Serials Binding Practices Here and There:

A Comparison Between Cornell and Leeds Universities

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Abstract

This paper describes the differences between serials binding practices at Cornell and Leeds universities as related to the binding industries in the USA and the UK.

Introduction.

In the summer of 1989, I was privileged to hold a Fulbright scholarship at Cornell university to study various aspects of Binding, Conservation and Serials Administration in Engineering Collections. Cornell university has a well established Conservation Unit which is responsible for maintaining the physical condition of the library collections through repairs, stiffening of new paperbacks, and conservation of rare books and maps through the work of trained conservators. In addition, the Department is responsible for for managing the Commercial Binding Unit; here, books and serials are prepared for binding and sent out to local binders.

During the course of the study, I was able to observe each of the sections of the Conservation Unit and I undertook a major costing exercise of Cornell's "Brittle Book Programme", in which brittle books and serials appearing at the circulation desk are considered for replacement, withdrawal or returned to the shelves with minimal treatment. The time I spent in the Commercial Binding Unit was particularly important since it was linked to visits to a number of commercial binders, both locally and at other major centres in the USA. These visits were invaluable in gaining a better insight into how the binding industry operates in the USA as compared to the UK and how the differences observed affect the options available for serials binding by academic librarians in the two countries.

The Commercial Binding Unit at Cornell is responsible for handling 17,000 of the current titles subscribed to by the constituent libraries of the university and it has a throughput of 650 volumes every fortnight. The system used to be operated manually, as it is presently at Leeds; binding cards accompanied titles each week or fortnight as they were sent to the binders and a duplicate set was kept in the library to check against returned bound volumes. However, the whole operation at Cornell is in the process of being automated; terminals now link up to 3 operators to a binding database. To prepare a volume for binding, all that is necessary is to call up the record, key in the correct volume number/year etc. and store the record for printing. Once a batch of records has been entered, a "print run" of binding slips is done; one copy of each is inserted in the appropriate volume to be sent for binding and the second copy is retained in the library for matching with the volume on its return from binding.

Binding records for that fortnight's batch are then transferred online to the minicomputer at the binders, so that they have a batch of records "activated" ready for the incoming work. The binders generate routing slips from the data received and also generate instructions for the printing machines; these print the buckram of the correct colour, the required spine labelling for each volume of each title and in the exact position to match previously bound volumes in the library - a remarkable feat of automation, which saves an enormous amount of time and effort. Cornell's local binders produce three basic styles of binding, an oversewn binding similar to styles in the UK, and two "fan-glued" styles similar in appearance to styles introduced recently at Leeds. Much of the volume binding at Cornell is now done in the cheapest grade "utility" binding and is "fan-glued". However, the decision to glue or sew with the other styles is usually left to the binders; they normally glue unless the volume is too thick or the paper unsuitable for gluing. At Leeds, the library exercises much more control over the style of binding used on its serials and several surveys of usage were undertaken prior to introducing cheaper fan-glued styles for "low-use" serials. Five styles are currently in use at Leeds and the style chosen is related to the level of usage of each title. If the cheaper fan-glued styles prove to be effective, then it is envisaged that their use will be extended to the "medium use" titles.

Cornell operates its Commercial Binding Unit on a rotating cycle; one week serials are prepared and sent to the binders; the next week bound volumes returned from the binders are processed. Bound volumes are checked against the binding slips retained in the library when the journals were sent for binding and if all the details are correct, the computer records are "cleared". Volumes are then stamped with marks of ownership and sent for shelving. The "turn round" time at the binders is thus two weeks and the longest time that any serial could he expected to be off the shelves is four weeks, allowing for "standing time" for entry onto the database prior to despatch and time to complete processing on return from binding.

It was clear from my visits to both local bookbinders and bookbinders elsewhere in the USA that the industry in the USA is "light years" ahead of the industry in Britain. All the firms I visited in the USA had invested heavily in automated systems, often with direct links with their customers. The equipment on the factory floor was also much more automated than in the UK, with large numbers of "rounding & backing machines", automatic "casing in" machines, combined "grinding/fan-gluing" machines and even an automatic "case making" machine. The layout on the factory floor was also much more oriented towards "production line" management than any observed in the UK; I was most impressed by the efforts put into management at one firm where the work was divided into six distinct sections with a section head responsible for production in his or her section of the bindery. The volume of work undertaken in all of the binderies I saw in the USA was enormous by British standards, one bindery was putting through between 1600 and 2000 volumes per day. This enormous throughput probably accounts, in part, for the differences between the binding industry in the two countries in that the USA has a much larger market than the UK.

US firms have thus been more profitable and have been able to invest heavily in the new technologies and reduce costs. In the UK, the industry still has a large "craft" base, with a large number of small local firms dependent on relatively few customers. Since the market in the UK is much smaller and has already suffered through successive government cuts in grants to higher education institutions, it is difficult to see how the industry can become sufficiently profitable to invest heavily in the new technologies which would help it to reduce its costs. Trained craft bookbinders are also paid relatively high salaries and this continuing "craft" tradition in the UK militates against reducing costs. Even bearing all these differences in mind, the price differential between serial binding in the USA and in the UK is still staggering; costs are between 2.5 and 3 times higher in the UK than in the USA, regardless of the binder. There is a real danger in the UK that academic librarians soon won't be able to afford to bind all but their most prestigious journals and this could have disastrous effects on the industry. Price rises higher than the rate of inflation in recent years have also exacerbated the situation.

What advice can be given to any British binder reading this article? Clearly, any price rises above the current rate of inflation are likely to be counter-productive; librarians will simply send fewer volumes for binding. Any investment in the new technologies that a firm can afford, particularly in purchasing automatic printing machines and combined grinding & fan-gluing machines will help to reduce costs, or at the very least enable price rises to be kept at a minimum. Cheaper styles of binding, particularly fan-glued styles are going to be essential to enable librarians to continue to bind the same volume of work and British binders shouldn't be afraid to embrace these; they have a proven history of durability in the USA and indeed, fan-glued styles now predominate in many binderies in the USA. I think there also needs to be a change in "mentality" on the part of both management and the workforce to move the industry forward from its traditional slow "craft" binding to streamlined factory production lines. There also has to be a greater emphasis on turn-round times, most US binders turn their work round in 1-2 weeks; 1-3 months seems to be the standard in the UK.

Acknowledgment