Ephemera: MARC-Formatted Cataloging Records

STEPHEN J. ZIETZ

THE PROBLEM OF CATALOGING EPSHEMERA
The word “ephemera” is not liked or accepted by many curators of ephemera collections, but there seems to be no other term which covers the territory as well. When we use the word “ephemera,” we are not expressing a judgment or value but specifying a large number of genres.

The bibliographic control of ephemera is now in its infancy with the exception of the major ephemeral genres: broadsides and the graphic arts (woodcuts, engravings, drawings, and lithographs), book-like pamphlets, and major manuscript materials such as letters, diaries, journals, and ledgers. Some photographs or photographic materials are being cataloged using the MARC format and AACR2, but this is being done sporadically.

There are still a great many previously ignored ephemeral genres to catalog. In his book Ephemera, a Book on Its Collection, Conservation and Use (Aldershot, England: Gower, 1985), Chris E. Makepeace gives a list of 126 ephemeral genres. Another 25 or 30 genres could be added with ease—genres which include such arcane categories as matchbook covers, cigar box labels, and calling cards as well as ordinary postcard collections, political campaign materials, advertising, trade cards, and sales catalogs.

The distinctions between ephemeral genres can be useful when deciding how to catalog individual items; the majority of ephemera can be divided into four categories:

(1) practical materials, which includes tickets, application forms, bank notes, boarding passes, some calendars, etc.;
(2) promotional materials, advertisement, and publicity which includes industrial and self-promotion, and promotion of services and products;
(3) nonpromotional material which includes political (when not self-promotion), artistic and literary productions, sociopolitical and religious materials;

Stephen J. Zietz is the coordinator of PACSCL’s “Initiative for the 1990s” and one of the planners of the conference.
mixed materials include promotional materials which may have an artistic or literary, political, sociological, or religious bias.

The uses of ephemera in research are not exactly the same as with more traditional materials. Ephemeral materials have been under-utilized as a research source probably because of the difficulty in accessing them.

Ephemeral materials may be researched in the following manner:
(1) by a general subject (e.g., political office or campaign literature);
(2) by the "intended" subject (e.g., a product or person);
(3) by a "non-intended" subject (e.g., socio-political aspects of advertisement, or women in domestic situations, subject of illustrations, etc.);
(4) by personal or corporate names, which may sometimes be the actual intended subjects;
(5) by production or physical elements (e.g., printing or printer, form, format, genre, illustrators, type of illustration, designers, type of design, design elements, and place and date of production);
(6) by local association, which might include the collector or collection, autographs, extra-illustrated copies, former owners, etc.

The catalog record is supposed to permit researchers access to the materials. If the cataloger keeps as many of the research methods as possible in mind, then the cataloging record will be accessible to the widest audience.

There are a number of reasons why ephemeral materials remain uncataloged. Among these reasons, the following are the most prominent:

(1) Until very recently ephemera was rather low in status among research materials, and libraries were loath to invest the money in processing "marginal" materials. It is only in the last decade or so that the research value of ephemera has been realized and promoted.

(2) The cost of cataloging any materials has always been great. The costs continue to escalate, and when we consider that a catalog record for a piece of ephemera might be longer and contain far more words than the piece itself, we begin to wonder if the costs for cataloging the item might be unwarranted.

(3) Cataloging arrearages for traditional book materials have grown. Few libraries are in a position to take on an additional class of materials to add to the cataloging backlog.

(4) There is no tradition for cataloging ephemera. This means that there are few or no standards and little established practice. Few librarians or libraries want to be pioneers in establishing a cataloging policy for ephemera for reasons one through three cited above.

With many reasons given not to catalog ephemeral materials, what are the reasons for cataloging the materials? There seem to be two main reasons for attempting serious, item-level bibliographic control of ephemeral materials at this time:

(1) Ephemera is finally coming into its own as a serious research resource.

(2) Because there is generally no item-level access afforded to ephemera, use of
ephemera collections is by browsing what may be of research interest, looking and
hoping to find one or two appropriate items; browsing through 19th-century materials
of any sort will destroy the materials in very little time.

Where does this leave the collection with regard to use and access? Traditional
methods of cataloging and accessing the collection are faulty. Cataloging records for
all but broadsides and graphic arts are usually collection-level records which do not
give direct access to individual items in the collection by terms that researchers need.
This forces the researcher to have to browse fragile collections of badly preserved,
acidic objects, thereby causing further deterioration. Unlike bibliographic collections,
the most valuable ephemera collections are the biggest ones—the more there is of a
certain genre or on a certain theme, the more useful the collection, and the more likely
the researcher will find something of interest. When large collections of single-sheet
19th-century materials are browsed, they tend to fall apart. “Research”—which equals
“browsing”—will use up a collection in a relatively short period of time. The very best,
most useful, and likely to be used collections (the very large ones) are in most danger
doing destruction through use. The solution to the problem lies in providing access to
individual items. A catalog or inventory—not the collection—is browsed, and
specific, individual items are pulled for closer inspection.

Using AACR2 and MARC, such a traditional approach to access is not affordable;
libraries cannot invest the resources necessary to catalog every item in a collection of
many thousands of pieces, especially when book cataloging arrearages are growing.
Inventories, like collection-level records, by their nature provide access usually only
through one or two aspects, and they are unequal to the task of providing multilevel,
single-item access.

In some cases innovative solutions for specific collections which could not be
browsed were found. The Free Library of Philadelphia, for example, uses a
bound collection of black-and-white photographs of its Persian miniatures for
researchers to browse. This type of access is possible only with small collections
which do not grow rapidly. This method is, however, very forward
thinking. Technological developments are now such that this method of access
can be automated.

With the advent of imaging technology, we are in a position to begin cataloging
collections of ephemera with the secure knowledge that cataloging records can be
linked with images of the item in a way which will allow precise, quick retrieval. The
technology is available to enable us to browse images in computers, not the fragile
artifact itself. When retrieval of the original item is necessary, it can easily be
accomplished with little wear and tear to the collection as a whole. The opportunities
afforded by the new technology are important to remember as we begin to think about
how the ideal “cataloging” or inventory record for ephemeral materials should look.

Why is this an important consideration? Why might we not assume that the ideal
catalog entry for ephemera will look similar to the ideal bibliographic record, with its
AACR2 style and MARC-formatted frame? Two points are clear to anyone who has ever attempted to catalog great quantities of disparate ephemera:

(1) There is so much of it and it takes so long to catalog each piece in the traditional AACR2-MARC way that the item cost for cataloging is extraordinarily high. There is no possibility that even a medium-sized collection of 10,000 pieces can be cataloged at reasonable cost and in a reasonable amount of time.

(2) The problem is compounded by the fact that AACR2 often does not fit the medium. This is especially true in the 245 (or title) and 260 (or production) areas. Most ephemera has no real title, statement of responsibility, or edition. Although much ephemera was printed, very little of it was published. This is especially true of the “practical” ephemera with which we are surrounded: tickets, letterhead, calling cards, and envelopes. We are also very aware of how little of the AACR2-MARC-formatted record we can fill in when cataloging ephemera. Production information is seldom given so that 260s are sparse and filled with question marks. We also realize that in the cooperative cataloging arena, most pieces of ephemera, albeit printed in multiples, are unique, so that cooperative cataloging is not entirely possible as it is with books.

These two considerations—the fact that there is so much to catalog and the fact that the material does not fit the current cataloging codes and formats—have led the few libraries which try to catalog ephemera to do so outside the framework of AACR2 and the MARC format. Imaging technology may give further impetus to this “natural instinct” to deal with ephemera outside mainstream cataloging environments. The “cataloging record” bound to an image does not require the same sort of structure as that of the old card catalog or its modern-day automated version.

What the two types of “catalogs”—MARC-AACR2-formatted and non-MARC-AACR2-formatted—have in common is access. At this point in our technological age, it seems certain that the most precise type of access to large databases will be through thesauri: LCSH, AAT, or any of the rest. For the interim, then, perhaps we should concentrate on thesaurus-driven access in creating catalog records.

It stands to reason that preparing MARC records for correlation with images requires less time and fewer resources than preparing a MARC record which is intended to stand alone. Why describe in great detail an image which is there in front of the user? Controlled access, however, will always be important. In the future, when ISBD is finally abandoned and AACR2 becomes a relic of our library past, the access and image parts of our cataloging records will survive.

**MARC-FORMATTEc CATALOGING OF EPHEMERA**

Cataloging ephemera gives fullest meaning and reign to hybrid cataloging practice. Several of my colleagues make passionate pleas against creating “hybrid” MARC records, but I do not think anyone has yet made a compelling argument against combining from as many codes as necessary the most appropriate rules. The four cataloging codes most useful for cataloging ephemera are AACR2; Archives, Personal
Papers, and Manuscripts; Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Books; and Graphic Materials.

The MAIN ENTRY: Advertising and publicity items will normally have the producer of the item as a main entry, as will artistic or literary ephemera. The majority of the rest of ephemera will have a title main entry. Much ephemera is quite simply anonymous and the title will have to be the main entry. Also, when in doubt, a title main entry is probably the most appropriate. Greeting cards, Christmas cards, postcards, Valentines, and the like will always have title main entries when cataloged as printed ephemera and not manuscripts, unless the illustrator is known and the illustration represents the bulk of the item. Sales catalogs will always have corporate main entries. It is possible, however, that the same item could be cataloged in a variety of different ways resulting in different main entries.

TITLE AND EDITION areas are more straightforward than the main entry area. The guidance given in Graphic Materials for the construction of the 245 is complete and applicable in most of the instances when AACR2 is not entirely appropriate. One preference, however, is to give the full text of the item in the 245 area. Increasingly, the title area is being used as a major means of subject retrieval through key word. In the case of ephemera, where there is seldom a “clear” title statement, it might be faster and more efficient not to exercise professional judgment in the selection of a title statement. It might be better just to transcribe everything there! In many cases, however, the text available on the piece will not be terribly informative about the content, form, or production of the item. For much ephemera, the title area should be looked upon as a type of quotation for any text which is available. The description of the piece should be included in the first 500.

Edition statements should not be constructed in a 250. Rather, give the information in a note. Formal edition statements are rare in ephemera. More common is information on variants and states. This information is itself ephemeral but should be given in great detail when known.

PUBLISHER STATEMENTS will often be constructed. Constructed statements should not only be bracketed but should also be abbreviated as much as possible. When the main entry is a corporate body, the publisher will often be the same corporate body, whether the role as publisher is stated or not. When the main entry is not a corporate body, chances are that only a printer will be listed as publisher. Most pieces of ephemera will not have any publication data on them.

DATES will hardly ever be printed on the most ephemeral of ephemera. AACR2 requires a reasonable estimate. Dates can often be approximated from manuscript annotations or the particular situation in which one finds the piece.

Printers and publishers should always be traced as added entries in ephemera. A large database of ephemera records with ample access points would help immeasurably in establishing many of the missing data elements in publisher and date areas.
Certain genres of ephemera are frequently published in SERIES or will bear series-like numerals. These elements should always be transcribed onto the bibliographic record. Named series should be traced. It will sometimes be apparent that several different pieces belong to one series; some or all of the pieces may not be marked with a series title. In cases where the publisher has given a name or names to the series, bibliographic records for all pieces in the series should bear the series name as it appears or in brackets. When no name is given to the series, a note should be made for each piece stating that it is one of a series. The series should then be described.

The PHYSICAL EXTENT (or 300) part of the bibliographic record for ephemera is among the most important areas. If we assume that by linking imaging systems with bibliographic records we will have the image to look at as we search our catalogs, it is important to describe in great detail those aspects of the physical characteristics of the object which may not be apparent from the image.

The language used in the physical extent of the object is somewhat uncertain. A composite list of specific material designations from AACR2, LCRI, and the AACR2 clones would include broadside, chart, collage, cubic feet (or meters), diorama, drawing, exhibit, flip chart, game, items, leaf or leaves, linear feet (or meters), model, p. (for “page”), painting, photomechanical reproduction, photonegative, photoprint, picture, piece, postcard, poster, print, sheet, slide, stereograph, technical drawing, transparency, v. (for “volume”), and wall chart.

However, AACR2 allows the following exception: “If none of these terms is appropriate, give the specific name of the item or the names of the parts of the item as concisely as possible” (6-10.5B1).

The cataloger of ephemera may want to use the AAT Visual and Verbal Communication Thesaurus, Descriptive Terms for Graphic Materials: Genre and Physical Characteristic Headings, and LC Thesaurus for Graphic Materials: Topical Terms for Subject Access for specific materials designations. These thesauri provide the sort of specificity required for the various ephemeral genres.

The number of illustrations, the presence of color, and the number of colors (when known) should be indicated. Size of the item is very important. Many ephemeral items are not standard size or shape. The chapter in Graphic Materials on physical extent gives detailed instructions on how to deal with these items. Only in rare cases when the physical description is so complicated that it might go on for many lines should the 300 be abbreviated and the information given in a note. The rationale behind keeping relevant information consistently in one field is that in an interactive (image, bibliographic record) environment, it is important that the user know where to find which sort of information. In other words, we should always be able to search the 300 for dimensions, media, color, and other aspects which describe the physical characteristics of the item.

The NOTE AREA of the bibliographic record should always begin with a statement of what the object is when this is not clear from the 245 or the 300. This is
an essential element in any collection of records for miscellaneous genre. Notes such as “Portrait,” “Valentine,” “Calling card,” “Logo,” “Manufacturer’s catalog,” or “Membership list” are essential in identifying the piece, particularly in catalogs where many different genres are listed. A 655 should also be given for the term used in this first note. For many ephemeral items, multiple 655 fields should be given.

When the complete text of a brief item is not given in the 245, the rest of the text should be quoted in a note. Although the full text may be present in the linked image, it is not an ASCII text and not searchable. As part of the bibliographic record, the text is fully searchable.

Bibliographic citations are one of the most useful of the notes. When the source cited gives full information about the piece being cataloged, it is best not to repeat any of the information except that which is absolutely necessary for machine access.

Notes on the dating of an object should be given when the source of the 260c is not evident. One of the most ingenious aspects of the networked catalog is that no cataloging record may ever be considered “definitive.” The larger the shared resource for cataloging records becomes, the more our knowledge of the various aspects of the record will be. We will be able to add to and change the unknown or uncertain elements in older records. The production aspects of much ephemera will be the areas most likely to change. It seems imperative, then, that when not self-evident, the rationale behind any information which we have supplied be given in a note.

For lengthy pieces of ephemera, detailed descriptions of the contents should be given either as a formal contents note (505) or as a summary.

Finally, there will almost always be some sort of local association to be noted in cataloging the piece, except when the item is cataloged as a manuscript. Local notes will often provide the information used to date or ascribe authorship to an item. In these instances, the information should be incorporated into the explanatory note and not duplicated in the local note. For example, if the 260c is “[1890?]” and if a date explanatory note says, “Date of 1890 written in contemporary hand on piece cataloged,” it is unnecessary to give a local note saying that the date “1890 is written in a contemporary hand on the verso, upper right corner.”

In many cases, all the local information may be written in one long note. Local information should always be accessible through local added entries and local subject headings.

ACCESS: more is better than less. All names associated with individual pieces of ephemera should be traced. Relators should be used with names which are 700 or 710. Titles should be traced and elements of titles which might be thought of as complete and quotable. First lines of verses should always be traced (740), as should captions and mottoes, etc.

Subject headings fall into various groups, all of which should have added entries. There is the intended subject of a piece, i.e., a political flyer is intended to address a particular subject at a particular time. Subject headings must always be made for the
intended subject. There is the general subject category into which the piece fits. One of the advantages of cataloging ephemera is also one of the disadvantages: ephemera tends to be very specific. Usually more general subject headings are also appropriate when the intended subject matter is very narrow. We should also make added subject entries for subjects portrayed in illustrations. Certain political ephemera, for example, might require an added subject heading for donkeys or elephants.

It is important, it seems, to give as much subject analysis as the piece suggests. Sometimes this will entail a great many subject headings. This is especially true in the case of product information or catalogs (especially if the prices are present) in which the products are not closely homogeneous (when one or two more general subject headings might do).

When cataloging certain genres or classes of items, specific subject access might best be done by keyword searching of the descriptive text. This is most apparent with menus. It is probably sufficient to include one 655 Menus, a 650 for the meal (e.g., “Breakfasts,” “Luncheons,” or “Afternoon teas”), another 650 for the type of food (e.g., Cookery, French), a 710 for the location [e.g., Golden Spoon (Restaurant: Philadelphia, Pa.)], and a 700 for the cook. The dishes served should probably be included in a 500 (e.g., “Menu: Orange juice; tomato cocktail; grits with butter; toast and jam; and Sacre Bleu cheese”). It seems unnecessary to make a subject heading for each of the foods on the menu. Yet it does seem necessary to have the foods searchable somewhere in the record.

When is enough really too much? When do you arrive at the point when there are too many added entries or subject headings for a single record, or the record is simply too lengthy, or requires too much time to create? The answer lies in the cataloging policy of each institution and the nature of the collection being cataloged. The brief suggestions given above for cataloging menus certainly do not require unwarranted effort to catalog individual menus in a large collection of menus. It is, however, excessive for an institution which has only one or two menus scattered throughout a collection of scrapbooks.

This same theory of cataloging propriety applies to that most ubiquitous of ephemeral items, the membership list. For local history and genealogical collections or institutional archives, there may be something to be gained from making a subject heading for each member of an organization listed. However, for the majority of institutions and in the majority of instances, such detail is simply not cost-effective. One way around making subject headings for each member is to list the members in a 500 note just as they appear in the membership list. This will provide uncontrolled and imprecise access through keyword searches. As in this case, the cataloger is challenged to make MARC and AACR2 work to promote the collection and the goals of the institution.