Administering the Cataloging of Special Collections Materials

SUZY TARABA

In this paper I will consider the context and the institutional climate in which rare book and special collections librarians catalog 19th-century materials, and indeed, materials from any century. My perspective on this rather sobering topic is not just that of an administrator’s who manages workflow systems and never sees any real books, let alone books from the 19th century. As the Head of the Rare Materials Cataloging Unit at Duke University, I do have time-consuming administrative responsibilities, but I also continue to set rare materials cataloging policy, to answer cataloging questions, and to catalog some rare materials myself. I am in a position where I can see both the cataloger’s and the administrator’s side equally well. I consider myself a generalist, although 19th-century materials have always interested me the most. In my career to date, two of the things I have especially enjoyed doing are writing cataloging codes and policies, and applying those codes and policies—actually cataloging rare books, preferably in as much detail as possible.

Nevertheless, in this paper I will be wearing my (metaphorical) devil’s advocate hat (the Duke University mascot is the blue devil). My topic is one that catalogers frequently prefer to leave to administrators. But catalogers have just as much at stake here. I think that the best way for catalogers to thrive in the current climate is for us to begin tackling these difficult issues ourselves. We must have the support of our administrators, but we should not wait for them to do it for us.

From my point of view, as the head of a rather large rare materials cataloging unit in a highly competitive institution, the climate is not a welcoming one for new cataloging codes as they have been traditionally envisioned. Several factors influence this climate, among them: backlogs, the high cost of cataloging, constantly changing technology, and current trends in access to materials. The arguments that I will make are all arguments that I have had to respond to myself over the past two or three years. The questions I will raise are all questions that my staff and I have been compelled to try to answer. I do not claim to have found the best answers to these questions; they are not easy. However, they must be asked and their implications must be explored.

Suzy Taraba is Head of the Rare Materials Cataloging Unit at Duke University.
First issue: Backlogs of uncataloged or inaccessible materials. Backlogs of rare materials are not uncommon. Those of us who have large backlogs have undoubtedly been asked by our directors, “How can we justify keeping these materials if no one can find them and use them?” It is hard to find a justification for maintaining backlogs of inaccessible materials in any institution that has a mission of serving its patrons, rather than simply preserving its collections untouched for some imagined future.

Historically many special collections libraries have acted as though acquiring materials were their most important duty, thinking perhaps that “some day” there would be time to catalog them. But there is always more work to be done, and “some day” never comes. Backlogs become unwieldy very quickly. If they are large enough, they can take on nearly mythical proportions, so much so that the very thought of tackling them seems insurmountable.

In most libraries space is at a premium. How can we justify filling up precious shelf space with inaccessible materials? It’s particularly hard to convince administrators that we need more space (as so many of us feel we do) when part of the space we have is being used as a kind of “deep freeze.”

Backlogs contribute to the problem of unwanted duplication of materials. How many times have curators bought an expensive rare volume, only to discover, frequently too late to return it, that the same thing was languishing in a cataloging backlog? Even if the backlogs are organized well enough so that they can be searched before ordering new items, the staff time spent searching for something in the backlog would be better spent on another project.

There is only one justification for keeping large, unmoving backlogs of uncataloged materials: job security for catalogers. In difficult economic times, of course, job security is a very tempting rationale, but it is no match for the fundamental principles of access and service to patrons.

In a speech he gave at the American Library Association meeting in Atlanta in 1991, Dr. Jerry Campbell, Duke’s library director, issued a challenge to the Rare Materials Cataloging Unit to “make accessible” what he calculated as 24 years worth of cataloging “business as usual” in a mere 24 months. While I may quarrel with the time frame, I cannot disagree with the principles at stake. Whatever perfectly understandable reasons there may be for why we have a backlog, these reasons cannot in good conscience be used for maintaining backlogs. How to reduce dramatically and ultimately eliminate our backlogs without throwing quality to the winds is an enormous challenge that must be met. Who better to address this issue than catalogers?

Second issue: The high cost of cataloging. An obvious response to a mandate like Dr. Campbell’s is to hire more rare book catalogers. But, of course, it is not as simple as that. Many academic and research libraries are experiencing severe financial difficulties. Recently I read the minutes of a meeting of the RLIN Heads of Cataloging which included “a discussion of the impact of budget cuts on cataloging operations.”
The professional grapevine is buzzing with news of budget cuts, hiring freezes, unpaid furloughs, early retirement incentives, positions lost when the incumbents leave, and even possible layoffs. There is just no money for new cataloging positions.

Even if we do manage to get a new position or to fill an existing one, training a new cataloger is a major undertaking. It can take two or three years for a novice to become a fully productive, independent, and confident cataloger, and even an experienced cataloger needs some time to learn local procedures in a new institution. With the current focus in many institutions on hiring temporary personnel, training or retraining catalogers can take on a life of its own. We must remember that the time involved in this work adds up to a great deal of money expended, either directly through salaries, equipment, and supplies, or indirectly through the trainer’s time. This is not to suggest that new catalogers should not be given in-depth training, but, rather, to highlight a factor in the competition for scarce funds.

Special collections cataloging is complicated work. With constant institutional pressure to do more with less staff, the difficulty of balancing quality with quantity becomes ever greater. Add to that the need to know more than one cataloging code, the ability to switch back and forth between codes without lowering production or making too many errors, and the need to keep up-to-date with changing procedures, workflows, and rule interpretations. Even with improvements in technology and other tools, is it really surprising that increases in speed of cataloging are frequently infinitesimal and incremental? Every time we change cataloging procedures or codes, we must consider the time needed to make the transition. No wonder administrators are asking where we should put our money and just how far we can afford to go.

**Third issue: Constantly changing technology.** We are well aware of how much technical services have changed over the last few years. A personal case in point: when I was offered a position at Duke University nearly seven years ago, a key factor in my acceptance was the electric typewriter I was promised. At the time, Columbia University, where I worked, held out no hope for such a technological revolution. Little did I know that, so few years later, virtually our entire workflow would rely on networked computer terminals.

At Duke, when catalogers began to catalog directly on computers, few of us realized all that would be involved in making the adjustment. We naively thought that computers would speed up our work and perhaps make some positions unnecessary. What we had not counted on were the tremendously increased expectations based on a sense that computers will almost “magically” get the work done. We had not realized the devastating effect that downtime could have on an automated workflow. And when we first got started, we did not know how quickly the technology would change, and how often we would need to alter procedures and retrain staff to get the work done. As the technology grows ever more sophisticated and we become more dependent on it, we catalogers are less able to fix problems ourselves. Gone are the days when we could simply change the typewriter ribbon and get on with the job.
The growth of technology calls for shifts in attitudes which have not fully come about yet. First, we need to focus on maximizing the best features of the technology, on letting it do what it does most effectively. When we expect a faster, easier, online replica of the old card catalog, of course we are disappointed. We need to alter our procedures and workflows to take advantage of the technology, rather than trying to force it to fit the way we have always done things. Once we shift our expectations, this becomes exciting, revolutionary work.

Secondly, in this constantly changing technological environment, we must accept the fact that change itself is constant. We need to build this idea into our planning, realize that even a brand new system may not be around very long, and find efficient ways of introducing and using new technology so that we can get “up to speed” quickly. Otherwise everything will have changed again before we know it. In this environment flexibility has become one of the most important qualities in staffing.

**Fourth issue: Current trends in access to materials.** Forms of access to materials are changing. “Hot” approaches are not the elegant, detailed, full-level records we all know and love—and love to create. Instead, “cutting edge” approaches to making materials accessible include minimal-level cataloging, collection-level cataloging, or a nearly archival approach to printed materials, scanning and indexing images, non-MARC format databases on WAIS (Wide Area Information Server) and the Internet, and full-text retrieval databases like Project Gutenberg. While all these approaches have their own special strengths (and weaknesses), they have in common a movement away from providing copious descriptive information about individual items. We special collections catalogers must find ways to evaluate these new approaches and determine their appropriateness for our materials. To maintain our credibility in this rapidly changing environment, we must stay current with changing forms of access without following new approaches simply because they are trendy. To accomplish this, we will have to come to terms with the fact that no one mode of access is the best. Our mission is no longer simply to apply existing cataloging codes but to match our materials with the most appropriate ways of providing access to them. We must address issues of standardization, of local versus national needs, and of just how much detail is enough to balance quality and quantity. This is a tall order. More than ever before, it requires us to try to see into the future to imagine how our materials will be used.

This is the context and institutional climate in which we work: backlogs of uncataloged or inaccessible materials, the high cost of cataloging, constantly changing technology, and current trends in access to materials all influence our treatment of our holdings, including 19th-century materials. This climate requires us to ask some hard questions: is it better to catalog one book in complete and elegant detail, or to make five books adequately accessible? How is our time best spent to make 19th-century, or any other, materials available? I hope that we will soon begin to explore these questions together.