

On the Dublin Core front

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Bibliographic Challenges in Historical Context: Looking Back to 1982

{A published version of this article appears in the 23:4 (2007) issue of *OCLC Systems & Services*.}

*"A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."*¹ -- William Strunk Jr.

ABSTRACT

This article comments on a paper written in 1982 in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services (ALCTS). The piece describes persistent challenges faced by the cataloging community. It includes comments made during the ALCTS 50th Anniversary National Conference as a means of placing these challenges in historical context.

KEYWORDS

online catalog ; OPAC ; cataloging ; information access

I'm returning home in the comfort of Amtrak's coach class from the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services' (ALCTS) National Conference, a celebration of the organization's 50 years. The two-day event held in Washington D.C. featured visionaries who forecasted an increasingly chaotic future, penetrating anxiety into the collated world of the 125 members in attendance. Being a practical and responsible lot, librarians like to plan ahead. Given the exponential rate of change and the inability for our profession to keep up with it, I wonder if it's not better to proceed like the hitter who reacts naturally to a pitch rather than trying to guess what's coming. Not many librarians are ballplayers I've learned, so aboard the S.S. Unknown we go with a course set for the horizon. Don't forget the Dramamine.

I've had occasion recently to review past issues of *Library Resources & Technical Services* (LRTS), the official journal of ALCTS. To the satisfaction of serials librarians worldwide, *LRTS* has stayed true to its founding title, unlike its sponsor which was known as the Resources and Technical Services Division (RTSD) until 1989. Since its inception in 1957, *LRTS* has published peer-reviewed papers on collection development and technical services. In 1982, a silver anniversary issue of *LRTS* was commissioned. While browsing this volume, the title of one paper caught my attention: "Is there a catalog in your future?" by Nancy J. Williamson.² The question is timeless, having as much

significance today as it did 25 years earlier. Intrigued, I began reading the article, which unlike so many works that predict a false future, proved remarkably prophetic.

THE BIBLIOGRAPHIC WORLD OF 1982

When Williamson wrote her article in 1982, the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, Second edition* (AACR2) had been in service for four years; first-generation library management systems were being implemented in some libraries; indexing and abstracting services were developing Boolean and keyword search capabilities; and commercial information systems such as BRS and Dialog, through modem telecommunications, were allowing individuals from home or office to access citation, and in some cases, full-text data. At the onset of these developments, Williamson and others began to question the future role of the catalog and the library, particularly as the expectations of users grew in accordance with these technological advances. One of Williamson's concerns remains constant today: the need to improve access within online catalogs. Enriched catalog tools such as Endeca seek to maximize the rich data available in most bibliographic records. Yet it remains in 2007 as it did in 1982 that most catalogs are ineffective when compared to sophisticated, easy-to-use interfaces built for the commercial sector.

FULL-TEXT IS KING

Williamson's crystal ball noted the challenge of trying to serve a populous increasingly demanding of full-text sources. Williamson thought full-text would be "doubly attractive to users;"³ we know such sources to be infinitely more attractive to users, having become the expectation, rather than the exception. For example, undergraduates love JSTOR, the giving tree of online resources; it never fails to satisfy. Given the culture of convenience that permeates the lives of college students, one wonders about the future viability of information providers that fail to provide full-text. Abstracting and indexing services seem at risk, their niche being subsumed by Google Scholar. Although canceling citation-only services may be premature, especially given Google's secrecy about the sources it indexes, might there be a return to per-search database pricing models for those resources whose use is waning?

THE PLACE OF THE CATALOG

With stunning precision, Williamson predicts the future place of the catalog and role of the library upon the 50th anniversary of ALCTS:

I see a catalog in our future, but a catalog which will not be the major focal point in gaining access to information, and one which will play a diminished role in that world. While the role of the library as a recreational institution does not appear to be in serious question, its survival as an information agency will be dependent on its ability to redefine its procedures and goals in terms of the bibliographic universe as a whole. In doing so, it will be necessary to place its basic tool - the catalog - in its proper perspective with other access tools. In brief, librarians must consider the ways and means of developing *information services* as opposed to providing access to specific collections or particular databases.⁴

The persistent problems of the catalog exist less with its business modules and more with its front-end. R. David Lankes, an invited speaker at the ALCTS National Conference, made the observation that only in libraries are customers given access to the inventory system; in no other line of business are customers given such a privilege.⁵ Yet libraries not only provide such access, they do so knowing that the interface provided is not good. An undercurrent of Lankes's speech, which was even more

pronounced during the breakout sessions that followed, is that the time has come to peel away the discovery component of the catalog from its business core. Other information players do search better than libraries; we should let them do it.

CONCLUSION

Near the close of Williamson's insightful article, she cautions, "In the marriage between new technology and access to information, let us not be left standing at the alter."⁶ Twenty-five years later, are we even at the wedding? Enormous supplies of energy during the ALCTS National Conference were spent strategizing ways for libraries to remain relevant to our visually-oriented, socially-networked clientele. Pushing services into venues such as MySpace, YouTube, and Second Life was seen as one option, building relationships across campuses and communities in the more traditional ways another. If I live to comment on the 75th anniversary of ALCTS, I suspect the issue of library relevance will still be with us. Will the catalog be there as well? I'll let you know when we reach the horizon.

REFERENCES

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3. Ibid, p.124.
4. Ibid, p.127.
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6. Williamson, p.134.