Reality Check

"The Older It Gets, the Colder It Gets": Time Required for Cataloging of a Book Affects the Likelihood of Its Circulation

By Steven A. Knowlton

A teacher of mine had a favorite saying: "the older it gets, the colder it gets." He said it to encourage students to complete their assignments as soon as possible after the material was presented in class, so the information would be fresh in their

Steven A. Knowlton

minds. The same saying, however, seems also to apply to library materials. The older an item is when it is first made available to patrons, the less likely it is to ever circulate.

Balancing the Need for Metadata and the Need for Accessibility of Materials

A persistent concern in librarianship has been investigating how the activities of technical services librarians add value to the collection by their work of classification and cataloging. To be sure, those activities are indispensable to the functioning of a library. But they also contribute to a delay between the purchase of books and the availability of those books for patrons to read. The

Dollars and Sense

Circulation, the Secret Technical Service

By Sheila S. Intner

Sheila S. Intner

Forty-four years ago, when I first began working at the Great Neck Library, circulation was the most visible public service it offered. Except for the Reference Department, which employed a number of full-time and a plethora of part-time librarians to assist people wanting to find answers to their questions or particular items in the collections, the Circulation Department had

Reality Check...

"The Older It Gets, the Colder It Gets": Time Required for Cataloging of a Book Affects the Likelihood of Its Circulation

(continued from page 1)

balance between the need to apply bibliographic organization to a collection and the desire to swiftly make books accessible is one that demands constant adjustment of workflows.[1]

Much of the discussion around appropriate levels of cataloging has focused on examining how different types of metadata contribute to the discoverability of a book in a library's catalog. An additional consideration, however, should be the extent to which the additional time required to add metadata deprives the book of opportunities to be found by readers because it is kept out of the stacks while being cataloged. Patrons still rely on browsing the shelves to find appropriate titles for their reading.[2]

One way to examine the effect of time lag involved in adding metadata is to measure the circulation rates of materials with differing amounts of time devoted to cataloging. While circulation of library materials is not a flawless measure of an item's value to readers, it does demonstrate that at least one reader found the book of enough interest to check it out. We can examine the length of time a book awaits cataloging, and determine how it affects the likelihood of a book ever circulating. Such a study was performed using data from a research university library (not a member of the Association of Research Libraries) in the United States.

Data Set

The library in question had not yet implemented shelf-ready cataloging, PromptCat, or other methods of utilizing vendor-prepared catalog records.[3] Each item in the study, whether it required copy cataloging or original treatment, was cataloged by library personnel. In a five-year period, 16,083 unique circulating monographic items were cataloged. (For ease of analysis, this report includes only books for which a single item was cataloged per bibliographic record; it also excludes items which had been ordered but were not yet cataloged.) Data recorded were the date each book was acquired, and also the date the book was cataloged; in almost all cases, the book was shelved shortly after being cataloged.

The length of time between receipt of a book and its final cataloging ranged from the same day (recorded as zero days) and 1,757 days (or four years and 297 days). The median number of days from receipt to cataloging was 175 days, and the mean number of days was 213. The figures count calendar days, not working days.

For each book, we recorded three data:
1. whether it ever circulated (that is, circulated one or more times)
2. whether it circulated more than once (that is, circulated two or more times)
3. the number of circulations divided by the number of years the book had been available for checkout (expressed as circulations per year of availability).

The books were grouped into categories. Each category was defined by the number of days between receipt and cataloging. For example, all books that waited 17 days to be cataloged were in the same category.

For each category of "days in cataloging," the following figures were calculated:
1. the percentage of books that ever circulated
2. the percentage of books that circulated more than once
3. the average number of circulations per year of availability for all books in the category.

Results

To ensure that the results of the study arise from a normal distribution of data, a t-test was performed on each of the datasets, using the "T.TEST" function in Microsoft Excel; in all cases, the p value was < 0.05, indicating that the results are unlikely to have been produced by chance.

Using the "CORREL" function in Microsoft Excel, we determined the coefficient of correlation between days

Table 1: Correlation Coefficients between Days in Cataloging and Other Measurements	
Measurement	**Correlation Coefficient**
Books ever circulated	-0.7
Books circulated more than once	-0.58
Checkouts per year of availability	-0.14

in cataloging and each of the other variables. The correlation coefficient ranges from -1 to 1; a coefficient of 1 indicates perfect positive correlation between two factors, and a coefficient of -1 indicates perfect negative correlation. The correlation coefficients for each of the variables studied are shown in Table 1.

There is a strong negative correlation between number of days in cataloging and the likelihood of a book ever circulating; that is, the longer a book waits for cataloging, the less likely it is to ever circulate. The association is less strong for the other two measurements. In Figures 1, 2 and 3, the slope of the trend line illustrates the decline in likelihood of circulation as time in cataloging increases.

Analysis

There may be several explanations for the negative correlation between days in cataloging and use of materials. The library's internal studies show that its users exhibit a strong preference for new materials, as do studies by Lisa Rose-Wiles, Denise Brush, and Allen Kent.[4] If a book is ordered near its publication date and cataloged quickly, it is likelier to appeal to patrons. Also, the library does offer a rush cataloging service; patrons who discover an uncataloged book in the online public access catalog may request it to be cataloged and then check it out. Such a service will skew the numbers slightly. However, the rush cataloging service only accounts for a few hundred of the more than 16,000 records examined.

In addition, works that are more difficult to catalog—for example, those in non-English languages, or addressing topics not covered by existing subject headings—could be some of the works that took the longest to catalog. The abstruse nature of the works may mean they

are less likely to circulate no matter how quickly they are cataloged.

Discussion and Conclusion

Regardless of the explanation for the phenomenon, there are clear implications for library administration. While creating catalog records is important to findability, taking too much time reduces the chance that patrons will make use of the books they find. Cataloging administrators may wish to examine studies showing which elements of catalog records contribute the most to successful searches, and prioritize the processes that add those elements, while de-emphasizing addition of elements that contribute less to library patrons using books from the collection.

For example, Michele Seikel has shown that additions of a number of traditional data elements "do not aid the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) user tasks in the resource discovery process."[5] On the other hand, Cherie Madarash-Hill found that books cataloged with enhancements in the MARC 505 Table of Contents field or 520 Summary field see higher use.[6] Laura Kirkland identified the MARC tags that, when searched successfully, were most correlated to circulation of the item cataloged. She noted that "library users find title, contents, subject, and author information the most useful."[7] In addition, keyword searching often produced results from fields that are not closely correlated with circulation. She also

Figure 1: Trend Line of Percentage of Books Ever Checked Out by Days in Cataloging
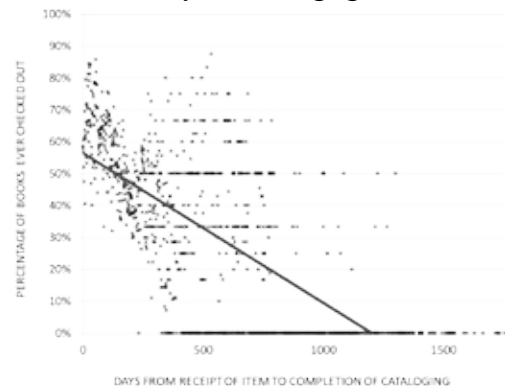

Figure 2: Trend Line of Percentage of Books Checked Out More Than Once by Days in Cataloging
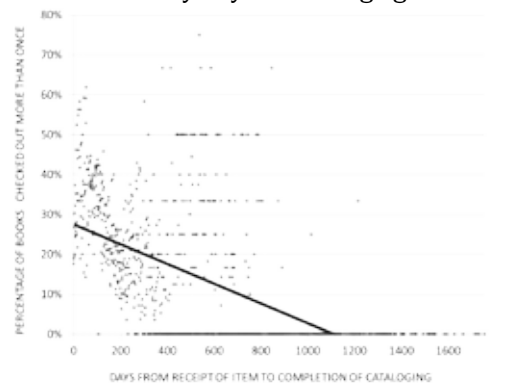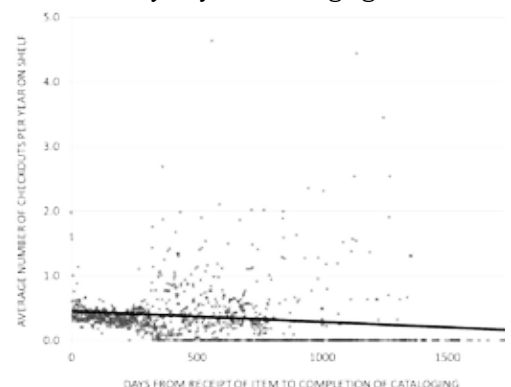

Figure 3: Trend Line of Average Number of Checkouts per Year of Availability by Days in Cataloging

Reality Check ....➤

"The Older It Gets, the Colder It Gets": Time Required for Cataloging of a Book Affects the Likelihood of Its Circulation

(continued from page 5)

recommends that "libraries may wish to consider limiting the indexing of some MARC fields in their catalogs."

This study finds that the longer a book waits for cataloging, the less likely it is to circulate. What may have been a "hot" book when it was first acquired "cools off" as it waits to be cataloged. The implications for cataloging workflow management are many and profound.

References

1. The classic entry in this field is Andrew D. Osborn, "The Crisis in Cataloging," *Library Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1941): 393-411. Others include Seymour Lubetzky, *Cataloging Rules and Principles: A Critique of the ALA Rules for Entry and a Proposed Design for Their Revision* (Washington, DC: Processing Department, Library of Congress, 1953) and Peter S. Graham, "Quality in Cataloging: Making Distinctions," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 16, no. 4 (1990): 213-18.

2. See, for example, Herbert Goldhor, "Experimental Effects on the Choice of Books Borrowed by Public Library Adult Patrons," *Library Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (1981): 253–68; D. Yvonne Jones, "Oversized and Underused: Size Matters in Academic Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 67, no. 4 (2006): 325–33; and Steven A. Knowlton and Lauren N. Hackert, "Value Added: Book Covers Provide Additional Impetus for Academic Library Patrons to Check Out Books," *Library Resources and Technical Services* 59, no. 3 (2015): 112-19.

3. Information about these methods can be found in, among others, Mary Walker and Deb Kulczak, "Shelf-Ready Books Using PromptCat and YBP: Issues to Consider (An Analysis of Errors at the University of Arkansas)," *Library Collections, Acquisitions, and Technical Services* 31, no. 2 (2007): 61-84; Michael Jay, Betsy Simpson, and Doug Smith, "CatQC and Shelf-Ready Material: Speeding Collections to Users While Preserving Data Quality," *Information Technology and Libraries* 28, no. 1 (2009): 41-48; and Rebecca Schroeder and Jared L. Howland, "Shelf-Ready: A Cost-Benefit Analysis," *Library Collections, Acquisitions, and Technical Services* 35, no. 4 (2011): 129-34.

4. Lisa M. Rose-Wiles, "Are Print Books Dead? An Investigation of Book Circulation at a Mid-Sized Academic Library," *Technical Services Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2013): 129-52; Denise Brush, "Circulation Analysis of an Engineering Monograph Approval Plan," *Collection Building* 26, no. 2 (2007): 59-62; and Allen Kent, ed., *Use of Library Materials: The University of Pittsburgh Study* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1979).

5. Michele Seikel, "General Notes in Catalog Records versus FRBR User Tasks," *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 51 (2013): 420.

6. Cherie Madarash-Hill, "Electronically Enriched Enhancements in Catalog Records: A Use Study of Books Described on Records with URL Enhancements versus Those Without," *Technical Services Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2005): 19-30.

7. Laura N. Kirkland, "The Relationship of Metadata to Item Circulation," *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 51 (2013): 528.

Steven A. Knowlton is Librarian for (United States) History and African American Studies, Princeton University Library, and can be reached at steven. knowlton@princeton.edu.