On the Dublin Core front

by Norm Medeiros
Associate Librarian of the College
Haverford College
Haverford, PA

The Catalog's Last Stand

ABSTRACT
This article describes the uncertain future of the online catalog, and the tension that exists between creating a cataloging code that meets user needs while adhering to principles deemed important by the cataloging community. Underscoring this tension are the provocative questions posited by the Taiga Steering Committee, which call into question the future of libraries.

KEYWORDS
online catalog ; OPAC ; RDA ; Resource Description and Access ; cataloging ; Taiga Forum

For the traditional cataloging community, full and detailed descriptive cataloging is still the gold standard. They believe fervently that this level of description is essential to the continuation of scholarship, and resist most challenges to this view of their role and mission, even as Google seduces their users.[1]

*I*t's a confusing time to be a cataloger. On my desk is a three-ring binder consisting of a couple hundred draft pages of RDA[2], the successor to AACR2. Alongside it, in stark contrast, rests a single duplexed page of "provocative questions" from the Taiga Forum[3], a meeting of associate university librarians for technical services first held in May 2006. RDA represents the future of cataloging, yet the Taiga publication questions whether in five years catalog librarians will even exist. I'm not alone in my confusion. In March 2007, the Library of Congress held a meeting to discuss the future of bibliographic control, a future that is becoming increasingly more difficult to discern.

A colleague asked recently whether I thought purchase of an enriched online catalog (opac) tool was justified. Rejuvenating the catalog to be a more user-friendly and powerful tool, I told him, is not just warranted, but responsible. Despite this assertiveness, I have doubts concerning the long-term future of the opac and its role in resource discovery. I maintain the position that libraries, as finances allow, ought to provide the best catalog search experience possible. Yet OCLC's recently-announced experiment to serve as the local catalog for a handful of libraries, beginning with the University of Washington in April 2007, gives me pause (see <http://www.oclc.org/news/releases/200659.htm> for additional details). Moreover, one of these troubling Taiga statements suggests:

Within the next five years a large number of libraries will no longer have local OPACs. Instead, we will have entered a new age of data consolidation (either shared catalogs or catalogs that are integrated into discovery tools), both of our catalogs and our collections. The ERM system and the ILS will be one and discovery will be outsourced.

The proficiency with which libraries exercise resource sharing suggests availing users to union catalogs rather than local catalogs, particularly when patron-initiated requesting is available. My institution belongs to a local three-college consortium, a state-sponsored library federation, and another federation of college and university libraries in the Pennsylvania area. Each of these consortia has a union catalog that supports patron-initiated borrowing. The three-college consortium funds a delivery service that provides 24-hour turnaround. In the two larger consortia, delivery occurs in three days via express carrier. Although some users are under time constraints that preclude waiting even one day for a needed item, three days, as evidenced by the steady increase in borrowing activity, seems an acceptable waiting period to most. Why *not* forego the local catalog in favor of a vastly wider information resource?

The last sentence of the provocative statement quoted above seems more logical than controversial. In fact, if integrated library systems were more accommodating to processes unique to the management of e-resources, electronic resource management systems (ERMS) may not exist. With this said, vendors in the ERMS marketplace have distinct and passionate viewpoints on the role ERMS serves vis-à-vis the integrated library system (ILS). To some vendors, the ERMS is simply a module of the ILS, plugging into the central system in the way a cataloging or serials module does. To others there is the belief that the ERMS will eventually displace the ILS as the central system for backroom operations, a position easier to accept if discovery, as the Taiga Forum Steering Committee has posited, ceases to be the responsibility of the local opac.

<center>*   *   *   *   *</center>

The Taiga statements aren't entirely dejecting. In fact, some highlight opportunities where libraries can serve a vital role in the future. Two that resonate with me involve workflow and institutional repositories. Four of the 15 provocative statements reference workflow. As noted in earlier *On the Dublin Core Front* columns, I believe workflow management is the most significant payoff from electronic resource management systems. Business processes of many kinds rely on effective computer-facilitated workflows to ensure information dissemination and propagation; the need for efficient workflows is not unique to libraries, nor is the application of robust systems to achieve said efficiency. Institutional repositories are used to capture, preserve, and make accessible the scholarly output of a university. Repository systems such as MIT's DSpace provide a means of protecting objects whose future might otherwise be in jeopardy. The library, specifically technical services, needs to be at the center of this work, as demonstrated by the initiative of Carol Hixson at the University of Oregon (see <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/dspace/index.jsp>). Such efforts extend naturally from more traditional forms of resource description, organization, and preservation. Institutional repository initiatives, however, should not be seen as a challenge to traditional means of publication. Moreover, it's unlikely institutional repositories will become more desirable for faculty authors than discipline-specific open archives such as arXiv and RePEc. Yet there exist numerous known and countless unknown digital objects on every academic campus whose current value and future sustainability could be substantially increased through aggregation in a trusted repository. Technical services units are well positioned to lead this work.

<center>*   *   *   *   *</center>

Timothy Burke, Associate Professor of History at Swarthmore College (PA) and presenter at the aforementioned Library of Congress meeting on the future of bibliographic control, describes vividly the tension between accommodating the desires of users and staying true to the catalog's guiding principles:

I worry a little about the idea that the singular driving force in catalog reform is to seat King User on his throne, to depose the wicked expert viziers who have kept the king from knowing what he wants to know. I worry that it replaces the wicked vizier with a fawning courtier.[4]

There's much hope that FRBR will "fix" online catalog problems, a heavy burden to place on such a complex conceptual model. If FRBR doesn't collapse under the weight of these great expectations, can it strike a balance between user needs and catalog righteousness in the RDA era? No matter the outcome, this seems the catalog's last stand, the Rocky VI of catalog revision. How will it end?

REFERENCES

1. Coyle, Karen & Diane Hillman (2007). "Resource Description and Access (RDA): Cataloging Rules for the 20th Century," *D-Lib Magazine*, vol. 13, no. 1-2. Available: http://www.dlib.org/dlib/january07/coyle/01coyle.html (Accessed 22 March 2007).

2. RDA drafts are available at http://www.collectionscanada.ca/jsc/rda.html#drafts

3. Taiga Forum Steering Committee (2006). "Taiga Forum Provocative Statements." Available: http://www.taigaforum.org/docs/ProvocativeStatements.pdf (Accessed 19 March 2007).

4. Burke, Timothy (2007). "Search as alchemy." Available: http://weblogs.swarthmore.edu/burke/?p=344 (Accessed 22 March 2007).