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Casting the Net Column

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When is Format Integration Coming?

Q. When is a map not a map?

A. When it's an atlas.

In less time than it takes a whale to gestate, format integration will be upon us. The Library of Congress and the bibliographic utilities have agreed upon a January 1, 1994 implementation date, and the library community seems to be awakening to the fact that, however much it might like to, it can't ignore format integration forever. An ALCTS preconference to the ALA annual meeting in San Francisco on "Implementing USMARC Format Integration" sold out in the first few weeks of registration, causing the sponsors to begin planning a series of regional workshops for 1993. A number of other library associations and networks, including PALINET and AALL, are organizing their own programs on the topic.

Despite this surge of interest, however, many librarians don't really understand format integration and don't really want to deal with it. This is possibly because we're busy and fifteen months seems like a long time away (just ask a whale). It's possibly also because format integration sounds larger and more formidable than it actually is.

What is Format Integration?

First, let's clarify what format integration does NOT do. It does not apply to nonbibliographic data: the holdings, authorities, classification, and community information "formats" remain unaffected. Format integration does not eliminate the concept of bibliographic format. Like dwarves and deadly sins, there will still be seven formats: books, serials, visual materials, archival and manuscripts control, maps, music, and computer files. And it doesn't have anything to do, for good or for ill, with the problem of multiple versions or how to treat microform reproductions of print publications.

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What format integration does do is allow cataloging for materials with characteristics of more than one format to fully represent of those materials. Common cases include main items with accompanying materials (e.g., a computer file with a manual), multimedia, and nontextual serials (e.g., a sound recording issued serially). Catalogers have to describe these items using the fixed and variable fields appropriate to a single format, pretty much ignoring any characteristics that don't fit.

This led, in turn, to the conundrum that introduces this column: maps bound in volumes being cataloged as books, since there is no way to represent their book-ness and map-ness both. Unless, of course, the maps are issued serially, in which case CONSER rules specify that they will be cataloged as serials, physical format having been decreed secondary to seriality. Pity the poor user whose map is in an atlas issued as part of a periodical.

Multiple Formats in a Single Record

Enter format integration, which, when implemented, will allow you to describe multiple formats in a single bibliographic record, using both fixed and variable field data as appropriate. Fixed field data elements can be provided by means of a rather clever new field called the 006. Those familiar with the MARC data structure know that coded data elements, positionally defined, are encoded in the 008 field, which is defined differently for each format. However, the beginning and ending data elements in the 008 actually apply to all record types, containing information such as "date entered on file" and "place of publication." Only the middle 17 bytes vary from format to format. The 006 field was designed to contain in its first position a code indicating the type of 006 (e.g., serials and AMC), followed by 17 bytes defined as they would be in the corresponding 008. Like the 007, the 006 may or may not occur in any given record, and there can be as many in a single record as are appropriate. A map in an atlas issued serially, then, could theoretically have a serial 008 and one or two 006 fields, one for map-ness and one (possibly) for books.

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There must still be only one 008 field, and it will still be used for the primary format. Fields 006 can be added as needed to describe secondary characteristics. Format integration comes with rules for choosing which format is primary (i.e., which gets the 008) and which is secondary (and so gets the 006). For a main item with accompanying materials, the main item is primary; for textual serials, seriality is primary and physical format is secondary; for nonprint serials, the physical form is primary and seriality secondary.

Changes to Variable Fields

For variable fields, the major change is that all fields have been declared useable wherever they are appropriate. In most cases, this means that fields previously defined as valid for only a subset of formats have been extended across all formats: the 522 "geographic coverage" note, for example, can now be used for computer files, if it should happen to apply. In some cases, essentially the same data was defined in different places in different formats, so one data element had to be selected for extension and the others declared obsolete. For example, acquisitions information was made obsolete in the 265 and 350 fields and shall live from now on in the redefined, expanded, and extended 037. In fact, the review process occasioned by format integration was seen as a good excuse to tidy up other problematic or little-used data elements in USMARC. A small but significant set of codes that have been driving catalogers crazy for years ("main entry in body of entry"!) have been eliminated.

Why Bother?

All of this is not to say that USMARC is now so simple and intuitive that we can throw away the rule books and devote our time to improving subject access. For one thing, obsolete content designation is still valid in older records, so, as with AACR2, we will have to live with two sets of rules for a long time. Even with guidelines, there will be situations where the primary format is not obvious. The ability to record information about secondary format characteristics means the opportunity to spend more time cataloging and to make more mistakes. One could argue that most automated systems make little enough use of the fixed field data elements as it is; the 006 now offers us the chance to ignore even more data than before.

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Format integration may ultimately result in more compact documentation, easier training, and less retraining for catalogers. But it would certainly not be worth the bother it was to define or will be to implement unless it ultimately benefits the end users of our online catalogs. As Karen Coyle of the University of California (who also provided the riddle that begins this column) pointed out at the ALCTS preconference, our OPACs aren't exactly littered with format-related information as it is. Karen had a number of interesting observations, some of which I'll repeat in "USMARC Format Integration, Part II: Implications for Local Systems." Stay tuned.

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