St. Cloud State University

theRepository at St. Cloud State

Library Faculty Publications   Library Services

2008

Who Moved My Pinakes? : Cataloging and Change

Tina Gross

St. Cloud State University, tmgross@stcloudstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/lrs_facpubs

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Who Moved My Pinakes?
Cataloging and Change

Tina Gross

"Two of the great libraries of antiquity were in Pergamum and Alexandria… Later writings have referred to Pinakes from both libraries. Pinakes is plural of pinax, a word that means tray or dish. It is thought that such trays had slightly raised edges and that wax could be poured in the middle; when hardened, the wax could be written in with a stylus. If this was indeed the medium, it is no wonder that no remnants have survived. Writers have quoted from the Pinakes of Alexandria, which was created by Callimachus. The work may have been a catalog, or it may have been a bibliography of Greek literature. Callimachus has been given credit as being the first cataloger of whom we have knowledge."
> --Arlene G. Taylor, *The Organization of Information*
> (Libraries Unlimited, 2004), 50

> "If You Do Not Change, You Can Become Extinct."
> > --Spencer Johnson, *Who Moved My Cheese?*
> > (Putnam, 1998), 46

Rhetoric about "fear of change," has long been present in discussions of the future of cataloging, but lately it's been more widespread than ever. If you think that dismantling LCSH would be a bad idea, or if you don't embrace the term "legacy metadata," it must be because you're threatened by change and worship the status quo. As Thomas Mann puts it, "professional librarians who raise objections to the abandonment of cataloging and classification" are "dismissed as dinosaurs whose 'resistance to change' springs not from their concern for the maintenance of high professional standards, but from a selfish fear of losing job security."[1]

If some catalogers fear losing their jobs, that would hardly be surprising, given the constant talk in some circles of how irrelevant and obsolete their work is. (You would think that we're clinging to truly ancient bibliographic technology—Deanna Marcum will have to pry the pinakes from my cold dead hands!) It may even be true that such fear factors into their views on what cataloging should be like in the future, but that doesn't mean they fear change itself, nor that they would resist any and all changes to cataloging. People don't fear all change in general, and we should emphatically rebuff attempts to characterize resistance to particular changes as motivated only by an inclination to cling to the status quo.

I have two goals in writing this. The first is to call out the disingenuousness and stupidity of "fear of change" rhetoric. It should be the object of ridicule and contempt, not something that cows us. The second is to argue that change rhetoric is actually a threat to a genuine agenda for the improvement and modernization (and not just cheapening) of cataloging and library catalogs.

"Fear of change" is frequently invoked in the corporate world in order to dismiss opposition to something that is about to happen (usually something involving loss of job security), or to characterize that opposition as irrational or hidebound. According to the rhetoric, when layoffs are coming, what the potential victims are afraid of is "change,"

not of losing their health insurance or not being able to pay their rent. That a change might be dreadful, and that to resist it might be the most rational and ethical response, is not conceivable within this framework.

Change rhetoric ignores the obvious fact that people do not generally fear or resist changes that they perceive to be positive. Having your salary doubled would be as significant a change as losing your job to downsizing, but no one would react to a big raise with fear. Imagine if, instead of simplification and reduction, the major reform of cataloging being proposed was to get rid of backlogs by hiring additional professional staff and providing the necessary institutional support. Imagine if new time-saving technologies and vendor services were used not to facilitate the downsizing of technical services departments, but to free up catalogers to provide richer subject access and spend more time on authority control. Obviously, either of these scenarios would be wildly out of step with the current direction of the field and its priorities. They would be a total departure from the status quo, and yet they would not drive catalogers to "rambling gripe sessions about the end of the world."[2]

Much of the time, a change is good or bad depending on one's position. Change rhetoric frequently serves to veil the interests of those promoting the change—a reorganization that results in layoffs and hardship for some results in large bonuses and increased profits for others. Change rhetoric presents such occurrences as inevitable and necessary; they are never actions that those in positions of power undertake to further their own interests. Their perspective is presented as objective—change itself is desirable, and thus to react with skepticism or resistance is inherently bad, while openness and flexibility (terms which, in the context of change rhetoric, are usually used to extol compliance and passivity) are inherently good.

This is essentially the view advanced by *Who Moved My Cheese?*[3], the sickening motivational book on which the title of this piece is based. It's frequently ordered in bulk by management to be distributed to employees, especially those about to experience a "change." Using a parable about mice (and "littlepeople") in a maze, it conveys that one should view change (the absence of cheese where cheese used to appear, and the search for New Cheese somewhere else in the maze) as a potential blessing and something to be accepted without questioning or complaining. In *One Market Under God*, Thomas Frank describes it as an "asinine and chronic best-seller" and a "work of breathtaking obscenity" which manages to "both call for childlike innocence before the gods of the market and openly advance a scheme for gulling, silencing, and firing workers who are critical of management."[4]

Change rhetoric often plays a crucial role in pushing through reorganizations and downsizing that result in fewer people having to do more work for less pay and benefits. Unfortunately for many of its ill-fated readers, the lesson *Who Moved My Cheese?* expounds, that "you can believe that a change will harm you and resist it. Or you can believe that finding New Cheese will help you, and embrace the change. It all depends on what you choose to believe,"[5] is patently untrue in the real world.

Even if they choose to believe that they would benefit from the search for New Cheese, it remains a fact that "two years after a layoff, two-thirds of the victims say they are working again, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Of those two-thirds, only 40 percent, on average, make as much as they had in their old jobs…The rest are making less, often much less. Out of 100 laid-off workers, then, 27 make their old salary again, or more — and 73 make less, or are not working at all."[6] Cajoling workers to become "change-masters" when they are about to be laid off does not change the fact that their lives are likely get objectively harder.

The drive to implement "lean and mean" business practices has transformed the economy, to the benefit of a tiny few—while productivity has increased, income inequality has grown massively.[6] For nearly thirty years, "incomes on the middle rungs of the economic ladder have stagnated, despite strong economic growth and strong productivity growth, while most of the rewards of the strong economy have gone to the wealthiest Americans. Their incomes have exploded."[8]

"Fear of change" rhetoric is one of the ideological tools that have been used to bring about this situation. But as Frank explains, "There is no social theory on earth short of the divine right of kings that can justify a five-hundred-fold gap between management and labor; that can explain away the concentration of a decade of gain in the bank accounts of a tiny minority. 'Change,' like the American corporation itself, is the product of argument and social conflict."[9]

In discussions about cataloging, change rhetoric is less about class warfare, and more about cost-cutting to accommodate the budgets that prevailing trends prescribe. In the largely non-profit world of libraries, the ultimate aim of cuts is obviously not to benefit stockholders and executives (except possibly in that the lack of resources available for things such as libraries is connected to the rich paying little or no tax on the wealth that has been shifted to them). Library administrators don't seek to line their own pockets, but to adjust to the budgets and priorities handed down to them, whether they agree with them or not (agreeing with them, of course, makes one more likely to be an administrator). Nevertheless, the outlook that drastically scaling back to "lean and mean" operations is the only possible way forward comes straight from the business world. It's not surprising that change rhetoric would come along with it.

As Frank argues, "'Change' is not a benevolent doctrine. On the contrary: Management theorists wield 'change' like a weapon. 'Change' cleans out resistance. 'Change' blasts through the defenses. 'Change' levels city blocks. 'Change' means 'do it or die.'"[10] As in the business world, "change" is wielded like a weapon in the ongoing debates about the future of cataloging. It serves there, as it does everywhere, to advance an agenda of pared-down efficiency and to characterize rational and reasonable defense of some "old practices" as irrational clinging to the way things used to be.

Karen Calhoun's "The Changing Nature of the Catalog and Its Integration with Other Discovery Tools," a report commissioned by the Library of Congress, is perhaps the most controversial document in the current stage of the "cataloging wars." She asserts that

"taking advantage of research libraries' opportunities for leveraging their investments in their catalogs and collections requires overcoming some daunting obstacles. Many research library leaders, most staff members, and some university faculty are not ready for change of this magnitude."[11] One of the challenges to the feasibility of her plans is "resistance to change from faculty members, deans or administrators."[12]

In typical fashion, change is casually presented as something that people resist in and of itself, but perhaps a much more revealing appearance of "change" is in the report's "Blueprint for phased implementation."[13] The eighth step of the blueprint is to "manage change," which includes the substeps "Train managers and staff to understand and cope with the dynamics of personal and organizational transition" and "Recruit and train change agents."[14] What this means may not be apparent to someone who doesn't read corporate management theory, but Calhoun includes a footnote referring the reader to *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* by William Bridges.[15]

Bridges's book is not as hideous and void of humanity as *Who Moved My Cheese?*—there are no littlepeople gathering up their courage by telling themselves "It's MAZE time."[16] Bridges is candid, indicating that his advice is for managers facing a situation in which "Industries are consolidating, and the last one in is a loser. Technology is transforming how business is done, and holding on to the familiar old ways will leave an organization out in the cold. The other firms in the field have restructured and slimmed down and outsourced and abbreviated their products' time-to-market drastically. Their competitors can't *not* change."[17]

Bridges addresses managers and advises them that if they are not forthright and humane in "managing transition," they risk creating an "exhausted and demoralized workforce"[18] and dooming their change to failure, while *Who Moved My Cheese?* addresses employees and attempts to dupe them into self-policing their doubts. What the two approaches have in common is that they both aim to provide the vital service of helping management restructure, slim down, outsource and abbreviate without being hindered by employee resistance. Calhoun's adoption of a business model, thoroughly critiqued by Thomas Mann,[19] wouldn't be complete without invoking it.

By far the most emphatic use of "fear of change" rhetoric in cataloging debates was a message with the subject "'Culture wars' in cataloging" which was posted by David Banush on the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) listserv.[20]

Banush asserts that there are two unequivocal camps in the cataloging world. On one side are those who want to do away with old practices, "primarily managers and administrators," and on the other "more conservative forces, which seem to include many front-line staff, are vigorously (sometimes stridently) defending the status quo, or even the status quo ante."[21]

Banush goes much further than most, elaborating a jaw-dropping analogy between cataloging and "the welfare states of Europe." What they have in common are bureaucracy, over-regulation, high costs, and a need to forego tradition and being

"comfortable and secure" in order to become more efficient and competitive. And of course, they both face the obstacle of workers who "do not want to change."[22]

Evidently trade unionists in Europe resist the elimination of social services and work benefits because they're "threatened by change," and not because they believe that their quality of life is more important than the competitiveness that business would gain if it were substantially lowered. In one way, it is difficult to believe that Banush really wants to compare library leaders who claim they want to modernize cataloging with corporations determined to wipe out social spending and laws protecting workers for the sake of higher profits and package the entire project as dynamism. But an uncritical adoption of the priorities and values of business and profit are utterly in keeping with the corporate mindset from which change rhetoric originates.

According to Banush, those who expressed opposition to Calhoun's report or to LC's series decision "feel too threatened by change to consider reforms anything but heresy or betrayal." He gives no hint that the concerns expressed about the Calhoun report were in reaction to specific proposals. He seems to think that an uncontroversial proposal such as "Enable much better browsing and organization of large retrieval sets"[23] is just as troubling to catalogers as "Urge LC to dismantle LCSH."[24]

If you believed Banush, you would never think that many catalogers would be ecstatic to see most of the changes proposed by the University of California report. It would seem that there was a hysterical reaction to the entire report, every bit as much to something expected like "Add enriched content such as Tables of Contents, cover art, publisher promotional blurbs, content excerpts (print, audio or video), and bibliographies"[25] as to "Consider using controlled vocabularies only for name, uniform title, date, and place, and abandoning the use of controlled vocabularies..."[26] This would make perfect sense if "change" is what catalogers are opposed to, and not the impoverishment of access.

Perhaps because change rhetoric fits so well with the traditional stereotype of catalogers as rule-obsessed hermits, it has largely become part of the stereotype. Echoes and adoptions of it are widespread. Just as I was writing this, a posting on AUTOCAT, discussing recent events at LC, said "…this is the 21st century and things have changed. And since things have changed so do WE have to change. I realize that change is scary, but it has to be done."[27] The same contributor went on later in the same day to say that "…I don't understand why LC's series decision, which to me was a delegation of work, caused such an uproar...other than the fact that it was a CHANGE."[28]

Uncanny! There could hardly be a more perfect specimen: the only explanation is that CHANGE is scary. Tellingly, one of the actual reasons for the uproar (the "delegation of work" meaning an increased workload for libraries) is mentioned but passed over.

In reality, the uproar being made by defenders of cataloging is in response to the notion that the conceptual categorization and collocation of works made possible by catalogers are unnecessary and expendable. We object to giving users only search results that are "incomplete, haphazard, indiscriminate, biased toward recent works, and largely confined

to English language sources."[29] We resist the forestalling of future search and retrieval improvements that depend on controlled vocabulary and classification.

We reject the idea that no one will care if library users can no longer retrieve a list of works by an author or about a particular topic without being inundated by irrelevant junk. We are not resigned to the revival of information organization problems that were solved by the end of the 19th century. That would be change, but it wouldn't be progress.

If it's just "change" that catalogers and their defenders are opposed to, their view would have to be that everything should just stay the same. It would be impossible to explain why dissatisfaction with online catalog design and functionality is nearly universal among them, or why many who objected to the LC series decision are also frustrated with the ongoing RDA development process and fear that it might end up a disappointing cop-out that sidelines FRBR and is merely AACR3 by another name.

How has the cataloging community reacted to FRBR and the changes it will bring? The responses have been varied—some catalogers are ecstatic about the possibilities, some doubt that it's all it's cracked up to be. Some are following its development closely, some aren't. Some feel that they don't yet grasp it, some even feel intimidated by it. But it could not be credibly argued that the reaction has been one of resistance. No one has said it's time to circle the wagons against this abomination, FRBR (not MARC) must die!

When Deanna Marcum says "Big changes are on the way,"[30] we know even before she continues with "The series authority records are but the first step..." that the "big changes" she's talking about aren't FRBR or FRSAR or the Virtual International Authority File. She isn't talking about RDA or even the replacement of MARC with another encoding standard. She doesn't mean expanding upon current cataloging practices or replacing them with more advanced ones, but simply eliminating them.

There are numerous initiatives and projects that could contribute to revolutionizing library catalogs, some of which are mentioned in the preceding paragraph. They will require time and resources if they are to meet their potential, and their realization may add time to the cataloging process. The vast majority of the "fear of change" axe-wielding crowd aim to drain resources from cataloging. They have little or no role in the genuine innovations taking shape, although they present their agenda as embodying progress.

It goes without saying that big changes are coming, in cataloging and in librarianship in general. What has yet to be resolved is whether these changes will actually mean progress and improvement, or the gutting of our mission. Against the latter, recalcitrance, opposition, and resistance are desperately needed.

[1] Thomas Mann, "What is Going on at the Library of Congress?" Library of Congress Professional Guild AFSCME Local 2910. (June 19, 2006):21, <http://guild2910.org/AFSCMEWhatIsGoingOn.pdf>.

[2] David Banush, e-mail to PCCLIST (Program for Cooperative Cataloging mailing list), May 24, 2006, <http://listserv.loc.gov/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0605&L=pcclist&T=0&P=4815>.

[3] Spencer Johnson, *Who Moved My Cheese: An A-Mazing Way to Deal with Change In Your Work and in Your Life*, (New York: Putnam, 1998).

[4] Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy*, (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 248-249.

[5] Johnson, 65.

[6] Louis Uchitelle, "Retraining Laid-Off Workers, but for What?" *New York Times*, 26 March 2006.

[7] Editorial, *Newsday*, September 4, 2006.

[8] "Does Wealth Imbalance Threaten Society's Fabric?" John Ydstie. *All Things Considered*. National Public Radio. February 5, 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7190876>

[9] Frank, 250.

[10] Ibid., 240.

[11] Karen Calhoun, "The Changing Nature of the Catalog and Its Integration with Other Discovery Tools. Final Report", prepared for the Library of Congress. (March 17, 2006): 9, <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/calhoun-report-final.pdf>.

[12] Ibid., 13.

[13] Ibid., 16.

[14] Ibid., 20.

[15] William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2003).

[16] Johnson, 45.

[17] Bridges, x.

[18] Ibid., 140.

[19] Thomas Mann, "The Changing Nature of the Catalog and Its Integration with Other Discovery Tools. Final Report.' Mar. 17, 2006. Prepared for the Library of Congress by Karen Calhoun. A Critical Review," Library of Congress Professional Guild AFSCME Local 2910, <http://www.guild2910.org/AFSCMECalhounReviewREV.pdf>.

[20] Banush.

[22] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Calhoun, 19.

[24] Ibid., 18.

[25] University of California Libraries Bibliographic Services Task Force, "Rethinking How We Provide Bibliographic Services for the University of California" (2005):6, <http://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/sopag/BSTF/Final.pdf>.

[26] Ibid., 5.

[27] Jerri Swinehart, e-mail to AUTOCAT mailing list, Feb. 6, 2007.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Mann, "What is Going on," 21.

[30] Deanna Marcum to ARL directors, 5 May 2006, <http://www.ala.org/ala/alctscontent/alctspubsbucket/bibcontrol/Marcum050506.htm>.