

# Online Catalogs and the Retrospective Conversion of Special Collections

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The perspective in this paper is that of a systems librarian who, in the course of the last four years, has worked closely with special collections staff at Brown University to develop specifications for retrospective conversion and to load special collections records into Brown's online catalog.

Brown University devotes a significant portion of its resources to the acquisition, organization, service, and preservation of rare books and special collections. The John Hay Library at Brown is devoted entirely to special collections. It houses some 250,000 monographs, 300,000 pieces of sheet music, over two million manuscript items, and sundry collections of broadsides, photographs, paintings, and the like. Through funding provided by the Title II-C Program of the Higher Education Act, Brown has been able to obtain three grants totaling over \$600,000 for the retrospective conversion of the monographs in the John Hay Library using the OCLC Retrocon service. A proposal for a fourth and final grant is now being reviewed. If the fourth proposal is successful, all of the monographic holdings of the John Hay Library will be in OCLC, RLIN, and Brown's online catalog. The general collections are also being converted, using funds from David and Laurance Rockefeller and other private donors.

Brown's success in obtaining Title II-C funding for the retrospective conversion of special collections is not unique, and a number of other major institutions have undertaken similar projects. Of particular note is the proposal submitted several years ago by the University of California at Berkeley to convert the holdings of the Bancroft Library. Prior to the Berkeley proposal, Title II-C had only funded the cataloging or retrospective conversion of specific subject collections. The Bancroft project was the

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first funded by Title II-C to cover an entire special collections repository. Assuming that the Higher Education Act continues to be funded in its current form, the Title II-C program constitutes an important source of funding for the retrospective conversion of special collections.

In undertaking retrospective conversion, it is critically important that special collections librarians be involved from the start in planning the project and in developing specifications for the conversion work to be undertaken. This is needed whether one uses an outside vendor such as OCLC, or whether conversion is undertaken in-house using local staff. At Brown, one of the special collections curators served on the task force responsible for drafting a library-wide plan for retrospective conversion. Another assisted with the specifications for the database load. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Brown's philosophy of service is the integration of special collections into ongoing library programs. Special collections librarians have served on all major interdepartmental library committees and have played an important role in the implementation of Brown's online catalog.

The involvement of special collections staff in planning for library automation is probably the exception rather than rule. A review of the special collections literature indicates a dearth of articles pertaining to automation. What there is focuses largely on the rare book cataloging principles and the MARC format for archives and manuscripts. The formation of an online rare books cataloging forum for NOTIS and other catalogers is a positive sign that this situation may be changing.<sup>1</sup> Another is the RBMS program at which this paper was presented.

For better or worse, online catalogs are or soon will be the primary means of access to information about library collections. Many institutions have already closed their card catalogs, and others are planning to do so in the near future. While special collections catalogs and special files may remain open for a time in some institutions, most library users will rely increasingly on online catalogs for bibliographic and holdings information. A growing number of faculty and students are now using the Internet, a network sponsored by the National Science Foundation, to dial in directly to online catalogs at a number of major universities. Over fifty online catalogs are currently accessible at no charge to the end-user. As Internet access becomes more widespread, reliance upon online catalogs as the primary means of access to scholarly collections will take on added significance.

While most online catalogs were not initially designed with the particular requirements of special collections in mind, the catalogs are becoming more sophisticated. Access to MARC fields other than the usual author, title, and subject fields is now a possibility in many systems. Some of the catalogs, particularly NOTIS systems, can provide full keyword access to potentially all fields in the MARC record. As a consequence, access to MARC fields primarily of interest to special collections, such as Provenance notes (561), Genre (655), and Hierarchical Place Name (752) is becoming feasible. With enhanced access to the MARC record and with some local

libraries able to determine which fields are indexed and searchable, it is important that special collections librarians participate in planning for the loading, reloading, and reindexing of online catalogs, and in the generation of additional records through retrospective conversion.

Special collections involvement in planning for library automation will also alert vendors and local systems staff to certain needs which are not yet being met. For example, few online catalogs have the ability to limit searches to specific collections or to limit by format, genre, or location. These enhancements are probably technically feasible in some systems, but have not been generally considered a priority. They may never be considered a priority or be implemented unless special collections librarians articulate their requirements and present them to vendors and to local systems staff.

## **RETROSPECTIVE CONVERSION**

Now that I have urged special collections staff to become involved in planning for automation and retrospective conversion, I would like to turn my attention to some practical advice on retrospective conversion, based on the experience at my own institution and the experience of others.

A significant portion of the literature on retrospective conversion focuses on the choice of a vendor or the means for conversion. Although from an institutional perspective this is one of the key decisions to be made, of equal importance from the point of view of special collections are the specifications used for inputting records and for upgrading records which already exist in the database. My practical advice is quite simple—do not try to save money by converting less than the full record for special collections. Once an institution has invested substantial sums of money in acquiring and preserving rare and unique materials, it makes little sense to try to save a few dollars by converting less than the full record. Full bibliographic information about these items should be included in the online catalog, including copy-specific local notes. In instances where the shelflist does not contain full information, be prepared to convert from the main entry cards.

Brown University's contract with OCLC includes two sets of specifications: one for the general circulating collections and one for special collections. While the matching and input specifications for the general collections are quite flexible, Brown requires the full input of all fields for special collections, including copy-specific local notes. Since some of the shelflist cards do not include complete bibliographic information, the special collections curators are inspecting the cards prior to shipment to OCLC and selectively substituting copies of main entries when needed. While this approach is more expensive in terms of staff preparation, and OCLC charges more for conversion of these records, we feel that this approach is justified in the long term. At

least one major research library has had to convert special collections a second time, because in the initial conversion, the brief records supplied by the vendor were not adequate to describe the items. Therefore, be prepared to convert the full bibliographic record and to pay more for these conversion services, whether this money goes to an outside vendor or is used for in-house staff. Brown's experience with OCLC has been that full bibliographic records on a large-scale project will cost only \$1.00 or \$2.00 more per item than brief records, depending upon the materials. We feel this is money well spent.

Another factor to keep in mind is the possibility that not all special collections information can be converted by a vendor working from shelflist cards. In many institutions, there are special collections files containing cards which are not specifically designated on the shelflist or main entry. For example, in some institutions it has been a common practice to keep separate files indicating provenance, autographs, bookplates, and the like. More frequently than not, the cards for these files were generated by producing extra copies of the main or added entries. In these cases, it may not be possible for a vendor or local staff to generate the added entries needed to make this information searchable in the online catalog. Even with a full keyword searching system, a note such as "Author's personal signed copy" in a record will not make a specific autograph searchable. Depending upon the files, it may be necessary for local staff to enhance the converted records once they have been returned from the vendor, working directly from the data in special files.

It should also go without saying that it may not be possible to convert all of the materials in special collections. If your institution is like Brown, it will contain many items that are cataloged only at a collection level or are not cataloged at all. Brown has no effective means of dealing with its 300,000 items of uncataloged sheet music or the university archives. We have no plans to convert these items at this time, and in the case of the sheet music, it is doubtful that we will ever have the funds to deal with the mass of the materials.

Brown has, however, had good success in sending OCLC nonstandard cataloging. Several years ago we received a major collection of some 10,000 monographs that had been gathered by a private donor and cataloged using the donor's own scheme. The cataloging was on four- by six-inch cards which could not physically be interfiled in the card catalogs or shelflists. Fortunately, we asked OCLC whether they would be able to convert these items. After examining a sample of the cards, OCLC indicated that they would be able to do so. Our 10,000 monographs are now accessible through our online catalog as a result of OCLC's conversion work.

If the library is also converting its general collections, there will be an opportunity to identify materials which are candidates for transfer to special collections. Brown has known for a long time that there were many pre-1801 items left in the circulating stacks, but had no means of locating these items until retrospective conversion began. As part of the database load of the records for the general collections, we are checking

the 008 fixed field for the date of publication and are flagging all monographs published before 1801. These items are given a special location symbol indicating to staff that they should be transferred to special collections. Several thousand items have been identified for transfer, the earliest dating from 1611. Sadly, it is missing from the stacks but at least it has been identified as something that should be searched for. Although no great rarities have been found, the process has enabled us to locate a significant number of eighteenth-century monographs which will be transferred to special collections for preservation purposes.

In a similar fashion, we are also flagging all manuscripts and archives items cataloged in the AMC format for the general collections. By this means, approximately fifty bound volumes of typescript manuscripts and letters have been found in the general stacks which will be transferred to the manuscripts section of special collections.

The order in which collections are converted is also important. Special collections conversion needs to be kept in synchronization with conversion of the general collections. As part of a project funded by NEH and RLG for preservation microfilming, Brown began conversion of segments of the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays several years before starting conversion of the general collections. As a consequence, the online catalog initially contained information about the Harris holdings, but did not identify the general circulating editions. The result was that an undergraduate would search for Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and locate only the rare Harris editions. Obviously, this caused a number of problems. Through the general conversion project, the balance of items in the online catalog has now been rectified.

Once a retrospective conversion project has begun, it will be necessary to make some decisions on loading the records into the online catalog. Loading retrospective conversion records is not particularly different from loading current cataloging, although some special programming may need to be done if the recon records are generated from a different system than the current cataloging. In Brown's case, all current cataloging is done using RLIN, and to load OCLC retrospective conversion records, we needed to do some special programming to deal with OCLC local fields such as the 049 holdings field. We anticipated a number of problems which might arise, such as records which were lacking call numbers because of operator errors. We flagged these records for cleanup in the database loads and caught a number of other problems as well.

In developing specifications for the load of retrospective conversion records, the library will also have an opportunity to rationalize location symbols used for both general and special collections. Over the years, Brown had accumulated a number of symbols and stamps for locations which no longer exist or collections which are no longer separately maintained. For example, the symbol "Art Room 2" indicates a location which no longer exists. In loading the records, we converted the symbol to

“Hay Star,” the current location for the collection. We also used the database load as an opportunity to systematize the text of location stamps and to provide more logical and complete location information to users.

All in all, I would say we are very pleased with the work done by OCLC in converting Brown’s records. While every once in a while we discover call number errors or records for items we don’t own, we have found the rate for errors of this sort to be on the order of one-tenth of one percent. This is about the same error rate as we have found with retrospective conversion done by library staff.

As a result of Brown’s Title II-C projects, over seventy percent of special collections monographs are now in the online catalog. We hope within the next two years to be close to 100 percent converted. The catalog is searchable from thousands of workstations attached to Brown’s campus-wide area network and the accessibility of the catalog has resulted in increased library use. Use of special collections is also increasing, not only by Brown students and faculty, but by scholars at other institutions as well. After the first year of retrospective conversion, paging of monographs in the John Hay Library increased 37 percent and interlibrary loan photocopy requests increased 120 percent. Staff attribute these increases to the retrospective conversion projects and the availability of information in the online catalog and OCLC. Our records are queued for loading into RLIN, and we expect a further increase when the records become available to RLIN users.

Retrospective conversion has helped to integrate special collections further into the mainstream of library development at Brown University, and staff and users are highly pleased at the results. Special collections staff have been 100 percent behind this effort and have contributed a great deal of time and energy to making the project a success. Most of Brown’s card catalogs have been closed, including the main catalogs in the John Hay Library. We look forward to the time in the not too distant future when we will have achieved 100 percent conversion, and the card catalogs themselves will have become historical objects, perhaps to be housed in the university archives and to be studied by scholars doing research on late-nineteenth century library technologies.

## NOTES

1. “NOTRBCAT, a Rare Book and Special Collections Catalogers’ Group,” is a Bitnet list open to all rare book catalogers. Subscription requests should be sent to [LISTSERV@INDYCMS](mailto:LISTSERV@INDYCMS). The Internet address is [INDYCMS.BITNET](http://INDYCMS.BITNET).