

**You Need My Metadata:
Demonstrating the Value of Library Cataloging
(A Response to the Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control)**

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Introduction

As a LIS educator and researcher, I have pushed for a change in the perception of library cataloging and of catalogers both to ensure the careers of those who currently work as catalogers and those of my beloved students who plan to work as catalogers in the future. From a logical perspective, the idea of a person specifically trained to maintain the quality of the information within the system so that users of the system are happy *returning* customers should be employed in a library. However, based on research I have conducted over the past few years I am certain that we are unwittingly sabotaging the quality of library catalogs by undermining the value of catalogers and the work they can do. I use the term “sabotage” for lack of a better term and perhaps it is too harsh, but if it serves to make administrators aware of the situation then I am confident in using it. In this vein, one of the more important question becomes “How can we effectively demonstrate the value of library cataloging to library administrators?”

The most common response to this idea of “sabotage” is the lack of funding for libraries, especially public and school libraries. In a recent article, Salamon (2005) remarked that “American public libraries are supported by a Byzantine system of federal money, grants, local fundraisers, private donations and state and local tax revenue” and that even with the 1969 Library Systems Act the amount of funding here in Texas is 8% below the national average. (p.3)

This is particularly evident when it comes to library catalog development and maintenance and the time, effort, and funding needed to enable catalogers to do a good job of it. (Miksa, 2006)

Could we make an argument that it is a lack of understanding about the long-term value of cataloging that often puts it at the end of line when it comes to funding? Is it viewed as non-essential when it comes to monetary issues and good access to information?

Setting the Context

In 2005, I conducted a survey of the rural, suburban, and urban public libraries within the Northeast Texas Library Service (NETLS) and the North Texas Regional Library System (NTRLS) order to measure the extent and utilization of cataloging tools and resources by owned and used. Each respondent (n=105) was asked to give the number of full-time equivalents (FTEs) dedicated to cataloging, with one FTE being equivalent to 40 hours a week. The table below shows both the average and range of FTEs from the 94 libraries who responded to the question, cross-referenced with the type of library. (Miksa, 2005)

Table 1: Number of FTE (40 hours) per week devoted to cataloging

| Libraries (Total=94) | Rural N=51 | Suburban N=36 | Urban N=7 |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Avg. FTEs/wk | .60 (range 0-2) | 1.62 (range >0-2) | 1.52 (range 0-5) |
| Avg. hours/wk | 24 | 65 | 61 |

Rural libraries accounted for half of the libraries surveyed and most of the librarians working within them described their current position as *director*. In a quick follow-up email to the majority of these it was ascertained that they also functioned as the cataloger. This is on par with the multiple roles that most rural librarians are required to take.

Time and again I am confronted by the unfortunate news of the complete disregard for the skills and service that catalogers can normally provide. At conferences, I've had librarians slip me their business cards and ask me for advice on how to convince a director to keep positions for professional, and not paraprofessional, catalogers. I've had students describe how they are forced to catalog incorrectly by their employers. A woman in tears asked me for advice on how she might save her cataloging job from a supervisor who believed catalogers were no longer needed in a library because they received records from a vendor. Just as disconcerting is to hear of the shuffling around of a entire cataloging unit in a major academic library here in North Texas due to the erroneous belief that outsourcing and copy cataloging *alone*, and the lower costs associated with that practice, will give quality library service to students and faculty.

Example: Lack of Authority Control

The cost of employing a cataloger and effectively using cataloging software modules are high, there is no denying this fact. This high cost naturally affects related decisions such as whether or not to include other facets of the system. For example, an often neglected facet is an authority database. It is especially perplexing to see the lack of attention to authority control in public and school libraries. Any bibliographic database worth using must have a corresponding authority database to ensure successful searching by subject or name headings. Yet, I very often talk with librarians who do not even understand the function of an authority file, much less know the overall process of authority control. A librarian who does not understand this can not explain the necessity of it to their library director or corresponding administrator.

This is a particularly disturbing trend that I have observed and have somewhat measured in the study of North Texas libraries. In the survey, roughly half of the 105 responding libraries performed authority control on name and subject headings, with 81% of the half outsourcing

those records (18-19 respondents skipped these two questions). However, when asked about the amount of time spent actually maintaining the authority database the responses were low. Table 2 gives the breakdown of time spent.

Table 2: Time spent on authority database maintenance (N=105; response n=74)

| Time | Libraries (Res. n=74) | Res. n % | N % |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------|-----|
| Weekly | 7 | 9.5% | 7% |
| Monthly | 2 | 2.7% | 2% |
| Occasionally | 22 | 29.7% | 21% |
| Not Applicable | 41 | 55.4% | 39% |
| Other | 2 | 2.7% | 2% |
| Skipped question | 31 | -- | 29% |

This illustrates the other side of this trend—the employment of an authority database but very little actual authority control. Even without factoring in the 31 libraries that did not respond to this question there is still a significant percentage who are not investing quality time on this important part of bibliographic control. The survey did not ask for reasons behind time spent, but we can interpret the results in several ways, starting with the fact that many librarians just don't seem to understand authority control on the whole. Alternatively, they may understand its importance but have an implicit belief that outsourced records are good enough and need no maintenance. Or, it may simply be rooted in the more realistic *lack of funding*.

Another interesting possibility is a struggle I have often heard about or witnessed between library departments about who is in charge of the database. For example, I was recently contacted by a public service librarian at a state university who was in the midst of an argument with the head of technical services about the maintenance of subject headings in the catalog

because of a concern about “dead end” searches. The gist of the argument lay in the belief that outsourced records came with very precise headings and that the cost of updating the authority database more regularly was prohibitive.

To the credit of the service librarian, it is an accepted practice for libraries to tailor subject headings and their corresponding authority records for local practice and local users. The argument about prohibitive costs is understandable, but it is disheartening none the less. Records outsourced from respected major vendors do not necessarily ensure accuracy of subject headings, especially when we factor in the needs of users of a particular library collection. Every collection is different, starting with the users, and to make the assumption that headings used for one library will always work for all others is a sign of a potentially debilitating complacency. Stated another way, it breeds complacency with mediocre bibliographic control.

To clarify, the fact that outsourcing and copy-cataloging are the predominant source for bibliographic records is not at issue. What is at issue is the misperception that these processes alone suffice for quality organization, control, and access to information in our libraries. Whether catalog records are created inside the institution or without, humans still make them and so the records are prone to error. (This is not to say that computer-generated records would be absolutely perfect.) As such, there is a constant need to ensure the quality of records with a firm process of quality control in place. This requires the complete bibliographic control, or cataloging, enterprise—the cycle of organizing, controlling, and providing access to information resources, regardless of format, that begins with acquisition of the resources and revolves around the governing of the access points to ensure retrieval. I use the term “cycle” because there is no final stage; the enterprise is in continuous motion. It is an enterprise that, within our current

stage of bibliographic control, is unable to be fully automated due to the abstract processes such as subject analysis, subject cataloging, and classification.

Assessing and Demonstrating the Value

The scenarios discussed above have long provided me a sturdy soapbox from which to rant, rave, or otherwise heap loads of criticisms on those who would not see what seems so obvious to me. The only problem was that those I had hoped to “convert” were never in the audience. Even the few administrators I have managed to interest in my arguments always counter with “it costs money” or with the all-purpose answer “We have better technology and the Internet.” Even those knowledgeable about the cataloging process do not factor in the entire cataloging enterprise. At the American Society for Information Science and Technology 2005 annual conference Michael Leach, the then-incoming ASIST president, remarked that the cataloging process needs to be streamlined in order to catalog more in less time by focusing on the key access and identification points for a given format (personal conversation, 2005). I agree that dismissing unneeded steps from the cataloging process is beneficial, but we need to be very careful on what processes are streamlined or cut altogether because of the potential detrimental effect it can have on users’ access to information resources. Removing or downsizing processes, such as authority control, is a bit like trying to run a car with a fuel tank and an engine but no fuel line in between.

My suspicion is that the whole argument concerning the value of cataloging and library catalogers comes down to a disagreement about the definition of a professional cataloger. At the American Library Association Annual Conference in July 2004 the word on the “floor” was that catalogers had better start calling themselves anything other than a “cataloger.” But, this message conflicted with another interesting tidbit—that even though the job title may be off-

putting, influential companies, such as Google, know the value of the cataloger's product—*metadata*. We can change our job titles, but being forced to do so points to the larger misconception that a cataloger and a “metadata specialist” are two completely different professions.

In a *Technicalities* article, Bohannon (1998) lauded the skills that are at the heart of what catalogers do—they analyze, classify, do systems design and analysis, and they observe and monitor (p.8). At the same time she admonished catalogers for not “being good at verbalizing the adaptations and transferability of these skills.” (p.8) She also pointed out that what should really be sold to administrators is that “catalogers know how to put the ‘value’ in value-added services” (p.7). Working as a cataloger means to work beyond the application and manipulation of metadata. It is to enumerate the list of items in the collection; to bestow description beyond that of what an information object or resource may be and make the connections between resources for the user and in many cases based on the feedback from the user. I often tell students in my cataloging class that cataloging is out-guessing the user; always anticipating their needs by enriching the catalog records with access points that *may* be used (i.e., a possibility of use, but not an assurance.) This anticipation of use takes skill and if it is not recognized as value-added then we risk the chance of libraries losing value and standing with the people and institutions we serve. All current talk amongst ourselves suggests we are already traveling down that path. This loss of interest by the people, from housewives to national Senators, ultimately results in a loss of funding.

OCLC recently published a study on the perceptions of libraries by information consumers in which they found that 84% of the respondents use search engines to begin an information search and only 1% actually being a search on a library website. (OCLC, 2005).

They also reported that “quality and quantity of information were top determinants of a satisfactory information search” and that “search engines were rated higher than librarians.” (OCLC, 2005). On the other hand, they found that a majority of the respondents were aware of the “many library community services and of the role the library plays in the larger community. Most respondents agree the library is a place to learn.” (OCLC, 2005) We have to factor in the real issue that a list of hits on Google is enough to those using libraries that do not serve more scholarly or in-depth researchers.

Strategies

If indeed we want to (or need to) compete with Internet search engines and directories, or just operate at the same level, we must increase the investment in our catalog systems and those qualified to maintain the content of the systems, as well as evaluate the contents of countless others. This long term investment will take a broader definition of funding—one that means more than just money. Skills and knowledge of professional librarians have value, but is this type of value regularly included in any standard operating budget beyond that of the level of salary paid to professionals and paraprofessionals that is based solely on the presence or absence of a graduate degree? I am aware that library budgets are complex and laden with operational and political realities, but I would hope we are not so much of a consumerism society that we no longer recognize the idea that a job worth doing is one worth doing well. If we provide a quality product then experience tells us that customers will return for more. The tricky part is that the products are no longer be limited to tangible objects (i.e., we are in the digital age). As one of many 21st century societies, we are very enamored with the non-tangible—perhaps so much so that we tip the balance and neglect the physical library for the virtual. However, we don’t seem to extend this obsession into the crafting of library budgets beyond that of providing access to the

Internet and electronic resources. For instance, in a report on public libraries commissioned by the Texas State Library, the consultants write that “in business terms, materials represent a public library’s major product line” and that Texas is ranked “45th among the fifty states in the average amount of money available for public library purposes during the 200 Fiscal Year.” (A Study of Public Library Development in Texas, 2003, p. 14) This strikes me as particularly perplexing considering the interaction with non-tangible resources we have in today’s information environment. Basing a budget solely on tangible objects, but then expecting the non-tangible as well, is faulty logic. This harkens back to the idea that all a librarian really does is stamp books and shush noisy patrons, instead of the more common and difficult information “wrangling” that is now a part of her daily work reality and which makes her indispensable.

In his seminal work, *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith wrote the following about the component parts of the price of commodity:

If the one species of labor should be more severe than the other, some allowance will naturally be made for this superior hardship; and the produce of one hour’s labor in the one may frequently exchange for that of two hours labor in the other.

Or, if the one species of labor requires an uncommon degree of dexterity and ingenuity, the esteem which men have for such talents, will naturally give a value to their produce, superior to what would be due to the time employed about it. Such talents can seldom be acquired but in consequence of long application, and the superior value of their produce may frequently be no more than a reasonable compensation for the time and labor which must be spent in acquiring them. In the advanced state of society, allowances of this kind, for superior hardship and superior skill, are commonly made in the wages of labour; and something of the same kind must probably have taken place in its earliest and rudest period. (Smith, 1961, p.48)

The “species of labor” required for quality maintenance and output of an information system should be recognized and acknowledged (i.e., several workers with different skills or one

worker with multiple skills.) Turning the system on, dumping information into it and then asking it to perform correctly will not suffice. The dexterity and ingenuity of a cataloger (or metadata specialist, if you prefer) lends to the superior value of their product—well-constructed metadata and a well-maintained information system. (To be fair, there are many “species” of librarians and each have their own type of dexterity and ingenuity.)

One way to demonstrate this argument is to focus on issues of user access in information systems. All library administrators have been confronted by unhappy patrons in one way or another; problems stemming from unsatisfied access to information with the library’s collection are particularly important. For example, using the real situation previously described, let’s say a more experienced library user has encountered “dead ends” when searching via subject headings at his preferred library. He points out his dissatisfaction to the Reference librarian who, wanting to verify it, does the same search and gets the same results. The patron fills out a user satisfaction card which eventually finds its way to the Director of the library. At the monthly staff meeting the Reference librarian also points out not only this particular patron’s dissatisfaction, but many others as well. The Director assesses the situation and identifies the problem as stemming from budget cuts which forced the library to switch from one outsourcing vendor to one of less reputability. The quality of records from the new vendor is low and is coupled with the fact that the library employs only one part-time paraprofessional who works with all the outsourced records. What will the Director do to improve the situation?

One strategy would be to find another vendor with a higher quality records and make another switch. Another would be to keep the vendor but increase the level of bibliographic control within the library by employing a full-time professional cataloger. Alternatively, they could form a consortium with other libraries and share bibliographic control and catalogers, or

share catalogers across several libraries. Still another would be to do nothing and take the chance of losing patrons. There are other strategies (e.g., assessing the accessibility and ease of use of the entire catalog) but how would the director calculate the value of each?

Bell (1973) writes that “money is a rough and ready measure” but the “value of money diminishes as one’s hoard of it increases.” (p. 305) He also speaks of *individual goods* and *social goods* and we must naturally ask whose goods are these in this particular scenario? Does the patron and the library make up the *individual goods*? Does the patron and the library make up the *social goods*? Bell, citing Adam Smith, argues that social goods are not divisible, like individual goods are, and the “nature and amount of goods much be set by a single decision, applicable jointly to all persons. Social goods, therefore, are subject to communal, or political, rather than individual demand.” (p. 304-305). Using this logic, we could say each decision made by the Director may be applicable, but will necessarily disappoint any or all of those involved. How then would the Director proceed?

In the short run, we may be able to satisfy the library patron by supplementing their search with resources and knowledge of the reference librarian (s). In the long run, we could change vendors based on research about the quality of products (i.e., records) offered, employ a full-time professional cataloger, and develop a plan for economic bibliographic control that ensures quality, usability, returning customers, and money in the coffer. On the whole it is a service issue that revolves around money and good access to information.

This short paper doesn’t give a complete strategy that demonstrates the value of library cataloging because there are other causes of bad access in library information systems that are not entirely the result of administrators’ lack of understanding of the cataloging enterprise. I previously used the example of lack of authority control in many libraries. It difficult to make

my case when there are many situations in which those who are employed as professional catalogers lack the necessary cataloging skills and knowledge or don't know how to acquire them. In the survey of North Texas libraries, I listed over a hundred cataloging tools and resources and asked respondents if they used them, and if they did, how often. Table 3 below shows the results when asked about typical cataloging tools, in particular the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*, 2nd edition, one of the most important tools of a cataloger.

Table 3: Rate of use of AACR2 and other tools (Miksa, 2005)

| Cataloging Tool | Rate of Use | | | | |
|---|-------------|--------|--------------|--------|-----|
| | Daily | Weekly | Occasionally | Rarely | N/A |
| AACR 2nd edition 2002 Revision – with 2004 Update | 6 | 9 | 13 | 1 | 53 |
| AACR 2nd edition 2002 Revision – with 2003 Update | 0 | 0 | 9 | 2 | 68 |
| AACR 2nd edition 2002 Revision | 1 | 2 | 7 | 5 | 66 |
| AACR 2nd edition 1998 Revision | 1 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 69 |
| AACR 2nd edition 1988 Revision | 0 | 1 | 6 | 3 | 71 |
| Concise AACR2 1998 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 4 | 68 |
| Concise AACR2 1988 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 67 |
| Use AACR2 via Cataloger's Desktop (CD-ROM) | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 74 |
| Use AACR2 via Cataloger's Desktop (Online) | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 73 |
| Library of Congress Rule Interpretations (LCRI) | 7 | 2 | 11 | 8 | 54 |
| ALA Filing Rules | 4 | 1 | 7 | 11 | 56 |
| Library of Congress Filing Rules | 8 | 5 | 8 | 5 | 56 |
| | | | | | |
| Total Respondents (N=105) | 91 | | | | |
| (skipped this question) | 14 | | | | |

The actual list of tools and resources listed in the survey was much more extensive but the table above demonstrates what the overall survey discovered about the lack of tools or the low usage of what tools were used. When respondents were asked if they regularly subscribed or monitored developments in cataloging and classification (i.e., listservs, publications, etc.) the majority of respondents did not monitor developments or skipped those questions entirely. For example, only eight (8) respondents subscribed to relevant cataloging and technical service listservs when asked to choose from a list of thirty-seven common electronic discussion lists.

The other ninety-seven (97) respondents skipped the question entirely. When asked what affected the availability of cataloging resources and tools 80% of the respondents (n=105) indicated budget limitations (89.3%) and staff limitations (75%) as the main factors or that they simply did not know enough about the tools and resources available (46%). Other responses included availability of training, or ability to travel to and from training sessions and investment in training part-time personnel.

The most perplexing result of my survey was the feeling by approximately half the respondents that even with these limitations it was not detrimental to their providing users with a reliable catalog system. (Miksa, 2005) How is this not detrimental? As information professionals we know that information on the Web can be incorrect, uninformative, or too deeply buried in a source to make sense of (I do not necessarily agree with the opposite statement made in the WG's February 25th background paper that "Relevant information buried within a text has become more easily accessible), yet users flock to it because of its speed and convenience (although they may inevitably experience finding something, discovering it is wrong, re-searching, etc.) Can we claim to be more reliable when we don't invest in our own systems, as the data from the survey suggests? On the other hand, it may speak volumes about the confidence librarians have in providing reliable service despite the lack of money and resources.

The absence of any real discussion in any of the background papers on the education of catalogers was puzzling, but not surprising. I do not have hard data on the most current state of library cataloging education but I strongly suspect that we are seeing now in our catalogs the result of the disturbing lack of knowledge of many cataloging librarians and library administrators that resulted from relegating traditional courses to the back burner over the past

decade or so. (As well, I believe our cries of woe concerning users abandoning library catalogs for Google or Yahoo! really originate in our feeling guilty about not providing a good enough reason to use the catalogs in the first place.) If MLS students are not pushed (whether by faculty or accreditation standards) to take the courses then we are failing our profession by not producing well-rounded graduates no matter what library position they occupy. Given the coming changes to cataloging that will ride in on the new *Resource Description and Access* (RDA) due to be completed in 2009, we are facing a choice to either be proactive and prepared or suffer the consequences of belated reactions.

Catalogers face a dilemma in that they often have to endure misunderstanding of their jobs from colleagues, patrons, and, most unfortunately, administrators. If the library cataloging practice is to continue evolving then everyone involved, in particular the administrators, must be aware of the long and short term effects of investing in professional catalogers and cataloging departments. My survey of North Texas public libraries is only a small example of the problems facing many libraries as we try to hold our own with companies such as Google and, more importantly, as we address the fact that outsourcing and copy cataloging alone do not always provide the best products for use in our information systems. It takes both these practices and the skills of a cataloger to ensure those systems function to the best of their abilities.

In another lifetime, librarians were meant to be educators, to help the people in a civilized society to be learned and informed. Bade's emphasis that "what happens in libraries is communication, not transportation" is such an important statement. In my classes, I educate students to be communicators of information, to be translators between the users, the creators,

and the systems—not just in the sense of language, but in helping people to use all these various forms of explicit or implicit structure.

We do not necessarily have to bend and give way to current information behavior phenomenon (i.e., users supplied subject tags, non-controlled vocabulary) simply because it is popular or because users expect “the Search”—characterized by Batelle (2005)—to be easy. By this I do not mean that we can’t work to make the process as efficient and effective as possible—but users should realize that in addition to the data doing its work, they must also do their’s. It would be detrimental to believe that relevant information to any query will be generated with little effort on the part of the searcher in most types of searches. The comment that “it remains to discern how bibliographic control should evolve to meet these user expectations and needs and to discover what other user needs we have not considered” is disturbing in that it implies an acquiescence to users expectations simply because they are expressed. In addition, accepting “the consumer environment” and instead of a “learning environment” undermines the strength of cataloging and classification traditions.

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