

On the Dublin Core front

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Screw Cap or Cork? Keeping Tags Fresh (and Related Matters)

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ABSTRACT

This article comments to the excitement caused by release of "On the Record," the final report of the Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control. The article notes the challenge of maintaining user-supplied tags in the absence of an agency responsible for their upkeep. It also refers to the chaos emerging from the convergence of enriched catalogs, WorldCat Local, and federated tools, all of which are vying for library search.

KEYWORDS

cataloging; social tagging; tags; enriched catalogs

"Subject analysis – including analyzing content and creating and applying subject headings and classification numbers – is a core function of cataloging; although expensive, it is nonetheless critical."¹

The Library of Congress (LC) Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control released its final report on 9 January 2008. The Working Group (WG) was convened by Deanna Marcum, LC's Associate Librarian for Library Services, and charged with:

- Presenting findings on how bibliographic control and other descriptive practices can effectively support management of and access to library materials in the evolving information and technology environment;
- Recommending ways in which the library community can collectively move toward achieving this vision;
- Advising the Library of Congress on its role and priorities.

Despite a lack of controversial recommendations by the WG – the exception being suspension of work on RDA -- the report has caused a stir in libraryland.² It reminds me of the commotion that ensued following release of George Mitchell's report on the illegal use of steroids in Major League Baseball (MLB) just a month earlier. I happened to be home during the airing on C-SPAN of day two of the congressional hearing, which featured MLB Commissioner Bud Selig and MLB Players Association head Donald Fehr. Not surprisingly, their testimony was combative and accusatory. As I watched

them spar, I thought how useful it would be to the library community if the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform would hold a hearing on the Working Group's report. Day one could feature WG co-chairs Olivia Madison and Brian Schottlaender, who would articulate thoughtful responses to questions posed by the committee members. The dialogue would be cordial, and Chairman Waxman would conclude the hearing by thanking Ms. Madison and Mr. Schottlaender, as he did Senator Mitchell, for leading such a thorough investigation. Day two would be the main event, featuring Deanna Marcum, commissioner of the Working Group report and change agent, against Michael Gorman, the staunch defender of complex and exhaustive cataloging. Michael Buffer could introduce them as they enter the room, followed by his trademark, "Let's get ready to rumble!" Now that would be "must see TV," not to mention a practical way to solve our differences.

On the Record holds few surprises. It is consistent with recommendations made by Karen Calhoun in a previous LC-commissioned paper, with a notable exception pertaining to Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH).³ Calhoun recommended the dismantling of LCSH in favor of explorations into automated subject analysis, while the WG sees value in the continued use LCSH, albeit using a faceted approach. In an attempt to maximize productivity of subject terms, the WG recommends LC and the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) find ways for additional libraries to create and maintain authority records. It's interesting to ponder how maintenance of LCSH might come to bear on tags, user-created subject terms popular on sites such as LibraryThing, Del.icio.us, and Flickr. The WG promoted incorporating tags into the library catalog, and indeed such terms can aid in discovery by providing a vernacular that may not otherwise be contained within the bibliographic description of the item, especially given the time lag between the common usage of a term and the appearance of that term as an LCSH heading or cross-reference. The question has moved in my view from one of whether such tags offer bibliographic enrichment, to how these tags will be maintained throughout the years, or as Joyce Ogburn puts it, "how tags will age."⁴

TAG MAINTENANCE

Despite numerous problems, including ambiguity, polysemy, and synonymy, tags have transitioned from the novel to the mainstream.⁵ Little attention, however, has been given to long-term tag maintenance. If libraries generally adopt user tags in the catalog, what happens to retrieval via these terms as their meaning changes with time? As Mary Ellen Bates cautions, "No one's considering 'Is this how we'll refer to this issue in 2 years?'"⁶ We can't expect users who contribute tags to be mindful of the consequences of their choices, but if we are opening our catalogs to community influence, then libraries should consider how to prevent these terms from going stale. Could this class of subject terms undergo authority control? The LC Working Group noted the need for better collaboration in creating and maintaining authority data. As time goes by such collaboration may need to be focused on this new and popular descriptive element.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC ENRICHMENT

*Libraries have tended to equate bibliographic control with the production of metadata for use solely within the library catalog. This narrow focus is no longer suitable in an environment wherein data from diverse sources are used to create new and interesting information views. Library data must be usable outside of the catalog, and the catalog must be able to ingest or interact with records from sources outside of the library cataloging workflow. The tightly controlled consistency designed into library standards thus far is unlikely to be realized or sustained in the future, even within the local environment.*⁷

It's fascinating to watch the development of enriched or "next generation" catalogs. The field of available products is growing, most recently with the addition of Villanova University's "VUFind" <<http://www.vufind.org/>>, an open source application that seeks to be a portal for an institution's locally-created metadata, including but not limited to the bibliographic records contained within its library catalog. On the other end of this spectrum is WorldCat Local, offering the immensity of the WorldCat database, along with shared collections and open access materials. Although WorldCat Local offers branding and the ability to prioritize results based on availability at the local institution, it is diametrically opposed to the next generation catalogs, which are customized to serve the needs of a well-defined user population. Somewhere along this spectrum, or more accurately, matrix, exists federated search products, such as WebFeat and Ex Libris' MetaLib. And let's not forget Google, whose Scholar tool may be the best federated search service available.

The chaos emerging from the convergence of enriched catalogs, WorldCat Local, and federated tools, coupled with the commotion caused by "On the Record" and its yet-to-be-determined aftermath, should make for a memorable year.

REFERENCES

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2. A recent example is Foster, Andrea L. & Jennifer Howard (2008). "Library of Congress Report Urges Libraries to Update cataloging Strategies," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54(21): A11.
3. Calhoun, Karen (2006). *The Changing Nature of the Catalog and its Integration with Other Discovery Tools*. Available: <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/calhoun-report-final.pdf> (Accessed: 25 January 2008).
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7. Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control (2008): 31.