Innovation at the coalface: shelf-ready AV at Leeds Beckett

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It sounds so simple …. "Let's go shelf-ready with the AV". After all, we've been acquiring print materials shelf-ready since 2003, it works perfectly (fingers crossed), what could possibly go wrong?

At Leeds Beckett (then Leeds Met) we were early adopters of shelf-ready acquisition in the academic sector, and on the whole it runs very smoothly. As we went more fully shelf-ready with book stock (and some older members of staff retired…) I was able to chip away at the last bastions of local practice until we reached the position that for most print material we now produce and accept standard AACR2/RDA MARC21 records, with (very nearly) standard LCSH and DDC22 or 23. Cataloguers however have not become totally redundant, though in that period the numbers have been reduced from 2.5 fte (with extra help when needed from management and other librarians) to 1.4 fte. That's me, and part of my colleague Tom, when he's not trying to manage the ebook packages (also known as trying to herd cats). The work is more focused now on quality control, upgrading our older data, and dealing with things we can't manage shelf-ready (theses, some foreign language publications, out of print and, originally, all the AV - not to mention the e-book packages with their MARC record sets of varying quality! Large language teaching sets had to be taken out of the programme, because of the tendency for sets to be split by DDC. Similarly our School Practice material was also taken out of the project because we had to reclassify the Primary material from the 370s to the wider schedule.

We'd been asking our suppliers for records for AV material (mainly films on DVD, music on CD, and computer games) for some years, and they had been unable to provide quality records, or customised processing. In particular, no one seemed to be supplying the LCSH and DDC that we need.   The AV shelf-ready plan was kick started by one of our major suppliers who suddenly offered us good standard RDA records, and were willing to apply the appropriate class and subject headings, without which it wasn't worth us buying records in. The project was led by the Acquisitions team but required a lot of input from other areas – subject librarians, collections maintenance, and of course cataloguing/metadata (me). It was also the first use in the Library of a new University-wide formal project procedure, with such success that the project is now being used by the University as a case study of how the procedure works.

We decided to start with DVD feature films – a large part of our intake, and fairly straightforward. My first task was to produce a specification for the records – we try to keep that quite simple (MARC21, AACR2 or RDA, DDC 22-23, LCSH, MARC8) and aim at sorting out details when we get sample records. In fact the records were fine, with only a few minor queries. The physical processing was a bit more of a problem – 9 different types of material and 12 different processing actions. There turned out to be a great many possible permutations! At that point the supplier's promises of customised processing started to look a little shaky…. They went backwards and forwards and finally produced a spec which worked for both sides – this may have been the most difficult part for the acquisitions team.

I also had to come to a decision about the filing letters. Our historical policy for AV had been to file items by title – everything non-book was catalogued in-house with title main entry. The policy predated my arrival, and, I think, was intended to save time and effort on deciding main entry, especially with non-expert cataloguers not used to processing music and films. With someone else now being paid to make the decision, we decided to use standard main entry, and thus filing letters could now be from 100, 110 and 111 fields, as with most of the rest of our materials.

This of course meant that we'd have double sequences on the shelves, which we would have no time to rectify, but I made a fairly arbitrary decision in favour of the change. One argument for it was that we would have a double sequence for films anyway. Until 10 years ago the policy of the cataloguing department was to keep things very short and simple, especially for AV materials.

It was impossible to tell different versions of the same film apart from the bibliographic record, non-LCSH subject headings had been applied seemingly at random, and a local variation of DDC had been used to comply with the former Arts Librarian's preferences. (she had preferred films to be classified and shelved by "country" – she was neither clear nor helpful on whether she meant country of production, filming or language….). I had to produce some notes explaining the changes and their projected outcome to the subject liaison librarians, but I think I may have blinded them with technicalities and jargon, and they agreed without argument. The argument clincher as always was the promised reduction in throughput time.

In the meantime, the Acquisitions staff were battling with problems caused by Coutts' need to use EANs in the order process, when we often had ISBNs, or other standard numbers, or Amazon numbers supplied by the librarian ordering the item. The limitations of our LMS, and the wish to streamline the order process and keep it consistent with ordering non AV stock, meant that in the order forms, the EAN had to go into the box normally used for an ISBN, with the result that it then appeared in both the control number and ISBN field in the record. We decided to retain the EAN as a control number, while removing the "i" prefix that denotes an ISBN, and to make putting it into the proper field in the bibliographic record part of the loading process done by Acquisitions staff – a small fiddle, but it works. All of this of course required more staff training, and more re-writing of manuals and guidelines. Boxed sets were taken out of the programme, because of the difficulties of shelving and physically processing them, as were DVD/BluRay combinations.

Eventually we received the first test records and DVDs. We'd decided to start with the feature films, and then to expand further – probably a very wise move. A specific Acquisitions Assistant with an interest in film and music had already been responsible for much of the ordering and processing, and I trained him to check incoming records, and edit them where necessary. He's since rolled out the training, but remains the local expert. There have been odd problems with punctuation in 245 fields– I think it's being lost in transit in the ether somewhere! – but nothing too terrible.

Unauthorised headings are picked up by a weekly report, as with the non-AV items. These are then checked and authorised, by the cataloguers. The only DVDs that now come to a cataloguer are those with unauthorised titles (including series), which I prefer to see on the item itself, and queries and problems. And of course, those that we can't order because we can't provide an EAN – a diminishing number, mainly of strange arty materials!

The double sequences on the shelves remain, but the material doesn't have a long shelf life – it is either worn out, damaged or "walks", so the problem is self-managing. The change from the old non-standard subject headings to proper LCSH seems to have been regretted, or even noticed, by no one. I confess to retaining the old local headings containing the word "Films" and not changing them to "Motion pictures", on the principal that a) "Motion pictures" is horrible, and b) there are far too many of them, and c) the Library of Congress will surely get round to changing it sometime themselves. Please????

We've recently moved on to including music CDs in the programme, and again, it's going smoothly. We do still have changes to make in our practice and policies (for example, our record format for all AV material is VM, whether it is audio or visual. I have no idea why: and we need to change this as it means we can't make proper use of the fixed fields, which are becoming more important as some of that information is used by the Discover system. This is a problem for the Systems Librarian though, and fairly low on her list of priorities!).

The end result was an enormous improvement in customer service: a system which integrated smoothly with our print and e-resource purchasing: which didn't negatively affect processes in other areas of the Library: and which speeded up the throughput time for audio-visual resources from up to 8 weeks to under 3 days. This is despite the reduction in cataloguing manpower by more than half since our first shelf ready experiments, 13 years ago.

The project re-emphasised for me the importance of being prepared to take pragmatic decisions about cataloguing matters when it is necessary. As a dyed-in-the-wool cataloguer, I would like our shelves, our classification, filing and subject indexing to be perfect: however this is just not possible, especially with our reduced resources.   We need also to compromise where necessary with suppliers, and to abandon old procedures happily when the rationale behind them is no longer valid. Finally, none of this could have been achieved without the help of the Collections and Acquisitions staff, who have readily taken on new responsibilities and acquired skills.