Casting the Net

Caplan, Priscilla. "USMARC Format Integration, Part II:
Implications for Local Systems." The Public-Access Computer
Systems Review 4, no. 1 (1993): 13-17. To retrieve this file,
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When we last left USMARC format integration (see "USMARC Format
Integration, Part I: What, Why, and When?" The Public-Access
Computer Systems Review 3, no. 5 (1992): 33-36; GET CAPLAN PRV3N5
F=MAIL), it was defined, approved, and in imminent danger of
being implemented. We concluded then that format integration
would have to offer substantial benefits to the end users of our
public catalogs to be worth the bother. Before going on to
consider what some of those benefits might be, it's worth
spending a little time belaboring the bother.

Impact on Catalogers

For most catalogers, the burden of change caused by format
integration should not be too great. Most of the impact occurs
in a few specific areas: items with accompanying materials,
multimedia, and non-textual serials. Monographic catalogers will
see relatively little change, and catalogers of textual serials
will see the least change, since most conflicts in usage between
the old formats were resolved in favor of serial practices.
Cataloging staff should not fear that they will now have to learn
vast numbers of field tags that they never used before, since
chances are good that fields not previously defined for a
particular type of material aren't ordinarily relevant to it.
Catalogers who never before needed a 306 (playing time) or 586
(exhibitions note) are unlikely to need one now.

     Of course, catalogers will need an overview of the purpose
and major effects of format integration as well as specific
training in those changes affecting the materials with which they
work. Cataloging departments will need to spend some time
determining their own policies in areas where choice is allowed,
including how to select a primary format, when to create an 006,
and whether to use very specific note fields when applicable.
Catalogers will also need to get used to new documentation from
the bibliographic utilities and to the changes both the utilities
and their own local systems have made in response to format
integration.

Impact on Local Systems

The impact on local systems will be significant although not
radical. The Library of Congress and the bibliographic utilities

are coordinating their implementation plans so that these systems will be able to exchange data with each other from "Day 1" (currently scheduled for January 1, 1994). This means that every library receiving cataloging from LC or any of the utilities will have to be able to accept post-format-integration data from Day 1.

The extent to which software changes are required will vary from one local system to another. Some functions likely to be affected include data validation, data entry for the new 006 field, the import and export of USMARC records, duplicate detection and resolution for imported records, and reporting. (Staff who receive reports like "acquisitions expenditures by format of material" may also want to reconsider how they define format information.) Systems that have format-dependent functionality, particularly functionality specific to AMC (archives and manuscript control) records, could require some reprogramming.

Vendors may or may not decide to require full- or partial-file conversion. An advantage of converting is that it is easier for a system to handle a consistent bibliographic file, particularly in the leader and fixed fields. The disadvantage is that, since the older content designation is still valid in older records, all records from the utilities or other sources would need to be examined and converted at the time of import to maintain consistency. Unless, of course, the utilities decide to convert their own files. Conversion in general is one of the messier issues, but my suspicion is we'll be living with pre-format-integration content designation for at least as long as we have lived with pre-AACR2 cataloging. Longer than it takes a whale to gestate, anyway.

Whatever their vendors decide to do, systems librarians and others responsible for managing local systems will need to have the changes installed, tested, and ready sufficiently in advance of Day 1 to provide local training and updated documentation. The big question here is whether one's vendor will require its customers to be using the current version of its software in order to install the format integration release. Bringing software up to the current level will doubtless be a non-trivial task for many installations.

Impact on Public Services

Reference and public services staff should escape relatively unscathed. Certainly, they will see some changes, especially if vendors take full advantage of the power of format integration to improve searching and display, as noted below. Still, as a reference librarian recently told me, "Every time we get a new CD-ROM, I'm expected to learn a completely new set of data, new search software, and a new user interface. So I'm supposed to get excited over a few changes to our online catalog?"

Now for the Good Stuff!

These "few changes" to the online catalog, however, should contribute to helping patrons get what they want and know what they've got. For starters, systems can take advantage of format

integration to eliminate an existing problem with search
qualification. Many library systems allow patrons to limit or
qualify their search results by format--to say in effect, "I want
to see only maps," or "I want to see only serials." Today, such
a qualified search is likely to exclude relevant items. A map
issued serially, for example, if cataloged as a serial in
accordance with CONSER rules, would not be retrieved in any
search limited to maps. After format integration, since both the
map-like and serial aspects of this publication can be
represented in the fixed fields, a local system could let the
record be retrieved by searches limited to maps as well as
searches limited to serials. While this will be a helpful fix,
it won't exactly revolutionize online retrieval. At my
institution, transaction logs indicate that less than one percent
of OPAC searches are limited by format, and I suspect a healthy
subset of these are done by library staff.

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     A more pervasive, if more subtle, improvement will come from
the simple ability to record and thus to display any relevant
information about a publication--regardless of its USMARC format.
Trying to describe a mixed or multimedia publication in a single
format has always been a problem--you're likely to leave out
something important. This, in turn, is reflected in OPAC
displays, which can be cryptic, confusing, or even misleading.
Along the same lines, an incidental effect of format integration
could be that vendors will rethink and redesign their OPAC
displays. Hopefully, more systems will explicitly label and
display format information instead of requiring the patron to
infer it from clues in the bibliographic description.
     The greatest benefit of format integration, however, isn't
in simplifying USMARC rules or enhancing our catalogs. The real
benefit is that format integration allows us to describe and thus
give our patrons access to things that exist in the world. How
could we catalog electronic journals like The Public-Access
Computer Systems Review if we had to describe it as either a
computer file or a serial but not as both? How would we cope
with digitized maps or slides? Are you planning a project to
scan and store images of sheet music or architectural drawings?
The fact is that information resources are increasingly in
electronic forms, and electronic materials are increasingly
multimedia in content. It makes no more sense to try to describe
these in terms of a single USMARC format than it does to describe
yourself only as a staff member and not also as a mother/father,
sister/brother, church-goer, bridge-player, etc. Which of these
aspects is most important at any particular time may depend on
the context, but in the case of library materials, our patrons'
needs should define the context and not cataloging rules, system
limitations, or the USMARC format specifications.

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