Catalog or Catalogue?: Examining a Library Dilemma

By Jeffrey Beall

Abstract: The variant spellings catalog and catalogue create problems for librarianship by causing confusion, hindering research, and betraying the standardization the profession values. The predominant spelling in Britain (catalogue) differs from the predominant spelling in the U.S. (catalog), but within the U.S. both spellings are commonly used. Both of these different practices create inconsistencies. Although the spelling catalog has long been prescribed in the U.S., it has not fully caught on. The spelling catalog is far more common on the Web than catalogue. The best solution to this dilemma for librarians may be to not use this outmoded term at all.

Catalog or Catalogue?: Examining a Library Dilemma

One of the most common words in librarianship is perhaps also the word that suffers from the most inconsistent orthography within the profession. Though seldom discussed, the variant spellings of the word catalog / catalogue are both often seen in libraries, at least in the United States, and there is little resolution about which is the preferred usage. This inconsistency causes confusion, makes the profession seem unorganized, hinders research, and forces librarians to consciously choose a particular spelling, lest they suffer the stigma of inconsistency themselves. Although the word is still often used in librarianship, it is time to replace it. The word catalog does not adequately describe the increased functionality that library online systems make available today.

These disparate spellings are worthy of discussion for several reasons. First, librarianship values standardization. That is to say, we in the profession promote and benefit from a common way of doing and saying things related to librarianship. Second, a discussion is warranted simply because the different spellings are so often seen yet so seldom discussed. While it is unlikely that initiating a discussion of the different spellings of the word catalog / catalogue will lead to libraries changing their usage one way or the other, it will likely bring about a broader awareness of the two spellings, and the problems they cause. Finally, a discussion of the disparate spellings may inspire some of us to invent solutions to the problems the distinct spellings cause. The best invention will be one that does not use any form of the word at all.

One of the problems caused by the different spellings is the problem of research in librarianship. If a searcher inquires of a database for works with the word cataloguing in the title, the results will probably be devoid of works with the word cataloging in the title, works that may match exactly what the searcher is seeking. Most databases offer a way of searching for variant spellings in a single search, such as by using a question mark, as in the keyword search, "catalog?ng." But many of us forget to employ these methods, or we don't know them, for they often differ from system to system. Unsophisticated users may not be aware of them at all. The overall result is that research about catalogs and cataloging is hindered by the variant spellings.

Another problem is that the disparate spellings make the profession seem unorganized. This is not so much the case in the United Kingdom—where the spelling catalogue predominates--as it is in the United States, where there is much less agreement on the spelling. For example, a single library Web site may use both spellings; occasionally these variant spellings are seen almost in juxtaposition. Moreover, two colleagues within a single institution often use one or the other spelling. And the spelling may differ from one library to another within an institution. This variation fosters an image of confusion within the profession. For example, an article I wrote contained the word Cataloging in the title and dealt with cataloging as a topic [1]. The article was published by a library organization whose journal that at the time was published in British Columbia. The editors changed the spelling of the word in the title to Cataloguing, but they

did not change the spelling of the word throughout the article, thus creating a salient inconsistency.

Librarianship values standardization. The profession devotes much time and energy to developing practices and systems that employ international standards. The MARC format is an example of an international library standard. Another is the Z39.50 protocol. Thus the fact that one of the most common words in the profession lacks a standard spelling betrays the abundant effort librarians have devoted to standardization in our profession.

While it is true that in the United Kingdom and the current and former member countries of the British Commonwealth the almost universal spelling is catalogue, there is no universal usage in the United States. This divergence began with Noah Webster, and his American Spelling Book, which was first published in 1788 [2]. Later editions bore the title The Elementary Spelling Book [3]. Webster, like Melville Dewey after him, favored the rationalization of spelling, that is, making spelling match pronunciation. One source credits Dewey, a would-be spelling reformer himself, with promoting the change in librarianship. It claims, "He was a reformer of English spelling and is responsible for, among other things, the 'American' spelling of the word Catalog (as opposed to the British Catalogue) [4]."

Perhaps the best study of the change from catalogue to catalog in America is provided by H.L. Mencken in the fourth edition of his work The American Language:

But the real father of the Simplified Spelling movement was Noah

Webster. The controversy over his new spelling … aroused a great deal

of public interest in the subject, and in the early [18]70's even the dons

of the American Philological Association began to give it some attention.

In 1875 they appointed a committee consisting of Professors Francis A.

March of Lafayette College, W. D. Whitney and J. Hammond Trumbell

of Yale, S. S. Haldeman of the University of Pennsylvania, and F. J.

Child of Harvard to look into it, and in 1876 this committee reported that

a revision of spelling was urgent and that something should be done

about it. Specifically, they proposed that eleven new spellings be adopted

at once, to wit, ar, catalog, definit, gard, giv, hav, infinit, liv, tho, thru

and wisht. [5, p. 399]

Thus we see that even well before the end of the 19th century there was a

serious movement to legitimize the spelling catalog in the United States.

Remarkably, none of the other ten spellings was adopted popularly, except

perhaps, for thru. Mencken further recounts that in 1898, after the appearance of

the initial list of words whose proposed reformed spelling was not popularly

accepted, the National Education Association reignited the spelling reform

movement "with a proposal that a beginning be made with a very short list of

reformed spellings, and nominated the following twelve changes by way of

experiment: tho, altho, thru, thruout, thoro, thoroly, thorofare, program, prolog,

catalog, pedagog and decalog [5, p. 400]." Later, in 1919, the Simplified Spelling

Board published the Handbook of Simplified Spelling [6] that made numerous

spelling recommendations. Among these recommendations was number 21, which according to Mencken, stated, "When gue is final after a consonant, a short vowel or a digraph representing a long vowel or a diphthong drop the silent ue: tung, catalog, harang, leag, sinagog. But not when a wrong pronunciation would be suggested: rog (for rogue), vag (for vague), etc [5, p. 402]." Mencken also describes another significant event that helped to legitimize the spelling catalog in the United States. In 1935 the newspaper the Chicago Tribune announced a new style guide that included prescribed spellings for 24 words, including catalog. Mencken states that at this time the spelling catalog was already in general use.

The Oxford English Dictionary [7] defines catalog in its current sense as it relates to librarianship as, "Now usually distinguished from a mere list or enumeration, by systematic or methodological arrangement, alphabetical or other order, and often by the addition of brief particulars, descriptive or aiding information, indicative of locality, position, date, price or the like [7, v. 2, p. 967]." The dictionary lists the earliest spelling of catalogue as occurring in about 1535, and it lists the earliest spelling of catalog as occurring in 1587 [7, v. 2, p. 967]. It should be noted that the dictionary enters the word under the spelling catalogue, which is not unexpected, since it is a British publication. The spelling catalog is cited in usage examples in the entry for catalogue.

The entry for catalog in the Columbia Guide to Standard American English, published in 1993, lists both spellings in its entry; catalog is first. The definition states, "Both noun and verb occur in both spellings. Catalogue is more conservative, catalog probably slightly more prevalent today [9, p. 89]." On the

other hand, in the work A Dictionary of Modern American Usage, published in
1998, the author directs his scorn directly at librarians. The entry reads:

> Catalog(ue). Though librarians have come to use catalog with regularity,
> catalogue is still the better form. Cataloging makes about as much sense as
> plaging. "If the professionals decline to restore the –u- to the inflected forms"
> wrote Wilson Follett, "let them simply double the –g-" (MAU at 87) [10].

Of course within librarianship, the word means much more. As a noun, the
first contemporary meaning that comes to mind is a library's online catalog,
which is a detailed listing of materials a library holds or provides access to. So
familiar is the online catalog in the modern library that many have given to
naming it with pet-like names, such as Luis, Orbis, Pete, etc. To our patrons, it
very often is not a catalog but "the library's computer system." More formally, we
call it an online public access catalog, or OPAC. Many experienced librarians
may still refer to the online catalog as the "public catalog," for that was what card
catalogs were called at many libraries. As a verb, to catalog means to create and
maintain bibliographic records. If is an item is not cataloged correctly the first
time, it may need to be recataloged. As an adjective, the term simply means
relating to the library's catalog, as in catalog cards.The –ing form of the word
cataloging can be a noun (Cataloging is fun), a verb (I am cataloging), or an
adjective (the cataloging rules). The spelling cataloguing has always seemed
strange to me, for it evokes in my American mind the image of something gooey.
Uncataloged items are works that have yet to pass through the cataloging process.
A union catalog combines the catalogs of more than one library. A catalog may
be split into parts according to access point. One may find an author catalog, a

title catalog, or a subject catalog, but electronic catalogs tend to combine these. Although the spelling of the word differs between the U.K. and the U.S. and within the U.S., the meaning does not, at least in the library context.

If one accepts that the Web is a valid textual corpus for studying usage and dialectology, and if one accepts that Google is a valid interface for this corpus, then it may be valuable to search the Web using Google and examine the frequencies of the different spellings of catalog / catalogue. Take, for example the individual searches for the spellings catalog and catalogue in Google. Table 1 shows the results of these two searches.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Word searched	Number of Web pages found
catalog	About 57,000,000
catalogue	About 16,700,000

Table 1 [10]. The number of web pages retrieved from Google searches for catalog and catalogue.

This Google search shows that the spelling catalog is found about three and a half times more often than is the spelling catalogue on the Web. Of course, this reflects only the frequency on the Web as measured by Google and nothing more.

In Google, it is possible to limit by internet domain, such as .edu and .uk. Table 2 shows the results of four searches of the words catalog and catalogue that were limited to specific domains.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Domain	Word searched	Number of Web pages found
.edu	catalog	7,200,000
	catalogue	1,740,000
.uk	catalog	1,220,000
	catalogue	4,440,000

Table 2 [10]. The number of web pages retrieved from Google searches for catalog and catalogue, with each word limited to either the domain .edu or .uk.

This table confirms that the spelling catalog is more common in the U.S. (where the .edu domain is located) and the spelling catalogue is more common in the U.K. where the .uk domain is located. The one surprising figure from this table is the 1,220,000 Web pages with the spelling catalog in the U.K. Perhaps the British don't use the spelling catalogue as exclusively as one might have assumed.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Domain	Term searched	Number of Web pages found
.edu	"library catalog"	559,000
	"library catalogue"	18,600
.uk	"library catalog"	2,050
	"library catalogue"	204,000

Table 3 [10]. Four Google searches showing the number of Web pages retrieved for various spellings and forms of the term "library catalog." The terms were searched as a phrase. These figures exemplify the different spellings found in the textual corpus within this selected library context.

Table 3 examines the frequency of the two spellings in a library context, namely the terms "library catalog" and "library catalogue" as represented on the Web and indexed by Google. Here again the spelling catalog predominates.

The cataloging rules used by most cataloging departments in both Britain and America are codified in a work entitled the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, second edition [11]. Note the spelling cataloguing in the title. The British spelling is used throughout the work, a practice that has certainly influenced the word's spelling among some American librarians. Terminology and spelling were negotiated among the committees who authored the work. In it they say:

> The second edition of the rules is based on a reconciliation of the British and North American texts of the 1967 edition. This extends to style, which is generally in accordance with the Chicago Manual of Style, and to spellings, which are those of Webster's New International Dictionary. Where Webster's gives as a permitted alternative a British spelling (e.g. catalogue, centre), it has been used in the rules; where the American usage is the only one specified (e.g. capitalize), it has been used in the rules. Agreement on terminology has similarly resulted sometimes in the use of an American term, (e.g. membership in) and sometimes in a British term (e.g. full stop) [11, p. 1].

This compromise has probably influenced many American writers—especially librarians—to use the spelling catalogue and has surely contributed to the confusion and lack of standardization found with the spelling in the library world today. American librarians are forced to select between the popular spelling (catalog) and the spelling prescribed by AACR2 (catalogue). How does one decide? The compromise has also created much confusion among librarians in America, many of whom do know not know what the British terms used in the rules mean, such as full stop (period) or mark of omission (ellipsis), for these terms are not used in the United States. No compromise is perfect and each involves some give and take, but the compromise on using the spelling catalogue in the chief edition of cataloging rules in the United States is a source of the lack of standardization described earlier.

On my first day at work as a cataloger at Harvard University in May, 1990, I saw a worn inscription on the door of my department. It read, "Catalog Department." The department has long since moved out of that space, and the door has been revarnished, forever erasing the old inscription. The department itself has changed its organization and is now called Technical Services, but the term Cataloger is still used as a job title. As you can see, my preferred spelling is catalog, and seeing that spelling on my first day of work at a great American institution of higher learning forever fixed that particular spelling in my mind.

The biggest problem with the variant spellings of catalog and its derivatives is that the predominant spellings differ between the United States and most of the rest of the English-speaking world, and the spellings differ within the

United States. This difference leads to confusion, can lead to incomplete search results on online systems, and makes librarianship look unorganized. Clearly, any attempts to force a particular spelling on a group of people will fail and is unwarranted. The fact that the spelling catalog has become the prominent one in America is itself amazing, given the number of words with reformed spelling that accompanied it in various proposals, words whose new spelling was never adopted. Why did the spelling catalog become popularly adopted when so many other proposed spellings did not? Perhaps the solution for the library community is to invent a completely new word.

The fact is that the word catalog is antiquated and does not reflect the increased functionality of today's online library systems. Librarianship needs a new terminology to replace the word catalog. Not only would this new terminology solve the problem of the variant spellings, it would invigorate this important aspect of librarianship and would unite us once again, orthographically.

References

1. Beall, Jeffrey. "What OCLC and RLIN Don't Want You to Know about the Future of Cataloguing." PNLA Quarterly 66, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 9-10.

2. Webster, Noah. The American Spelling Book. Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1788.

3. Webster, Noah. The Elementary Spelling Book: Being an Improvement on the American Spelling Book. Middletown, Conn.: W.H. Niles, 1829.

4. "Melvil Dewey." Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia. Online,

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melvil_Dewey

5. Mencken, H.L. The American Language: an Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States. 4th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965.

6. Simplified Spelling Board. Handbook of Simplified Spelling. New York: Simplified Spelling Board, 1919.

7. The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

8. Wilson, Kenneth G. The Columbia Guide to Standard American English. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

9. Garner, Bryan A. A Dictionary of Modern American Usage. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

10. Google Advanced Search. Online,

http://www.google.com/advanced_search.html Searches performed in February, 2004.

11. Anglo-American Cataloging Rules. 2nd ed, 2002 revisions, 2003 update. Chicago: American Library Association, 2003.