

How Catalogers Really Edit OCLC Records

by Walter M. High

How do catalogers really use the information provided on OCLC records? Do they accept the work of other catalogers without question, or do they edit bibliographic records to their heart's content? This question inspired a study of edited OCLC records that attempted to draw preliminary conclusions about cataloging practices in large academic libraries. The study evolved into a 1990 University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill dissertation entitled "Editing Changes to Monographic Cataloging Records in the OCLC Database."

The study focused on five research questions:

- 1) Are Library of Congress records edited less often than contributed records in the OCLC database?
- 2) Do catalogers perform more "cosmetic editing," cleaning up records, than "substantive editing," providing greater access and clearer descriptions which distinguish one bibliographic record from another?
- 3) How often do catalogers accept the intellectual work of other catalogers?
- 4) Do catalogers add "substantive" data to contributed records often enough to make the completeness of such records suspect?
- 5) Are there identifiable problems with the OCLC database that can be corrected by running special "fix this problem" computer programs or by allowing catalogers to make changes to defined areas of the OCLC permanent record?

To answer these questions, I chose five ARL libraries in different states and received permission to analyze the cataloging data on their April 1985 OCLC archive tapes. By examining archive tapes rather than post-cataloging printouts, I was able to determine exactly what changes catalogers had made to records rather than having to rely on assurances that editing at the OCLC terminal actually matched the changes indicated on a printout. A random selection of 1,000 monographic records from each institution's archive tape was matched with the original version of each record from the OCLC database. A computer comparison identified which fields had been changed, while a

manual review and tabulation pinpointed the specific changes. After various problem records had been removed from the 5,000 record sample, 4,425 remained of which 2,918 (66 percent) were Library of Congress records. The results confirmed some of the cataloging folk wisdom, as well as providing insight into the utility of sharing cataloging data.

The first question about the acceptance of LC cataloging versus that of contributed cataloging confirmed what catalogers already know: LC cataloging is edited far less often. The study showed that LC records averaged 70 editing changes for every 100 records, while contributed cataloging averaged 275 editing changes for every 100 records. The numbers tabulated in the study were affected by one anomaly: one of the five libraries in the sample systematically removed every Dewey Decimal, NLM, SuDocs, and NAL call number. This practice accounted for nearly one-fourth of all the changes identified on LC records. On contributed records, the study showed that the series field is often problematic and that the decision to trace or not to trace is frequently changed.

The second question about "cosmetic" editing versus "substantive" editing did not result in definitive answers; the practice varied depending upon the area of the record under discussion. The gross numbers showed that approximately 55 percent of all editing changes could be identified as "cosmetic." Again, though, the call number removal practice of one library affected the totals. Without those changes included, "cosmetic" editing would drop to only 39 percent of the total. In the descriptive area of the records, "cosmetic" editing was high, accounting for nearly 90 percent of all changes. Only 47 percent of call number changes, 21 percent of name/title access field changes, and 18 percent of subject heading changes were considered "cosmetic," however.

While it might seem propitious to decree that all "cosmetic" editing should stop, the resulting productivity gains would probably be slight. One must remember that a "cosmetic" change is usually a mat-

ter of a few quick keystrokes at the terminal by the cataloger, while a "substantive" change may often require research into appropriate forms of names or subject headings. Attempting to eliminate "cosmetic" editing may be virtually impossible as catalogers find it difficult not to make the small changes that clean-up a record and generate satisfaction, too.

The third question asked about catalogers' tendencies to accept the intellectual work of other catalogers. It cuts to the heart of the shared cataloging theory that underlies the networks. The whole purpose of OCLC, RLIN, WLN, etc., is to share data. Answering this question required me to define each change as being intellectual or not. For example, adding a new subject heading is intellectual work, but modernizing an old subject heading is not. Recognizing that such judgments are subjective, I found that acceptance of LC intellectual work was very high, ranging from 96 percent to 99 percent in the various fields. For contributed records, the same fields ranged from 86 percent to 89 percent. The one exception was the series area, where both LC and contributed records had their intellectual judgments accepted at a rate approximately 10 percent lower than the rest of the fields.

The fourth question concerned the quality of contributed records in the OCLC database. How bad are those records, anyway? The study reported 757 additions to the 1,507 contributed records, or approximately one addition for every two records. The most deficient area on contributed records was the fixed field. Many older records lacked fixed field data, but OCLC has since run a standardized program to supply default data in several fixed field elements. With this change, the most significantly deficient area is the call number, where 13 percent, or one of every eight contributed records, lacked a valid LC call number. Because large libraries often route items to support staff or professional catalogers based on the presence or absence of a valid LC call number, this statistic is significant. Libraries using Dewey or NLM call numbers would undoubtedly find an even larger percentage of records

Research ... continued.

missing call number appropriate to their classification schemes.

The final question asked whether OCLC could run special programs to fix standardized problems in the database. Examples of successful programs are the name authority flip performed at the advent of AACR2 and the provision of default data in the fixed field which changed over 2.75 million records. The study concluded that indicator corrections and a carefully controlled program to update old subject headings based on the online authority file would be useful. Subjects, of course, could only be updated by a computer when the change was a "one-to-one" change. Periodic rerunning of the name authority flip would also correct many errors. Call numbers and series statements are two areas that receive much editing, but are not amenable to machine-generated fixes.

This study examined cataloging practices in five large ARL libraries. How OCLC records are edited may vary considerably in public, special, or smaller academic libraries. It would be useful for the study to be replicated with other libraries, testing the validity of the data gathered. Perhaps the most significant unasked question is, "How useful are the access points we place on bibliographic records?" Transaction logs of online public catalogs may yield an answer to this question and, thus, guide us in making intelligent decisions about how much time we invest in editing and correcting shared cataloging records. Until we know what practices are useful to our patrons, we can only continue to make our current practices more efficient.

From the President ... continued from page 118.

about, study, and synthesize library and information services issues. Let me take this opportunity to tell you what issues I would like to see studied further. There is no end to most library issues so I am sure we will have these to work on for many years to come. Literacy, the freedom to read, computer technologies, library service fees, recruitment to the library field of a diverse (in ethnic background as well as in specialized talents) cadre of workers, and preservations of all types of media are just a few of the issues. For NCLA, I see the challenge as one of fostering study and finding solutions through committees, public relations, subsidized research, or whatever means it takes. In order to find the means to study and solve the challenges, we must be flexible. We must manage the association in an efficient manner that will ease our entry into new and developing issues. We must support individuals within our association that are making a difference. We must share information with each other.

What a time for libraries and information services! The amount of information is increasing exponentially, important older materials are deteriorating faster than we can do anything about it, more and more individuals are realizing the position of libraries as storehouses of information on both the positive and negative sides, and new knowledge is needed to handle new technologies of information. Together we can meet these challenges. I look forward to continuing to work with you in other roles to make libraries in North Carolina all that they can be. Thank you for allowing me to serve as your President in 1989-1991.

See you in High Point November 12 through 15!

— Barbara Baker, President

NC BOOKS/AUDIOVISUALS — BLACK HISTORY MATERIAL

FOR THE YOUNG, OLD, & IN-BETWEEN

Spring & Fall Catalogs — Are you on our mailing list?

BROADFOOT'S OF WENDELL

6624 Robertson Pond Road
Wendell, NC 27591
1-800-444-6963



Locate NC Authors through our now-being-published
Contemporary North Carolina Authors Packets

— *Two Different Locations Serving Different Needs* —

Geneologists & Reference Librarians

Request the Latest Catalog of Source Material from:



BROADFOOT PUBLISHING COMPANY

1907 Buena Vista Circle, Wilmington, NC 28405
(919) 686-4379

Just Published — **HEADSTRONG, The Biography of Amy Morris Bradley**
In The Works — **Clark's NORTH CAROLINA REGIMENTS**

Furnishing Knowledge Networks for the Information Future

1991 Biennial Conference

North Carolina Library Association

All of the pieces are being placed in the puzzle for the 1991 North Carolina Library Association's biennial conference. The stage is set in the High Point Conference Center for the dates of November 12-15, 1991. Last minute alterations are being made with the program, and events are being confirmed even as we go to press with this issue of NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIES.

On the program are items of interest to the broad range of librarians in the association. Special, public, academic, school and media center librarians, as well as library school faculty and students should find this a conference of merit for learning, sharing information, and getting to network with peers from across the state. The General Session will feature Peter Young, Executive Director of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Services. Other nationally prominent speakers include Doug Marlette, Judith Krug, Jane Pratt, Walter Anderson, and Jose Aruego. North Carolina will be well represented as well with the likes of Timmy Abell, Jill McCorkle, Bland Simpson, and Alice Wilkins. A special guest for the Oglivie lecture on Thursday will be the new President-elect of ALA—our own Marilyn Miller. Other surprises are in store as well for attendees as plans are confirmed.

Other features of the conference will be the ALA store, membership booths for SELA and ALA, and over 100 spaces for vendors, distributors, and service providers. An employee placement center will be established for interviews based upon job listings and resumes collected prior to the conference. There will be open table talk sessions and joint library school reception space in the Radisson on Wednesday. Tours of local libraries will be available, and the new High Point Public Library will host an open house on Thursday evening.

All-in-all, this year's conference looks to be one which truly reflects the theme of furnishing us all with the knowledge networks necessary to work toward the information future. Registration information will be mailed in early September, and hotel reservations will be accepted at approximately the same time.

The conference planning committee looks forward to seeing all of you in High Point in November!