Metadata is the key to collaboration and a national bibliographic knowledgebase

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/02/27/metadata-is-the-key-to-collaboration-and-a-national-bibliographic-knowledgebase/

The British Library has partnered with Jisc, Research Libraries UK (RLUK) and the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) to create a national bibliographic knowledgebase (NBK). **Neil Wilson** *outlines why such an initiative is necessary, explaining the implications of a hybrid print/digital marketplace, and how the rapidly evolving digital landscape has not been matched by a parallel development in the quality of metadata available to describe it. The NBK will ensure libraries can provide researchers and students with quicker, more efficient access to digital books and resources by aggregating and interoperating with a collection of data sources to discover where books are kept, in what format and the terms of their availability.*

In a recent blog post, Neil Grindley, Jisc's head of resource discovery, outlined Jisc's case for a 'national bibliographic knowledgebase' (NBK) to help libraries make informed, data-driven, collection management decisions at a time of diminishing resources. Now, they've announced a new partnership initiative designed to accelerate work to make the NBK a reality. The British Library welcomes this exciting new initiative and we look forward to collaborating with Jisc, Research Libraries UK (RLUK) and the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) to build the NBK and deliver greater value, savings and efficiencies for the wider library community.

How does the NBK fit with British Library strategy?

The British Library's Collection Metadata Strategy 2015-18 stresses the need for libraries to unlock metadata's full potential as an enabler of efficient collection management and effective service provision. The aim to "collaborate to do more than we could by ourselves" is also a key element of the library's Living Knowledge 2015-23 strategy. Therefore a collaborative initiative such as the NBK, with its objective of combining new technology, rich metadata assets and the collective experience of leading library community members, fits perfectly with the library's own strategic aims.

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Why do we need the NBK now?

UK libraries are currently experiencing a 'perfect storm' in which user expectations continue to rise and technological and licensing options become ever more sophisticated, while budgets decline. At the same time publishers continue to wrestle with the full implications of a hybrid print/digital marketplace and the new opportunities it offers. The result is that long-established practice and processes for managing collections are rapidly being rendered obsolete. This unprecedented combination of factors has resulted in libraries struggling to determine how best to navigate the transition and efficiently manage their new hybrid collections.

Publishers and publications

In the rapidly evolving digital landscape, the very concepts of 'publication' and 'ownership' are regularly challenged by new forms of licensing, remote access and increasingly fluid or complex content. The fact that digital publishing is so flexible and relatively inexpensive enables publishers to generate numerous variants or packages of content. Publishers may offer entire back catalogues, open access content, individual titles or chapters via individually tailored options for perpetual or temporary access.

The need for accurate metadata

Unfortunately, the rapid evolution of digital content has not been matched by a parallel development in the quality of metadata available to describe it. Some e-

book publishers can even see long established standards – for example, International Standard Book Numbers (ISBNs) – as irrelevant if they sell directly via the web.

The poor standard of publisher metadata is already recognised by the book trade and targeted by trade bodies such as Book Industry Communication (BIC), keen to stress the financial benefits of high quality metadata. Libraries and standards bodies are also attempting to influence publishers in this area due to the wasted effort caused by inaccurate or missing metadata.

A strategic partnership to build the NBK

The scale of the various challenges means that only a large scale initiative capable of pooling library resources and expertise can hope to address the issues involved. The strategic collaboration of Jisc in partnership with the British Library, RLUK and SCONUL will provide the firm foundation needed to begin building the NBK and collectively influence publishers.

This partnership is further strengthened by the recent appointment of OCLC as service providers for the work. OCLC's long experience of managing large, complex collaborative datasets and technical expertise in matching and clustering records will be invaluable for the delivery of the project's objectives.

Wider collaboration is key

As Neil Grindley noted in his post, development of the NBK will require several years and is dependent upon the active participation of the wider library community, service providers and content suppliers. The NBK will therefore be a community enterprise with the potential to offer libraries a transformational range of collection management services in return for their resource investment.

Effective collaborative action will be essential to build the NBK and deliver efficiencies for libraries and users. However, if Jisc's ambitious service vision is realised, the NBK will undoubtedly become a core component of the UK's information infrastructure in the years ahead.

To find out more, visit the national bibliographic knowledgebase project page, or join the conversation on Twitter using #uknbk.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our comments policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Neil Wilson has an MA in library and information studies from University College London (UCL) and has worked as a cataloguer, systems developer and library manager for over 30 years. Currently he is head of collection metadata at the British Library where he is responsible for the institution's open metadata strategy. He represents the BL and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) on several library standards and book trade supply chain bodies including: Book Industry Commission (BIC), EDItEUR, the Research Data Alliance (RDA) board and the ISBN agency board. He has also been a member of Jisc's bibliographic database oversight group for the last two years.