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Make a Quick Decision in (Almost) All Cases: Our Perennial Crisis in Cataloging

by Mary K. Bolin

Growing backlogs and the increasing complexity of cataloging rules have led to activity on the national level to simplify and streamline cataloging. The solution to the perennial crisis in cataloging, however, begins with the attitudes of the individual cataloger. This article discusses those attitudes and proposes solutions for the individual.

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As Michael Gorman has pointed out,[1] Andrew Osborn's "Crisis in Cataloging" seems as fresh and relevant today as it must have in 1941.[2] This is discouraging, although it may be naive to think that the human race really gets any wiser or smarter as time goes by. It is unfortunate, though, that cataloging and catalogers are plagued by a continuing crisis promulgated by lack of imagination, the need for minute prescriptiveness, the inability to make judgments, and a partly self-imposed feeling of defensiveness and isolation.

There is evidence that general steps are being taken to try to deal with this "crisis." The Library of Congress (LC) is talking about cataloging simplification that will streamline the process of cataloging. Programs such as the National Coordinated Cataloging Program, in which large research libraries are contributing cataloging to the LC database, have resulted in greater tolerance of cataloging variation by LC. LC itself is proposing to use cataloging records found in OCLC and RLIN to reduce its backlogs. The shape of technical services and the role of catalog librarians in the future are ubiquitous topics at meetings and in library literature. I applaud all these efforts, but they are not my topic. Rather, I would like to address the problems we catalogers have keeping our eyes focused on the forest and not just the trees. No amount of streamlining or simplification at the national level will help us if we cannot change our own attitudes.

Categories of Catalogers

Gorman and Osborn have both neatly categorized catalogers and what is wrong with us.[3] Osborn skewered the Legalist, who demands that "there must be rules and definitions to govern every point that arises; there must be an authority to settle questions at issue."[4] This leads to rules for rules' sake and cataloging as an end in itself. Osborn saw the Legalist as the main danger to cataloging in 1941; there is no evidence that things are any different almost 50 years later. Osborn also pilloried the Perfectionist, who is

> guided by the compelling desire to catalog a book in all respects so well that the job will be done once and for all . . . every detail . . . is verified according to some authority, nothing has been omitted, and all users of the library now and in the future must be satisfied with the product.[5]

Even at the time Osborn was writing there was a sort of information explosion, which meant the Perfectionist cataloger was inundated with material to catalog, and the attempt to catalog once and for all meant that backlogs began to grow.

Osborn's third category is the Bibliographic Cataloger, who "attempts to make cataloging into a branch of descriptive bibliography." This theory of cataloging places emphasis on detail to an extent which "does harm when it is applied to everyday cataloging."[6] Osborn's categories conclude with the cataloger who wins his approval—the Pragmatic. For this cataloger,

rules hold and decisions are made only to the extent that seems desirable from a practical point of view . . . the legalistic cataloger would not approve of [the pragmatic's] standards because they have not been defined to a very great extent; the perfectionist . . . would dislike the omissions and the failure to check enough authorities; while the bibliographical cataloger would think the job only half done.[7]

Gorman's categories are similar. First are the Decadents, who, by "altering [cataloging from other libraries] to suit their own sense of the fitness of things," represent the "dandyish elevation of form over content."[8] Then there is the Stern Mechanic, who has faith that a machine of some sort will solve our problems.[9] Next is the Pious, for whom "cataloging is a . . . religion . . . [with] sacred texts, sacred objects, a central body of doctrine and high priests."[10] The cataloger "who shall save us" is the Functionalist, who believes that "catalogs are instruments of communication; . . . anything increasing this communication is good, and anything detracting from it is bad."[11]

In cataloging, as in many other activities, it is hard to keep the broad goal of our endeavor in mind at all times, and easy to slip into the rote and thoughtless application of rules. We may strive to be the Functionalist, but the Legalist in most of us sometimes emerges. The Pragmatic in us can put cataloging in its place—cataloging is one task among many a librarian may do. When, on the other hand, we allow the Pious or Perfectionist to take over, we look on cataloging as our sole professional activity, something that is its own reward, and something very difficult. For a cataloger to define his or her job merely as cataloging is like a reference librarian saying, "My job is answering questions."

Looking at one's job holistically is more than viewing it as multi-functional; it is seeing how each task fits in with the range of services provided in the library, and how each contributes to the library's mission. In some ways cataloging is a mechanical, repetitive task, but in other ways it is demanding and intellectual. Keeping cataloging in its place calls for balancing these two aspects.

A Difficult Balance?

Perhaps the most difficult problem catalogers face is that of balancing quality and quantity. The complex and detailed nature of the cataloging record, combined with the production orientation that any cataloging department must have, challenges us to move material through quickly without robbing the user of needed access points or making errors that affect access. The need for productivity in original cataloging is a touchy subject for all of us. I am not speaking about specific items or categories of materials. Some of us may want to argue about whether or not it is possible to rapidly catalog legal materials in Urdu or Martian music scores, but that is beside the point. If we specialize in such things, there is no excuse for not being good (i.e., fast) at it. We all get the occasional weird and ugly thing to catalog; that is not an excuse for being unable to catalog the garden variety items speedily. Only if we truly get nothing but esoteric materials that don't seem to fit any categories do we have an excuse for cataloging slowly.

In any case, high quality and high quantity in cataloging are not incompatible. Many academic libraries have substantial cataloging backlogs, and this makes an emphasis on production unavoidable. Whereas library administrators hoped that joining an automated network would reduce or eliminate backlogs, the continuing concern about backlogs (demonstrated in library literature and at professional meetings) would seem to show that this has not happened.[12] The blame for backlogs cannot rest solely with catalogers, since some libraries have acquired large amounts of material without providing adequate staff to process it. Moreover, we probably cannot hope to reduce our backlogs to nothing. In many cases, however, cataloging departments have not used the resources of bibliographic utilities in ways that would increase production. Instead of considering these records finished products, too often we have looked on them as lumps of clay to be molded into something usable.

Quality Standards

It is probably necessary to intrude with a definition of quality, since talking about quantity leads some people to ask whether we are talking about usable records or quick and dirty ones. A high-quality cataloging record is one that identifies the item and puts it together with others of its kind. It analyzes the contents, provides as many access points as necessary, and is accurate—i.e., all headings are authorized or established correctly, there are no typographical errors or misspellings, the prescribed punctuation is correct, and all MARC tags, indicators, and subfields are cor-

rect. Such a record should be usable, without alteration, by another member of a shared network database. (This is certainly easier said than done in some cases, and my definition, at any rate, is subjective.) For the Decadent in us, however, an error means "something I don't like," (e.g., a note that offends me) and "quality" means a record that's "just the way I would have done it." Obviously, there is room for judgment and variation even in the matter of how to tag some fields.

Cataloging literature is replete with articles about quality control—what it is, why it is essential, how to achieve it in a network environment, etc. No one could disagree with the desirability of standards, of adhering to standards, and of producing a cataloging product that can easily be used by libraries other than the one that created it. Certainly the rise of networks has focused more attention on the issue of quality control, since catalogers' work is now subjected to the scrutiny of other participants. Even if it is sometimes difficult to achieve, by now we should be taking the need for quality for granted, not because a high-quality record shows our great virtuosity as catalogers, but because accurate and complete information serves the users of the library.

Quantity Standards

Equally important, however, is the question of "quantity control." We have accepted the need for quality standards, especially as they relate to the network environment, but quantity standards are also essential. I am not referring to *quotas* for original cataloging. Libraries which impose quotas are certainly facing the facts of cataloging life, but those who have trouble being productive may not be helped much by establishing quotas. A quota can only be a minimum number, and an experienced cataloger who has to ask how much is enough probably will not like the answer. A quantity standard is something each individual arrives at, based on factors such as the nature of the material being cataloged and the percentage of time being devoted to cataloging. One problem, naturally, is that many catalogers have unrealistically low quantity standards—standards that we have set for ourselves.

Resistance to Quantity Standards

We may see an emphasis on quantity as a further deprofessionalization of cataloging, as well as an attempt by out-

siders (administrators) to meddle in something that cannot be predicted or controlled, and therefore is not subject to quantity expectations. It is interesting that the subject heading "Cataloging—Administration" in recent issues of *Library Literature* contains mainly references to articles about backlogs and what to do about them. The need for productivity is a fact of life, however repugnant it may sometimes be to us as catalogers. On the other hand, it may be hard for catalogers to accept the idea of quantity standards for themselves when the productivity of other librarians is not measured so starkly. Reference librarians may tally the number of questions they receive, but they are not *required* to answer a certain number, nor are they evaluated by the number they answer.

There are a number of arguments against quantity standards. One is that cataloging is so item-specific—each piece is unique and must be given individualized attention—that it is not possible to impose a production line mentality on the process. A corollary to this argument is that cataloging rules have become so complex that it is impossible to do it right and do it quickly. Another argument is that emphasizing quantity will cause an increased number of errors, degrading access to materials and causing our network and our peers to ridicule or sanction us in some way. Another argument focuses on secondary duties that, although important to the cataloger, the department, or the library, may be viewed as *detracting* from productivity. These duties include activities that are related directly to cataloging, such as training and problem solving, and those that are unrelated, such as professional and scholarly activities, meetings, and so forth.

Other factors make quantity standards unpalatable to many catalogers. Some believe these standards will deprofessionalize cataloging and contribute to the low self-esteem of many catalogers, as well as the low esteem in which they are sometimes held by other librarians. That is, many believe that if something can be done quickly and in great quantity, it must be menial and unprofessional.

In her book *Academic Librarians and Cataloging Networks*, Ruth Hafter speaks extensively about the belief of many catalogers that original cataloging is not valued the way it was before the advent of automation, and that belonging to a network has made quality

suffer.[13] The availability of cataloging copy through bibliographic utilities has led to the rise in importance of the paraprofessional in many library cataloging departments. A number of libraries isolate original cataloging in a separate department, with automated or copy cataloging occupying its own department. Some libraries that collect heavily in exotic languages or esoteric subjects may have sensible reasons for doing this. In other cases, however, the thinking behind the separation of original and copy cataloging is clear—to get anything done, keep the Legalists, Decadents, and Perfectionists out of it. As Herbert White points out: "at least in some libraries, what is called copy cataloging insures that input moves directly from paraprofessionals to the file, without review by professionals who might 'correct' it."[14]

> **". . . it may be hard for catalogers to accept the idea of quantity standards for themselves when the productivity of other librarians is not measured so starkly."**

Another reason for the resistance to quantity standards was also mentioned earlier: the visibility of records contributed to automated networks. Some catalogers feel self-conscious about the idea of their "errors" being there for all to see and point at. We worship an adherence to quality not only because it helps us create a reliable database, but also because it helps mitigate our nervousness at contributing records for others to see and use. Richard De Gennaro has given this phenomenon the apt name "fear of inputting."[15] Retrospective conversion is now unearthing some records that look shabby by network standards, and may bear little relationship to the books they are supposed to represent. Those records certainly show the options available for local cataloging before the rise of networks. Would anyone argue, however, that the ability to catalog something according to local rather than national standards is really more valuable than having access to the millions of records in a national data-

base? Besides, we have been contributing records to national databases and dealing with standardization for at least ten years. It is high time we got good at it.

Network Standards

Unfortunately, another factor that contributes to resistance to quantity standards is something very practical and necessary: those very shared network standards. If we are to achieve the goal of accepting cataloging from the networks just as it is without undue scrutiny or editing, then of course we need to feel that we are all following the same standards, and that a library assistant can easily decide whether the item to be cataloged matches the record in the database. The result of trying to achieve this, however, is a flood of manuals, bulletins, directives, messages, and policies—some of which deal with the basic elements of a record, and others of which record the minutiae of the bibliographic universe. The attempt to standardize, and the mechanisms for doing so, make it hard to be a Pragmatic or Functionalist, and put the Legalist at an advantage. Catalogers pore over documentation, technical bulletins, and other manifestoes; they discuss them; and they try to retain what is necessary. Standardization has certainly not turned cataloging into a science, but it may no longer be an art for a lot of people.

A Mysterious Creation

The supposed deprofessionalization of our speciality, as well as the perception by some people that we are narrow-minded, unresponsive, and unglamorous technicians, may lead us to behave as if cataloging were something arcane and mysterious, to be mastered only by those with the calling. Certainly the proliferation of rules, rule interpretations, etc., makes it easy to do this. In fact, many library school students and many librarians who are not catalogers display distinct "cataloging anxiety." Catalogers may exacerbate this by behaving like the scientists in Nevil Shute's organizational novel *No Highway* who "retreat into higher mathematics" when challenged.[16]

In many libraries, catalogers spend some time staffing the reference desk. The exchange almost never goes the other way. This leads to the misapprehension that it is much easier to master reference work than it is to become a competent cataloger. The implication is that reference librarians have not been

initiated into the mystery and probably are not really worthy. This attitude does not lead to striving for high quantity. Rather, it leads to what one experienced cataloger calls "diamond-polishing"—trying to create a masterpiece with every cataloging record. Genius can't be hurried.

Isolation
Another factor contributing to a feeling of creative isolation in cataloging is that catalogers lack direct contact with users. This can make even the best cataloger feel uncertain about what library patrons really require from a cataloging record, which materials it would be best to do first, and how significant certain routine cataloging tasks really are. This isolation can lead to a sort of groupthink—cataloging for ourselves rather than for the patron, developing a mania for unnecessary detail, becoming unable to separate the essential from the optional from the absurd. Hafter quotes catalogers who admit that "catalogers catalog for each other because no one else can understand the importance of the record"—that cataloging can become something done for the satisfaction of catalogers.[17]

The solution to this phenomenon is not necessarily that all catalogers should spend some time on the reference desk, although that may be the answer for some libraries. Catalogers need to develop the right sort of service-oriented attitude, to become convinced that patrons are best served by having materials available quickly, with accurate and adequately detailed cataloging records, of course. It is not service oriented to pretend that the user benefits from having catalogers try to create the platonic ideal of the cataloging record for every item.

Revising Records
Another factor contributing to timidity, mysteriousness, and low production is the common practice of having one cataloger revise or redo another cataloger's work. This combines the worst features of the Legalist, the Decadent, and the Pious. In many libraries, the work of original catalogers is revised long after training is complete. If it were only to check for typographical and tagging errors and other careless mistakes, a library assistant could do it as well as or better than a librarian. Often, however, the idea is for someone to do the final, compulsive checking before the record flies off inexorably to the net-

work. This contributes to the cataloger's dependency and indecisiveness, and promotes the impression that there is only one right way to do things. In Osborn's description of the Legalist school of cataloging, "the reviser sits in judgment on the cataloger, and the head cataloger is the supreme court for his particular library."[18] He also takes note of the hours frittered away in cataloging departments debating the best way to treat some feature of a cataloging record.

From the Sublime to the Specific
The "crisis" described by Osborn obviously did not begin or end in the 1940s (nor is it confined to cataloging or librarianship). As a recent article by Martha Yee shows, the elements leading to the "crisis" at the Library of Congress that Osborn describes are all too prevalent today.[19] It is disheartening to watch cataloging slide from the terseness of the *Paris Principles*[20] to the attempts of AACR2[21] to generalize and standardize through the dense and, at times, indecipherable advice of the *Cataloging Service Bulletin*[22] and Library of Congress rule interpretations.

But this plunge from the lofty and general to prescriptions for dotting i's and crossing t's is probably inevitable. It is what always happens when the general principles created by people with vision are applied in daily life and routine tasks by more limited people. As Paul Dunkin put it: "The prophet will say that to apply the rule wisely is not always to apply it consistently because of the infinite variety in the conditions of life. . . . He will say that to apply the rule is an art."[23] It is after the creation of a set of principles like the Constitution or the Ten Commandments that those who try to live by the principles begin to ask "What about this case or that case? Which rule applies here?"

Solutions
What is the solution to the continuing crisis in cataloging, and how can we fix what is wrong with catalogers? The solutions lie primarily with the individual—catalogers must strive to be Pragmatics or Functionalists, not Legalists or Decadents or some other deplorable sort. Administrators must provide training, tools, and as pleasant a working environment as possible; they must create reasonably designed jobs and maintain realistic expectations. But beyond that, the individual must take

the initiative. (Too often, of course, the worst Pious/Decadent/Legalist in the cataloging department is the department head. When that ethic is communicated from above, it is hard for the individual Functionalist to flourish.)

The first step is to define our mission as serving the user, and not simply as creating cataloging records. In addition to that, catalogers must be willing to admit that quantity is as important as quality in cataloging. Cataloging departments are certainly judged equally on those two things. Catalogers are often reluctant to admit that work can be performed quickly; we must acknowledge that we do not slave over every record or strive for perfection, whatever that may be. We are often reluctant to admit that increasing experience should make our work proceed faster.

Confidence is essential to productivity. To be productive, we must develop confidence in our ability to make judgments, and to make them without agonizing. Training is certainly the foundation of that confidence, but many catalogers who lack confidence have both excellent training and extensive experience. Along with training, the way to develop confidence is to look at cataloging as an art, not a pseudo-science. There is no one correct way to catalog most things, and pondering and meditating will not help.

Catalogers certainly need fluency with MARC format and probably need to have memorized many conventions of cataloging to work efficiently. Catalogers should be able to fill out a certain portion of any cataloging record automatically, without consulting any manual or rule interpretation. If this makes cataloging sound mechanical, that is because a large part of it is.

Along with confidence and competence, catalogers need to have internalized the principles underlying any cataloging code: identify the item, house it with like materials, make appropriate and plentiful access points, and exert authority control to integrate the individual record with its fellows. By keeping these goals in mind, we should be able to make decisions more quickly.

Room for Ambiguity and Creativity
At times we may feel that the price we have had to pay for standardization is the end of ambiguity and creativity. Rather than interpreting cataloging rules as generally as possible and then

using our own judgment, the Legalist in us would like to see every decision already made and written down for us to consult. Despite the number of places one can look to find an answer to a cataloging question, however, there is still room for ambiguity, and even for creativity. Agonizing over whether to do something one way, or another betrays our lack of confidence, and certainly does not contribute to a healthy output. Wrinkling our foreheads at the *Cataloging Service Bulletin* and waiting for rule interpretations as if they were our only salvation has contributed to this paralysis. Ironically, the *CSB* itself tries to save us (and its real audience, the catalogers at the Library of Congress) from this trap by cautioning periodically: do not agonize, and make a quick decision in all cases. So much for diamond-polishing.

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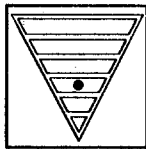
Historical Footnotes

*In this issue we continue our series of short contributions, tucked in as space permits, now under the title of **Historical Footnotes**. Readers who would care to add to the learned wealth of our profession are invited to write to Professor D.W. Krummel, 432 David Kinley Hall, University of Illinois, 1407 West Gregory Street, Urbana, IL 61801. Each contributor will be given credit for his or her **Historical Footnote** if it is published here.*

On Shucking One's Chapeau in the Library. Writing in 1905, the London library building planner F.J. Burgoyne reminds us that library services can reflect on different social status, which in turn reflect on readers' habits, and these in turn on the appropriate furnishings. Norman Stevens calls attention to distinctions implicit in Burgoyne's *Library Construction, Architecture, Fittings and Furniture* (pp. 95-96): In general, "if a proper cloak-room, with attendant, cannot be afforded for the public, a number of small umbrella stands . . . should be placed at the ends of the reading slopes and tables." This is preferable to "a single large one near the doors, for the latter seem to increase the difficulty which some persons have of distinguishing between [what's mine and what's yours]." While this problem may persist today, the progress of democracy has largely eradicated another nuance of library service in times past:

> In the "reference reading-rooms"—presumably for the best clientele— "hat pegs should be placed under the tables, or the chair seats may have double rails for that purpose."
> In the newspaper and magazine rooms, things are different: "The general users . . . do not consider the removal of their hats to be at all necessary, and so plentiful provision need hardly be made for them."