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Cataloging Outsourcing -- Practice and Thinking

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CATALOGING OUTSOURCING -- PRACTICE AND THINKING[*]

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Cataloging outsourcing is a heated topic in library services. From time to time, many different opinions are voiced by library professionals. Those in favor regard cataloging outsourcing as a trend in future library services, and those who are opposed see it as a threat to the library profession. My purpose in this article is to share our experience at UCLA in outsourcing of cataloging backlogs, discuss the advantages and problems of our practice, and then raise some issues for discussion.

I.   Initiation: Why did we need cataloging outsourcing?

The UCLA East Asian Library has been pursuing an outsourcing project for cataloging backlogs since October 2005, with a pilot project in September 2004. The cataloging outsourcing project at the UCLA East Asian Library was not part of our strategic plan. On the contrary, it was initially a temporary measure adopted to deal with cataloging backlogs.

In 2002-2003, the UCLA East Asian Library had two vacant positions of professional librarians. Because of a budget shortage at that time in California, we were unable to fill the positions. As a result, a cataloging backlog gradually built up. As of December 2003, the Library had a cataloging backlog of 11,504 titles, including 4,998 Chinese titles, 3,980 Japanese titles and 2,752 Korean titles.

In late 2004, we learned that we were able to fill only one of the two vacant librarian positions. Obviously, even though we could catch up on cataloging of current acquisitions, the cataloging backlog could be there forever. Based on the urgency of cataloging needs and the reality of budgetary constraints, we started to consider outsourcing as an alternative for eliminating the backlog. With the support of the library administration, we launched a pilot project for cataloging outsourcing.

We started with outsourcing original cataloging of Chinese monographs because, due to the vacancy of Chinese professional cataloger for two years, the Chinese section had accumulated the largest backlog among the three East Asian languages. In early September 2004, Richard Siao, the head of the acquisition and processing unit of the UCLA East Asian library, assisted me in selecting materials for outsourcing. The selected Chinese materials were from a backlog waiting for original cataloging. Then, a student assistant was assigned to conduct bibliographic checking on OCLC-CJK, making sure that no copy cataloging was available in the database. Meanwhile, Toshie Marra, at that time interim head of the library's cataloging unit, was assigned to coordinate the project, by preparing cataloging specifications and providing guidance for complex cataloging situations. After careful bibliographic checking, 234 volumes were shipped to a cataloging agency via UPS on September 9, 2004.

By January 2005, all the shipped materials had been returned to the East Asian Library, after being cataloged. The 234 volumes were cataloged into 219 titles. Of them, 186 were processed by original cataloging, 19 by simple copy-cataloging, and 14 by complex copy-cataloging. This means that, during the period from September 2004 to January 2005, 33 titles, about 15 percent of all the titles outsourced, became available for copy-cataloging at OCLC-CJK.

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A student assistant did a bibliographic check of all the returned materials first. Then, Hong Cheng, our new Chinese Studies Librarian, and Toshie Marra reviewed all the cataloging records. By the end of January, the pilot project was concluded.

To assess the cost-effectiveness of the project, we kept track of the library staff time spent on the project. The pilot project cost the library 36 professional hours, 7 staff hours and 29 student assistant hours, including preparing outsourcing cataloging specifications and providing guidance for complex cataloging situations. However, not all of these hours can be regarded as an additional cost of the project. Bibliographic checking by student assistants and selecting materials for cataloging are normal procedures even for in-house cataloging. Preparing outsourcing cataloging specifications and providing guidance for complex cataloging situations by a professional librarian should be a one-time procedure for all outsourcing projects, including future projects.

After the pilot project, we recommended expanding the outsourcing project to the **entire** cataloging backlog, including Japanese and Korean materials. Based on the size of cataloging backlogs and current available manpower of the Library, outsourcing was crucial in reducing cataloging backlog. We hope that, as the outsourcing program continues as initially planned, the East Asian Library will be able to finally eliminate the cataloging backlog in foreseeable future.

II.   Practice: How did we handle the cataloging outsourcing?

After approval of the library administration, the UCLA East Asian Library started a two-year cataloging outsourcing project in October 2005. According to the agreement with the cataloging agency, the library plans to ship 400 titles to the agency each month, including 200 Chinese titles, 100 Japanese titles and 100 Korean titles, for either original or copy cataloging. The agency will complete the cataloging within two months after receiving the materials, and then ship the volumes back to the Library. To date, three shipments, about 1,200 titles, have been completed. We expect the whole outsourcing project to be concluded as planned. By October 2007, the cataloging backlog should be finally eliminated.

We set up the following library procedures for the two-year outsourcing project:

1. Librarians or copy catalogers select materials for outsourcing (200 Chinese titles, 100 Japanese titles and 100 Korean titles each month).
   Preferred Criteria for selection:
   • Single volume items
   • Simple treatment (i.e., no Non-circulating, no Reference)
   • Books only (no serials, no CD-ROMs, etc.)

2. Copy Catalogers delete item/holdings/bibliographic records on local online catalog, and exclude from shipment titles for which records cannot be deleted from the local online catalog. The intent of this step is to simplify the merge of cataloged records with existing acquisitions/processing records.

3. Cataloging Student Assistants make copies of colophon pages or any other pages that include the most complete bibliographical information including title, series title, imprint, and ISBN, for the Library's records.

4. The processing unit packs books and barcodes, counts the number of titles and volumes included in each shipment, and ships the packages to the outsourcing agency via U.S. postal service or UPS with insurance.

5. When cataloged shipments are returned from the outsourcing agency, cataloging student assistants compare books returned with copies of colophon pages to make sure that all the books originally shipped were returned.

6. Librarians or copy catalogers make a final check, and then cataloging student assistants send books for marking.

After six months of practice, we have concluded that the outsourcing of cataloging backlogs has both obvious advantages and disadvantages. The two need to balance to make it worthwhile. The following issues should be considered when evaluating outsourcing:

First, cost and manpower. Outsourcing did not lower the cost of cataloging. If we calculate only the cataloging fees charged, the cost of outsourcing cataloging is comparable to in-house cataloging, perhaps slightly higher. If shipping, insurance and other costs are included, outsourcing is obviously more expensive than in-house, especially for copy cataloging. However, the key question is: do we have the manpower for doing all the cataloging in-house? Using UCLA as an example, if we had to handle the cataloging backlog in-house, we would need at least two catalogers. This reality gave us no choice but to choose outsourcing.

Second, the need to balance quality and quantity. Outsourcing focuses more on quantity, not on quality. It meets the need for putting more books on shelves. Of course, it can also meet basic requirements for quality, such as the minimum of one subject heading per title. The more quality we require, the higher the price we have to pay. In most cases, what you get is what is available on the union catalog. Thus at UCLA, we prefer to have all reference titles and important titles cataloged in-house.

Third, conflicts with the local network. In our cataloging outsourcing project, a notable problem is how to coordinate with the local network. On the UCLA library system, the acquisition unit creates an initial record for each acquired library item. During cataloging, the cataloger must update the initial record for it to merge with the cataloged record downloaded from OCLC. Unless we give the outsourcing vendors access to the local network, there will be a problem in merging records. When outsourcing cataloging backlogs, we simply delete the initial records from the local network. However, for items awaiting invoice payment or other processing activities, the initial records cannot be deleted. If we use our staff to update such records, much time and effort would be required, and we might as well do our copy cataloging in-house as we are not realizing much staff time saving from outsourcing. If this conflict is not solved, I don't think we should further expand the outsourcing project.

III.   Thinking: What will be the future of cataloging outsourcing?

We chose to do outsourcing solely to eliminate cataloging backlogs. So far we have no plan to outsource cataloging routinely. Outsourcing as a routine is a much more controversial issue, which could affect the future of our library profession.

In fact, many libraries, especially public libraries and smaller libraries, are outsourcing cataloging to private companies or agencies. These companies employ part-time workers, or subcontract to individuals or even companies abroad. There are many arguments over the issue of the outsourcing. Below I summarize some of the opinions from both sides.

The pro side of the issue regards outsourcing as a trend of the future. They emphasize that outsourcing will inevitably play a major role in libraries. The key points of this side are:

1. Outsourcing saves library budgets and speeds up the cataloging process.
   Almost all the academic, public and school libraries are facing serious budget cuts, so outsourcing gives libraries opportunities to reduce library staff.

2. Outsourcing helps libraries get specialized service.
   To many smaller libraries, cataloging materials in foreign languages or in certain specialized field is always a challenge. Outsourcing can help such libraries get the service they need.

3. Outsourcing centralizes the library functions to specialists in the fields.

Centralization and specialization is the direction for cataloging. Outsourcing enables specialists to maximize their roles in the field. In recent years, major libraries centralized their cataloging service into metadata centers. For smaller libraries, outsourcing makes available similarly centralized services from specialists.

4. Outsourcing goes along with the trend of privatization and globalization.

Like it or not, outsourcing represents the trend of privatization and even globalization. Some people regard privatization as a way of cutting cost and raising efficiency. For cataloging foreign language materials, outsourcing might mean taking advantages of lower labor cost abroad.

The con side of the issue looks outsourcing as a threat to the library profession. They focus more on the long-term effects on library services. At the time UCLA launched our outsourcing project for cataloging Chinese backlogs, the union organization expressed their concern over library jobs. Quite a few librarians who heard of the project were also opposed. We can expect more opposition if cataloging outsourcing becomes routine in library services. The main concerns over outsourcing are the following:

1. Outsourcing diminishes the library profession.

Librarianship is a profession that requires many years of formal education and even more years of continuing education. Private outsourcing companies and/or agents might hire people lacking formal education and training for lower cost. Using outsourcing to replace in-house cataloging and using teaching faculty for collection development, together with Googlization, could eventually eliminate librarianship in many educational institutions, while some accrediting groups tend to drop library services from the accrediting requirements.

2. Outsourcing lowers library's service quality by using less skilled part-time or foreign workers.

Private outsourcing companies and agents mainly use part-time workers and subcontractors. Due to lack of professional education and training and lack of quality control, they might create substandard records. We might see more duplicate and substandard records appearing in OCLC and other databases, which adds to the burden of records management. However it should be noted that some private companies also use skilled catalogers from major libraries and take advantage of their training and expertise.

3. Outsourcing reduces the job market for permanent fulltime library workers.

The cost saved from outsourcing is actually from cutting staff benefits, not from productivity or efficiency. Outsourcing companies and agencies use mostly part-time workers or subcontractors with no fringe benefits or retirement pensions. So, the library budget saving from outsourcing is achieved at the expense of library workers.

4. Outsourcing moves American jobs abroad.

While library jobs in the United States are shrinking, outsourcing could mean jobs go abroad especially for foreign language materials, just as is happening in the computer, finance, and entertainment industries. The difference is that most libraries are operating on taxpayers' money, which means U.S. tax dollars are going abroad.

In general, the pros of outsourcing look at the issue more from the point of management, and the cons of outsourcing look at the issue more from the point of socio-economics.

Finally, I would like to offer a long-range view of outsourcing. Cataloging as a way of information and knowledge management is losing ground to speedy metadata processing and retrieval. Google is already digitizing multitudes of full-texts of library books. It seems that the bulk of cataloging as we know it, which we have cherished and practiced for so long, will evolve into a totally new library operation. Such an operation would be in the charge of managers rather than catalogers and most likely, it would be outsourced for efficiency and economy.