Cataloging, Pre-Cataloging Searching and Database Maintenance, Authority Control, and Physical processing. One faculty member heads the unit, and has the support of 13 staff members plus student assistants. In 1999-2000, these staff members added over 29,000 titles to the existing 1.7 million records in WestCat.

In the last few years, the Cataloging Department began to incorporate, in increasing numbers, the non-book acquisitions of the Libraries. The Department now handles cassette recordings, films, slides, videotapes, microforms, computer files, CD-ROMS, interactive multimedia, maps, atlases, Web pages, e-books and journals, and remotely accessible databases. The complex workflow of all kinds of materials necessitates a close and productive relationship with the Acquisition/Serials Department located adjacent to the cataloging and processing area. (See “Where Are the Periodicals?” in the Winter 2000 issue of Gatherings.)

As the formats of materials become more varied, complex, and intermingled, the catalog has undergone a revolutionary transformation. Where once users found a catalog that was a record of locally held resources, there now exists a gateway through which access is provided in multiple layers to materials accessible via the WWW. This has created its own unique challenge since the resource is not “owned” by the library, merely linked to it through the catalog. Unfortunately, Web sites may move from day to day, and URLs (Uniform Resource Locator(s)) change without notice. The content itself may be modified or increase or decrease significantly so that the catalog description no longer is accurate. In essence, the University Libraries has lost control over the entry for a WWW site that is found in WestCat.

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—authors, titles, keywords, URLs, publishers can change without any notice. As a result, what was correct yesterday becomes incorrect today.

Regardless, a past and continuing emphasis of the Libraries' bibliographic database is effective authority control. Complete, accurate bibliographic and item records are provided for materials held by the Libraries since complete access cannot be guaranteed unless access points (e.g., author, title, subject, etc.) are consistent, current, and correct throughout WestCat. As noted, with the addition of online links to sites, assuring that guarantee has become vastly more difficult. However, users are demanding such access, and the Catalog Department is responding as precisely as possible.

One timely example of the difficulty of providing authority control is found in the area of subject headings. Most searches are not aware that official subject headings are suggested by the Library of Congress and used in common across all libraries. (Users are usually sent to keyword searching tools when they begin a search since such indexes use common language found in actual titles and descriptions.) The "real" subject heading is a powerful search tool, because all libraries use standardized terminology. Until recently, the official subject heading for books and other resources, originally describing Negroes or blacks, was AFRO-AMERICANS with appropriate subdivisions or clarifications such as AFRO-AMERICANS—BIOGRAPHY or AFRO-AMERICAN TEACHERS. The change to AFRICAN AMERICAN as the official subject heading was made in December 2000—a change that required updating several thousand records in WestCat.

Some of the corrections could be initiated using a one-fell-swoop, automated global heading change feature that is built into our cataloging system, but this could be used only with the main heading. No longer phrase or subdivision could be corrected without a manual, in-house intervention so that AFRO-AMERICAN TEACHERS could become AFRICAN AMERICAN TEACHERS. Moreover, the word "AFRO-AMERICAN" was also embedded in other major headings such as UNITED STATES—HISTORY—CIVIL WAR, 1861-1865—AFRO-AMERICAN TROOPS. Traditional searches do not easily uncover text appearing far down the line in a subject-heading string. In this single example, the cataloging staff eventually located some 300 bibliographic records that required the substitution of AFRICAN AMERICAN for AFRO-AMERICAN. The bottom line is that without accurate and thorough authority control and database management, online library catalogs are not the useful, modern tool that they have the potential to be.

The University Libraries' WestCat is an amazing catalog or, if you will, search engine of the 21st century. This gateway links every searcher to a wide range of information resources including, at least: traditional holdings (books, periodicals, rare books, government documents, etc.); e-books and journals; images; sound recordings; course reserve materials; CD-ROMs; remotely accessible databases; and sites of the public WWW. The key to all of this information is held by the Cataloging Department that shapes and articulates the definition of WestCat for our user community. No matter how the nature of our collection and services changes, WestCat, in one form or another, the Libraries' online catalog, will remain the backbone and trusted companion to a world of information that is always there to support the educational, research, and public service mission of Western Michigan University.

The Trouble with the Library

By Allison Danforth

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The patron enters the library to the sound of the heavy glass doors, crossed with steel, slamming behind him. He stands in the rotunda, feeling almost lost in the depths of a well, as three echoing stories of the library tower over him—topped by a glass dome. More steel bars across the dome (and dirty glass) cut the watery sunlight till it has no strength to warm the patron far below. Still, he forges ahead, and passes through the security gate that paradoxically has a sign that reads: "Welcome Students." If the patron glances back to the other set of gates, through which he will later escape, he is less welcomed by signs that warn: "Theft and Mutilation Will Be Prosecuted." "Will Be Prosecuted" is in red letters.

The patron, now made timid and self-conscious by the deathly quiet of the rotunda after the echoes of the banging doors have dissolved into silence, enters the belly of the library. Seeking help, he wends his way through the maze of computer stations, each with a patron staring into a glowing screen, to the reference desk hidden back and to the right of the main aisle. Behind a long, low, mahogany colored desk with a gray top reside the librarians who hold dominion over the four million books and other items that have been stamped as property of Western Michigan University—in purple ink.

Once at the desk, the only standup section is already taken, and the patron must get on his knees to see eye to eye with the librarian as she guides him through the research process. The woman skips from this page to that page of the Web-based catalog, clicking on this blue word and that button, and pointing out that he should take note of this, this, this, and that on a page—all done so quickly, as if she is flying from screen to screen, that he doesn't even know where she started. She is flinging words around as fast as she is clicking and typing away: online catalog, research resources, abstract, citation, microform, general stacks, circulation, and permanent reserve. On and on, words cascade over his unseeing ears and links flash by his unseeing eyes. The librarian ends the crash course in research with a pleasant smile, a quick point at a two-sided, four-part map, and a gesture toward unknown locations: "Okay? Here's your call number. Come back if you can't find it."

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