

Séminaire CERL : Manuscrits : innovation et collaboration

Updating and modernizing the French Manuscripts union catalogue : a collaborative project for enriching and improving the CCFr

1. Introduction : What is the CCFr ? What is the French Manuscripts union catalogue?

I would like to start by reminding you what is the Catalogue collectif de France. The CCFr is the French union catalogue. It does not only concern manuscripts but all library data with a special focus on heritage data. In the CCFr, there are 2 kinds of data: our own and the one from other institutions. This is true for the whole catalogue but this is specifically true for the manuscripts and archives base. In this base, we provide an access to the French Manuscripts union catalogue: it means you can find the Manuscripts descriptions from the universities libraries network, from the National library itself and from our own network, which is mainly composed of public libraries from the whole country. [ici démonstration sur capture d'écran PPT]

Through this research screen, we actually provide an access to all French collective catalogues for Manuscripts and archives, which is why we speak of the French manuscripts union catalogue.

The CGM, which is the General catalogue for Manuscripts, is consists of “our own” data: the other ones are distance-requested catalogues. Apart from data from the retroconversion from the original paper catalogue, new libraries have joined the project; and corrections and new inventories were made during the past few years.

2. Dealing with what we have inherited : a huge amount of work... but an ancient and outdated work.

Let's start by specifying that the General Manuscripts catalogue for French libraries has always been a collaborative project. It was launched in the middle of the 19th century and has always been characterized by collaborative work. Many librarians and scholars have worked on it, year after year, for 150 years, in order to publish its III paper volumes.

Let's also remind that cooperation is one of the French National library's missions since its foundation in 1994. Heritage description is one of the forms this cooperative mission takes. Therefore it was logical that the Cooperation department for the National library, that I represent here, inherited of the project and that it joined the CCFr after its retroconversion.

Since the retroconversion has been done and put online in 2008, the CCFr has always been promoting the importance for libraries to correct and to enrich their manuscripts and archives inventories. As early as 2009, Florent Palluault was pleading the case for a cataloguing tool for the CCFr in a professional journal (BBF). He was also writing, in the same article, that cataloguing tools would soon be developed by library management systems editors. In 2016 it still is not the case.

One of the main current issues is the fact that libraries have now to deal with archives, even if they are mainly literary ones, and sometimes don't know how to catalogue them. Today, one of the main questions for librarians is : what do I do with an archive collection where there are print material, manuscript material, recordings, objects...? Even though EAD is quite a natural format for archives description, it's not mastered by many librarians since it's not part of their initial curriculum.

3. How to enrich and improve what we have ?

Where are we in 2016, 7 years after Florent Palluault pleaded the case for a cataloguing tool?

As far as public libraries are concerned, Libraries Management Systems do not provide cataloguing tools for cataloguing in EAD.

Therefore, librarians who want to work on their manuscripts collection and update the CGM have 3 main options :

1. They learn EAD and use a XML editor such as Oxygen or Notepad++. This option means they have to know XML language and master EAD format quite well.
2. They catalogue them in Unimarc as if they were print material. This option quickly causes problems when they have to deal with non-codex manuscripts (archives in all their possible forms).
3. They don't work on their manuscripts collection because of a lack of time, human resources available or simply a lack of skills.

A lot of them are requesting a cataloguing tool and some help from the CCFr and today, we can only provide them with a training in EAD and the advice to buy Oxygen which appears to be the most « user-friendly » XML editor.

A proper cataloguing tool would allow librarians to access their files, modify them, enrich them, correct them and create new ones. Librarians want to update their manuscripts catalogue but they want an efficient and user-friendly tool to do so. They also want to be able to see the result of their work quickly.

A national group has met for a year and a half to investigate the options we could set up for solving these issues. This group offered a range of 3 scenarios to provide a tool for updating the CGM. One of the options was to duplicate the BnF's tool, called PiXML which is based on Xmetal with a lot of specific improvements and developments for the BnF specific needs. The other two options were building a completely new tool, and to duplicate the ABES' tool. The BnF's tool was chosen, since the BnF is already maintaining the CCFr program. Following the same logic, the Ministry for Culture and Communication will help funding it.

If we can certainly regret that it took such a long time to start developing something for public libraries and the whole CCFr network, we can also rejoice that we now have the experience to know what librarians require to catalogue manuscripts and archives in EAD format. We will certainly benefit from the BnF experience with EAD, from the Abes experience and also from our own experience at the CCFr.

We know that librarians want 2 main things : 1. to correct and improve their descriptions ; for instance, they want to add links to their digital libraries or they need to update the shelf-marks in the catalogue. In order to do that, they don't need a big knowledge of EAD and how to use an

XML editor. Consequently they need a simple user-friendly tool allowing them to access their inventories easily and a workflow publishing the result of their work quickly.

2. They need to complete their inventories with new descriptions. For instance, Rennes public library has only about 700 manuscripts records in the CGM (its first volume was published in 1894) but they actually have about 2500 manuscripts held in their special collections department ! They chose to describe them in unimarc format to have at least a short description of them in their public catalogue, but it would really be better for scholars and the general interest to have updated records in the CCFr since it provides a national and international visibility to these records.

As a matter of fact, even if we are not harvested by the CERL yet, the CCFr has already an international impact. We have requests from everywhere since we are very well harvested by the search engines robots.

Now we have not only a need but we also have a plan. Let's see what this plan is.

4. What is our plan for updating the CGM?

I mentioned earlier that the CCFr will benefit from the replication of the BnF tool for EAD cataloguing, PiXML. This PiXML program has been quite improved in the past years. It's not as user-friendly as we wish our tool would be but it's definitely easier to use than Oxygen, for instance. One of our goals is to improve its features and especially the idea of a "user-friendly" tool. It will probably not be exactly WYSIWYG, but it should guide the user as much as possible. We will also pay close attention to the workflow improvement. Users should be able to see their work published within the CCFr rather quickly (every week ? Every other week ?), we know that this will be one of the conditions for them to use our tool.

These are some of the main questions we have to deal with and to examine very carefully since we know that if we don't provide libraries with an efficient and simple tool, they won't use it. And of course we want them to use it!

The other main question we have to deal with, once we'll have a functioning tool, is : how are we going to let librarians have access to it. First let's say that it'll be free of charges for users since this is one of the major requirements for people to use it.

We have to work carefully on this matter, but we are currently thinking about a regional deployment. The idea would be to train locally some regional representatives and to ensure they would spread the knowledge to their colleagues and local librarians.

The program will also probably be offered to colleagues already mastering EAD. Even if we will make sure you won't need a full EAD-knowledge to use the program, we won't offer it without a proper training.

5. Conclusion

Our goal is simple: offering a way for libraries to access, enrich, correct and improve their own section of the General catalogue for manuscripts. We have quite a lot of work to do within the next months and years to achieve our goal but I feel confident we'll reach it. At the end of the year 2017, we should already have a program ready for trial. Let's hope this new opportunity will mark 2017 as a memorable year for a new CGM: a more collaborative, modern and up-to-date catalogue.