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Short Communication

Retrospective Conversion of Arabic Collections at a Nigerian University Library

Muhammad Etubi

University of Jos Library,
Jos, Nigeria
etubimk@unijos.edu.ng

Abstract

The University of Jos Library, Nigeria had envisioned the computerisation of its functions and services since the 1980s, but it was not until 1992 that it had its first set of microcomputers. The retrospective conversion (RECON) of the library's collection is currently in progress, and the Integrated Technical Services (ITS) for Windows software is being used for it. This paper highlights progress and challenges in connection with the RECON of the Arabic collection in the library, including lack of bibliographic details of many of the collection items, inaccessible search information in the database and lack of imprint in some Arabic collection. It is recommended that the library should consider acquiring library software that can handle the RECON of Arabic and other foreign languages, as well as acquiring Arabic materials with bibliographic data that are in accordance with international standard.

Keywords

Arabic collection, retrospective conversion, academic library, Nigeria

Introduction

The increasing use of information and communication technology (ICT) to facilitate daily routine has transformed the traditional functions of academic libraries from manually processing library collections to electronic methods of performing such technical library processes as cataloguing, indexing, etc. Kanungo (2008) wrote that libraries supporting instruction and research are facing huge challenges because ICT is changing the nature of library and information services, and that the challenge is more severe in developing countries because libraries there need to, for a start, undertake costly retrospective conversion of their usually large paper-based bibliographic records to machine readable ones. Retrospective conversion (RECON) entails converting the existing records in manually produced catalogues to machine readable form (Bryant, Chapman and Naylor, 1995). "Retro conversion means the conversion of the existing records in manually produced catalogues to machine readable form" (Bryant, Chapman, and Naylor 1995). According to Cohn, Kelsey and Fiels (2001), when conversion is done with a given library's entire existing collection and current acquisitions, the process is referred to as retrospective conversion

The usual primary aim of retrospective conversion (RECON) is to make information on the library holdings accessible by computer to library staff and users. Kanungo (2008) mentioned that the idea of retrospective conversion in India was to make information accessible from anywhere and encourage resource sharing among libraries.

An aspect of RECON that is often not considered or written about in RECON projects is the creation or conversion of bibliographic records pertaining to materials written in languages that have their own peculiar character sets, such as Arabic, Russian, Finnish, Bengali, etc. Vassie (2000) pointed out that bibliographic control of Arabic books is more difficult than the Western language books due to inconsistency in imprint. The challenges are even more for a non-Arabic language reader in cataloguing Arabic books. Another aspect of the problem is the use of appropriate software to capture the bibliographic data pertaining to such foreign language materials. The software used in the retrospective conversion of Arabic collection at the Arabic and Middle Eastern Electronic Library, Yale University are NOTIS and Voyager (Samoeil, 2008).

RECON at the University of Jos Library

The University of Jos Library was established in 1972. The library started with a stock of about 1,000 books and 40 journal titles supporting teaching and research in Arts degree courses. At present, the library houses collection to support eight faculties: Arts, Education, Environmental Sciences, Law, Medical Sciences, Natural Sciences, Pharmaceutical Sciences, and Social Sciences. English is the language of the bulk of the collection, but materials in Nigerian and foreign languages are collected based on their relevance to the university programmes and the university community at large (University of Jos Library, 2008). The Arabic collection aids instruction and research in Arabic and Islamic studies degree courses of the university. The library currently has 685 volumes of Arabic books out of the library's total collection of 163,297 volumes of books, 20 Arabic journal titles out of the library's 25,824 bound journals, and 19,522 special document collection (University of Jos Libraries, 2007; Yusuf, 2002). The volumes of Arabic materials are distributed by subject as follows: Arabic grammar (54 volumes); Arabic Literature (461); Islamic studies (those written in Arabic language only) (163); Medicine (2); Law (3); and Environmental Science (2). There are also 103 Arabic reference books.

The University Library had envisioned the computerisation of its functions and services since the 1980s, when the library's collection grew quickly thereby making it difficult to handle serials lists and control subscriptions. However, it was not until 1992 that it had its first set of microcomputers. In preparing to computerise some of the library functions, the library staff participated in training programmes organised by the Computer Centre of the University. Aspects of the library activities considered for the computerisation exercise were records on acquisition, retrospective conversion of cataloguing records and digitisation of abstracts and records of postgraduate theses (A Jos-Canegie Partnership Project, 2006). Accordingly, two cataloguers and a programmer from the library, along with a member of staff of the UJNet (University of Jos Network), were sponsored to a two-week train-the-trainer attachment at the Balme Library, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana. These staff received advanced training on ITS for Windows, the software already in use at the University of Jos library (Jos-Carnegie Partnership, 2006).

Retrospective conversion of the collection of the University of Jos Library commenced with the conversion of bibliographic titles included in the catalogue records. The retrospective conversion started with Natural Sciences, Environmental Sciences and Pharmaceutical Sciences collection from the Main Library at the Bauchi Road campus; Medical Sciences collection from the Medical Science Library along Murtala Muhammad Way; Education, Arts and Social Sciences collection from the Arts and Social Sciences Library at the Permanent Site campus, some four (4) kilometres away from the Cataloguing Unit, venue of the retrospective conversion project; and Law collection from Law Library, also on Bauchi Road campus. The Arts collection includes the Arabic collection.

In retro-converting the library collection, the University of Jos Library uses Integrated Technical Services (ITS for Windows) software that supports library functions supplied by the Library Corporation of the United States. Arkorful (2003) mentioned that four universities in Ghana use ITS for Windows software for the automation of their libraries – University of Ghana, University of Cape Coast, University of Education, Winneba, and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.

The RECON is done in-house using 23 library staff, comprising 10 library officers and 13 librarians. Eight of them are cataloguing staff, while the rest

are from other sections of the library. The RECON team has the use of eight computer workstations, In order to make the workstations available to every member of the team, a shift timetable was drawn up in such a way that team members could work in turn between 8 am and 6 pm each work day. At present, the RECON of about 27,590 records has been done, out of which 265 records pertain to the Arabic collection. The RECON of the Arabic collection is being done by a bilingual (Arabic & English) member of staff that has a first degree in Arabic studies and a diploma in library science. The RECON of the records of French and German language materials is yet to begin because none of the members of the project team is literate in these languages.

Challenges of retrospective conversion

The RECON of an Arabic collection in an English-speaking environment where library software and hardware are purchased with little or no consideration for non-English languages poses some challenges, which, in the experience of the University of Jos Library, are enumerated below.

Inaccessible search information

Many Arabic texts' information are not found in the Integrated Technical Services (ITS for Windows) database. A search for an Arabic item entails typing in any of its available search terms like author, title, subject, ISBN, etc. to query the database. The Arabic cataloguer then effects modifications to a retrieved record as required. For instance, only 23 out of 425 Arabic books brought to the cataloguing unit for retrospective conversion had records in the database.

Use of template

Working on a book template takes longer time than imputing information on an existing bibliographic data. The Arabic cataloguers' expectation in retro-converting Arabic collection is to find records corresponding to items in the bibliofile, and then modify and save them to the database as appropriate. But, because there are no records in the bibliofile for many items, the cataloguer must resort to the use of a blank book template and key in the bibliographic details of many items from scratch. This entails searching the Library of Congress subject headings and classification scheme for appropriate subject and classification numbers for items. Furthermore, a minimum of 13 fields on the template, including subfields, need to be fully completed to provide the basic data for each item. Also involved is the transliteration into English of the bibliographic details of items that were originally in Arabic such as author and title, and translation of other information like publisher and place of publication.

Lack of imprint information

Many of the items in the Arabic collection lack core bibliographic data like publisher, date of publication and place of publication. Out of the 425 books brought for retro-conversion, 186 had no publishers, 262 had no place of publication, and 382 have no date of publication

Lack of ISBN and LCCN

The fastest way to search for an item in the ITS for Windows database is by using the International Standard Book Number (ISBN) or the Library of Congress Control Number (LCCN). But many of the Arabic collection do not have ISBN or LCCN. Out of 425 books, 387 did not have ISBN, while 419 books had no LCCN.

Problems with logistics

Physical books (instead of existing catalogue card records) were used for the retrospective conversion at the library. Books were packed from shelves into cartons and taken to the Cataloguing Unit, venue of the retrospective conversion project. For Arabic books, they had to be transported from the Arts and Social Sciences Library, about 4 kilometres away to the Cataloguing Unit. Often times, the Arabic books did not arrive as soon as work was completed on existing ones, thus causing delay in the RECON processes.

There was also frequent interruption of power supply. Public power supply would be interrupted for hours on some days. Frequent power outages often increased the cost of a RECON projects in developing countries as libraries. Nok (2006) wrote that infrequent power supply was a problem to automation and the cost of maintaining a generating plant was high. The recent delivery of a 60 KVA power

generating plant to the library had been of help in solving this problem at the library.

A third problem is the delays that have been experienced in the supply of barcode labels after existing ones had been exhausted. This slowed down progress of the RECON project. Retrospective conversion of the Arabic collection had to stop for about one month on one occasion because barcode labels were not available.

Conclusion

The average time that an Arabic collection item spends in the processing room has reduced significantly with the RECON project. If the record of an item is found in the Bibliofile of ITS, less than 15 minutes of additional keyboarding is required to complete the conversion process for the item. Before the retrospective conversion project, a current Arabic book could take a whole day or more to be processed because the subject and classification number had to be manually searched for using the bulky Library of Congress Subject Headings and Classification Scheme. One of the goals of a RECON project is to speedily convert the bibliographic details of all Arabic items into machine readable format. However, such challenges as the absence of records in the ITS database corresponding to many items, which necessitates the identification and keyboarding of bibliographic details unto blank book templates from scratch, as well as the absence of imprint, ISBN and LCCN information on many items and some logistical problems, pose serious challenges.

Recommendations

In view of the challenges being faced at the University of Jos Library in the RECON of its Arabic collection, it is recommended that the library, as well as other libraries contemplating or implementing RECON projects should consider acquiring special software designed for the conversion of the bibliographic data of Arabic and other foreign language collections. Such software may also have databases that contain bibliographic records of documents in those languages. Secondly, the University of Jos Library should acquire only Arabic materials published by reputable publishers so that the materials would have standard cataloguing-in-publication data that conform to international standards. Logistical challenges should also be adequately addressed. For instance, the inventory of barcode labels should be replenished on time in order that shortages of bar codes do not hamper the progress of the RECON project.

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Muhammad Etubi is a Senior Library Officer at the University Jos Library, Plateau State, Nigeria. He attended the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and University of Jos. He holds Diploma in Lib. Science and B.A. (Hons) degree.