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The Future of Cataloging (for the Rest of Us):
Forecasting for Production-Level Cataloging

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For decades, catalogers have lived in a place of change. We've been in a nearly continual shift ever since library catalogs moved to digital environments, and before that as concepts and new formats emerged. In the past, many of these changes have taken years or decades to implement locally, let alone implement on a national or global scale. Our era in cataloging is no different. The implementation of RDA, the shift away from the MARC record, and increasing interest in linked data (among myriad other factors) are beginning to coalesce into a discernible future. This is an exceptional time when we can begin to imagine a practical future for the catalogers, copy catalogers, and staff-who-occasionally-catalog who might not always be privy to the inner workings of committee meetings, task forces, or academic conferences.

In this article, I will look specifically at how copy cataloging will likely look in the near future. The pace of evolution in cataloging is generally glacial, so by "near future," I'm thinking of the next 20 years. I'll also summarize current developments with RDA, linked data, BIBFRAME, and other factors, and discuss their impact. I will use the terms "catalogers" and "copy catalogers" interchangeably, since most of us are both or either, depending on the day or hour.

RDA

RDA's initial implementation was a source of much trepidation—remember the "retirement date approaches" jokes? For many production-level catalogers, changing one's thinking from the AACR2 format-based approach to the conceptual model supplied by the Functional Requirements of Bibliographic Records (FRBR) and delineating the concepts of Works, Expressions, Manifestations, and Items was a struggle. Rather than looking only at the item in hand, catalogers were encouraged to observe where objects existed in relation to the rest of the universe—the entities that created and contributed to it, the relationships between the

object and those entities, and the object's relationship to other works—and then appropriately apply the conceptual model and its attendant complex language. One major objection to the switch to RDA continues to be that copy-cataloging staff should not be expected to spend so much time thinking about such a complex conceptual model.

The text of RDA is currently being rewritten and restructured under the auspices of the RDA Toolkit Restructure and Redesign (3R) Project. The goal of this project is to bring RDA in line with the IFLA Library Reference Model (LRM), which is a consolidation of FRBR, FRAD (Functional Requirements of Authority Data), and FRSAD (Functional Requirements of Subject Authority Data). According to the IFLA LRM website, LRM "was developed to resolve inconsistencies between the three separate models … IFLA LRM was designed to be used in linked data environments and to support and promote the use of bibliographic data in linked data environments" (IFLA, 2018). I'll discuss more of the revised RDA's integration with linked data later in this article.

The revised text of RDA relies on the use of application profiles. The text and the initial creation of these profiles may present a challenge, as the language of the revised RDA is even more highly conceptual and technical than the initial version of RDA. However, if these application profiles are implemented in the way intended by the steering committee, use of the new RDA Toolkit by copy-cataloging staff will ideally be more straightforward than it currently is. Application profiles would, in theory, be created for each subset of resources that a cataloger might need to catalog, and once a cataloger implemented the profile, the applicable set of RDA guidelines would be available in a user-friendly way.

Linked Data

The first version of RDA was the beginning of the boots-on-the-ground movement away from sequestered library data silos and toward a linked data environment. As a content standard, this initial version of RDA was intended to prepare our library metadata for a ponderous shift away from its historical container, MARC, and toward an environment where it could be encoded in Resource Description Framework (RDF) for easy crawlability and exchange on the web. RDF encoding is what transforms library data into linked data. It is "a web-based encoding model for making simple statements about entities and the relationships between them" (Balster, 2018), i.e. linked data triples. As of this writing, the first cloud-based environment for library linked data creation is being built by the Linked Data for Production: Pathway to Implementation (LD4P2) project. This initial attempt at a shared, native, linked data cataloging environment, called Sinopia, will include a lookup service for identifiers (see below for more on identifiers), as well as a BIBFRAME editor and BIBFRAME to MARC mapping (Li, 2019). The goal of the LD4P2 project is to build infrastructure and to see how linked data plays into discovery. UC Davis will be exporting data from Sinopia into a local system to experiment with how linked data functions with regard to circulation, acquisitions, and cataloging.

BIBFRAME

BIBFRAME, the Library of Congress-led project to build a replacement for the MARC encoding scheme, is being built for RDF so that library data will no longer be siloed in a library-specific format. BIBFRAME is intended for use in libraries, archives, and museums (Balster, 2018) and is meant to be content standard neutral. For example, BIBFRAME aims to handle EAD (Encoded Archival Description) as easily as it handles RDA. Therefore, the

application in which catalogers work with BIBFRAME will need to be flexible enough to accommodate elements from many content standards, and will need to use language that is, in Balster's excellent phrasing, both "generic and granular." Balster's article is intended for an audience of serials catalogers, but is excellent reading for anyone seeking a review of BIBFRAME developments.

Identifiers

Catalogers have long been used to constructing strings to identify names and subjects (for example, "Dubuffet, Jean, $d 1901-1985"). Traditionally, when more than one possible string exists (e.g., an author changes their name, or a title is translated into a different language), catalogers have chosen one string as the preferred or "authorized" form, and the authority record has been structured based on that choice. The trouble with this method is that it allows no flexibility for different communities to display the particular string that may make more sense for their unique users. This has proven to be especially problematic when it comes to data interoperating between different languages and cultural communities.

Multiple projects, such as VIAF (Virtual International Authority File) and ISNI (International Standard Name Identifier), are working to match and consolidate the identities represented in various authority files all over the world. These projects make it possible to obtain persistent identifiers for entities that do not rely on matching strings. When we have persistent identifiers (such as URIs), and when our bibliographic utility and our local systems are able to display identities in a way that is meaningful for our local communities, we'll have both authority and flexibility.

Punctuation

Another step toward readying our metadata for greater interoperability is the move toward omitting ISBD punctuation in descriptive fields. In a limited way, this change is already being implemented. According to the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) Policy Committee, PCC libraries are currently entering the first phase of implementation of their policy to omit ISBD punctuation in bib records (PCC, 2019). Without this library-specific punctuation, our data is more easily manipulated—meaning that our choices for display would depend on what a system is able to supply, rather than what is attached to the data itself.

So what does this mean for the future?

The development of Sinopia is a major step. A linked data cataloging environment that can be demonstrated and used makes it possible to imagine future hands-on copy cataloging. It makes it possible to imagine doing the work we do now in an environment similar to familiar bibliographic utilities such as Connexion or SkyRiver. There will be new concepts and functions to learn in order to bring linked data into local catalogs. It also remains to be seen whether the "record" will continue to exist in the form we know it, or if it will become a complex amalgam of Work, Expression, Manifestation, and Item elements mapped to the three BIBFRAME levels of abstraction (work, instance, and item) and pulling information from RDF triples.

In whatever state "the record" exists, copy catalogers will still be reusing metadata from a bibliographic utility of some kind, which will not be a huge departure from what they do

now. Eventually, catalogers will likely have an interface that utilizes application profiles and prompts and is drastically more clear than our current catalogs about relationships to other objects. For example, a cataloger in a public library would experience the bibliographic utility through a profile that defines the type of material being worked on, and perhaps even the set of rules being followed (e.g., a sound recording cataloged in RDA), and only the applicable prompts would be visible. The goal for all catalogers in an RDA/linked data/BIBFRAME environment is more efficiency and less data duplication and maintenance. For the patron, the context and relationships of an object would be clear and easy to discover.

What we must hope occurs—for the sake of all copy catalogers—is that future local systems use accessible language that both patrons and catalogers can understand. While the new rewrite of RDA is a step forward in terms of aligning with IFLA conceptual models, it clearly is not an improvement in terms of being a readable text or an easy-to-follow set of guidelines. Trainers and cataloging supervisors would be wise to provide interceding tools for their copy catalogers, such as Robert Maxwell's guides or local interpretive "how-to" documents. As much as possible, this duty should fall to supervisors and experienced cataloging staff.

Once we realize the dream of easy interoperability via RDF linked data, not only will exchange formats be far more compatible, but we'll also be able to more easily ingest data from publishers, vendors, and the web. This data will be a starting point for manipulation and cataloging, rather than starting from scratch. Our resultant metadata will be much simpler to expose on the web, and at long last, we may find ourselves where our patrons already are.

In short, we are still on the trajectory that began with the first library catalog, and we continue to look for ways to meet our patrons where they are, provide access, and accurately represent the world of knowledge. We've been through innumerable growing pains before. Don't panic.

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