

THE CARD CATALOGUE: IS IT AN EFFECTIVE RETRIEVAL TOOL IN PRESENT DAY INFORMATION WORK?

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ABSTRACT

Access to document files has been greatly improved with the introduction of computers into libraries and documentation centres. Quite apart from the traditional author and title elements, entries are made using ISBD elements, Keywords from titles, abstracts or text from documents, conference or report numbers, etc. to facilitate information retrieval. This has led some people to question whether the card catalogue is effective as an efficient retrieval tool. The Paper looks at some of the issues raised in-so-far as the multi-access facility provided by computer-based systems vis-a-vis the constraints imposed by the Card Catalogue.

INTRODUCTION

The last two decades has seen significant developments in library and information work with the introduction of computers to facilitate the information storage and retrieval processes. This has, in no doubt, provided the opportunity to increase the level of exploitation of available stock through the provision of more access points. A wide range of bibliographic elements like ISBD's, report and conference numbers, Keywords from titles, abstracts and text from documents are used in addition to the traditional author and title elements. By providing quick references via these elements to facilitate information retrieval, users' time is thus saved as advocated for by Ranganathan.

This significant development is seen by some people outside the Librarianship profession as a way of breaking away from the 'stereotyped' concept of entering a work under its author or title. Of course, the computer is gradually replacing the card catalogue in some libraries and the continued use of the latter is seen as a hindrance to successful utilization of available resources.

THE CARD CATALOGUE

This is one of the several traditional tools which is relied on to retrieve information from a library's collection. It shows what a library has by a given author on a given subject. Depending on the type of library one is considering, and the

extent to which the cataloguing process has been done, it can give information on imperfections, language, etc. Thus, the catalogue enables a person to find a material of which either the author, or the title, or the subject is known.

The creation of records for a catalogue file requires the creation of document description as well as designation of access points², and this follows systematic and laid down rules which is embodied in a code. Usually a code is designed to cater for different cataloguing styles and practices to meet the needs of different libraries. It is these rules which show the cataloguer how to regard different intellectual and material aspects of document and give directions as to how the data pertaining to the features is to be recorded on the catalogue card. Each document is therefore described for easy identification by providing for a clear definition of the bibliographic entity which constitutes the basic unit of record for the catalogue file.³ Cataloguing rules are not only designed to facilitate the construction of file records in libraries, but also to ensure to a great extent, uniformity in standards and they go a long way to help with the organisation of knowledge in libraries.

The card catalogue therefore does not only play a very vital role in bibliographic control but

also serves as a special index to a library's collection as well as a guide for users to the likely shelf location of books on a particular subject

ORGANISATION OF KNOWLEDGE

In organising knowledge for easy retrieval, the data recorded must be as accurate as possible so that it allows the user to retrieve whatever documents he needs from the stock.⁴ This is due to the fact that any imprecise or inadequate data which is input into the database could lead to the loss of the particular document in question. Thus, if the Card catalogue is to serve its function efficiently (i.e. to organise and provide access to the collection) then it must reveal its logical organisation as quickly as possible to users. According to Malinconico⁵, the catalogue must exist in, and create an environment that is perpetually changing with the result that the means of access to it must be varied and capable of responding to changing conditions.

The operative concept here is the provision of effective access to the document and this is judged within the context of the user's ability to satisfy his needs in relatively short time. Unfortunately, the nature of the card catalogue is such that it does not display the intellectual

organisation as quickly as possible and this ultimately affects accessibility to document files.

ACCESSIBILITY

The card catalogue allows for the location of items by:

- (a) means of author(s) who is/are responsible for the document(s) including corporate bodies, editors, etc.
- (b) means of title or subject; and
- (c) in very few instances by the series of which the material is a part.

Definitely, the access points provided are woefully inadequate. What we should not lose sight of is the fact that the structure of the records have implications on the search process. With author search this is simple and straight forward, but as far as subject search is concerned, it is not easy using the title. Keywords and abstracts should be scanned where possible, and this is what is lacking. If the aim of every library is to make its collection truly "open" in the sense that access to the resources can be provided as far as possible by fruitful self-service then in the opinion of Bryant⁶ the main library catalogues are failing to play their part in the process. To him the catalogue has proved not only a hindrance to obtaining information but also failed to be a positive help to

the user. This may be due to the fact that instead of the libraries concentrating on improving subject access to their stock, they tend to concentrate on bibliographic descriptions⁷. Justifications for such remarks are not hard to find.

One weakness of the card catalogue which easily comes to mind is the way multi-authored books and/or conferences, seminars, and workshop reports are catalogued. Even though such composite works contain contributions from different authors/contributors, provision is only made for the editor(s) and the general subject or title in the card catalogue. No reference is made to the individual contributors and their papers. Consequently, it is very difficult for a user to gain access to some of the useful articles contained in these publications. Fortunately, this problem seems to have been resolved as far as computer-based systems are concerned. With such systems, the contents of composite publications (i.e. authors and the titles of their work) are entered separately into the database and search can be carried out using any of the contributor's name as well as Keywords from the text. Other attributes of computer-based systems which are lacking as far as the card catalogue is concerned are that:

- (a) additions can easily be made to the database, and these records are instantaneously

integrated into it.

- (b) it provides easy, flexible, and varied access to its contents and the display is such that the intellectual organisation of the catalogue is easily revealed.

Again with shared authorship, a code like AACR II prescribes that one of them should be designated as the main entry and the others as added entries. Even with the added entries this should not exceed three. Therefore, in a situation where an enquirer knows of an author whose name does not appear under 'rule of three' access to that particular material becomes very difficult. This seems to be the argument special libraries advance against the concept of main entry.

Incidentally, several libraries, according to Ellis, are producing very simple, often one line "listings" of their holdings and these are accessible by Keywords on line or otherwise.⁸ The question that follows then is whether any other catalogue is really necessary? Certainly, the card catalogue as it is now is not dynamic enough to meet some of these challenges.

THE PARADOX

As far as the effectiveness of the catalogue as a retrieval tool is concerned the baseline against which it is being measured is user's access to Library materials. Most

item searches are subject searches in which the user uses some keywords as entry points to the subject area. Hence the likelihood is that not everyone will use the same search terms in the art of searching. This point is reinforced by Lancaster's experimental results. According to him most people tend to remember Keywords in titles better than authors, and also people tend to remember keywords in titles even when they do not remember the title.⁹ Consequently, the main entry may mean nothing to the user so long as there is some entry under which he can find the item. Therefore, strict adherence to the concept of main entry under author or titles/subject is only meant to ensure consistency in cataloguing practice.

On the other hand, the flexibility of search techniques provided for in an automated catalogue does not negate the need to identify a work systematically and also to provide for a main entry.¹⁰ However, the use of KWIC and KWOC enable files to be arranged such that it becomes possible to approach them from a great number of different view points unlike the card catalogue. Such facility is designed in some libraries and documentation centres to meet specialised requirements. Automation does not imply that the standard of cataloguing is being relaxed, and this is evidenced by the existing co-operative

networks. On the contrary, Lewis points out that, the cost of mechanisation means that the exercise of option and divergence from the standards and luxuries that no library can afford.¹¹

Another interesting point is that it is a cardinal principle in cataloguing practice to identify a person by only one form in a catalogue. In this case, the use of uniform titles/headings is the most sophisticated and efficient method of handling such a problem in a manual catalogue. However, in an automated system, due to the use of different identifiers this may be dispersed, but according to Ayres, collocation is unnecessary in a machine environment. The only concern is with linking the approaches of the users to any particular word instead of establishing a preferred batting order. The computer is capable of bringing together the right material at the right time when the user requires it.¹² This is an attribute which the traditional card catalogue lacks.

Whatever the shortcomings outlined above we should not lose sight of the fact that libraries which want to improve on the quality of access to the collections by providing computer-based catalogues are faced with extra cost. Hence the inertia to prevent change could be attributed to the great reliance on human labour to carry out certain routine cataloguing processes.

CONCLUSION

The ability to organise effectively the rapidly increasing information materials in its diverse form for retrieval has been greatly enhanced with the introduction of computers into library/information work. Thus, in an era where people need information faster than it used to be, the use of such incredible array of tools have gone a long way to improve access to document files. Hence over-reliance on the traditional card catalogue greatly affects the efficiency with which users' needs are satisfied.

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