

Has cataloguing become too simple? Why it matters for cataloguers, catalogues and clients

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Abstract.

Modern catalogues have become far removed from their original ideals, and cataloguing standards have declined. Nineteenth-century arguments about whether cataloguing is an art or a science have been overtaken by concerns about a “dumbing-down” of quality to meet the perceived needs of modern library customers, and by debate about the direction of resources towards digitisation in the clamour for access. Despite rumours of the impending demise of MARC, the format remains standard and is expected to prevail into the foreseeable future. This article has been adapted from a paper delivered at the LIANZA Conference in Napier in September 2003.

Since the nineteenth century, cataloguing has been an activity unsure of its own *raison d'être*. It has twice been caught between two diametrically opposed bodies of opinion: first Art versus Science, and secondly Rules versus Access.

Cutter, in his *Rules for a Dictionary Catalog (1839)*, initiated the Art versus Science debate, albeit unknowingly. The nineteenth century saw massive social change. Public libraries mushroomed and developed as places for social betterment rather than as bastions of the well educated, wealthy, gentleman who believed cataloguing was an art. Add to this mix the burgeoning number of university-educated women entering the labour market (according to Lerner, by 1876 two-thirds of American library workers were women¹), and developments in socialist ideology and scientific reasoning, and it is no wonder that the adherents of the Art opinion were on the defensive, and personally speaking, still are.

The second debate, Rules versus Access, is more relevant to our own context. It centres on the conflict between the use of standards and the provision of access. I am not implying that the two are mutually exclusive: merely that where once it was the rules that dictated how a resource was described, now it is the demands of those wanting access to it. Instead of practicing an Art or a Science, we have allowed resource description to be dragged down to the customer's level. It has been “popularised” to an extent that negatively affects retrieval. At the 2002 LIANZA conference we heard Elizabeth Swan's call: “We need to move our focus from the processes we have used for generations to create ‘traditional libraries’ to a focus on the end-results we need ... delivering products and services that library clients need.”² At the same Conference Derek Law in his keynote speech called for a reversal of this trend:

Librarians have become besotted by a restless search for the latest bright baubles of information technology, who find the provision of a coloured screen web-based windows environment a substitute for thought and who blow in the wind - or is it the flatulence - of every new management fad. I want to suggest to you that the way to deal with the storms of the future is to hold fast to that which is at the core of our profession and to look at a future which has solid roots in our professional present and in the culture of library and information science.³

It is no surprise that confusion exists about the role of catalogues when the profession is confused about its role, a role further complicated by those who see it solely as a gateway to the digital environment.

A third paper at that conference, Chris Todd's aptly titled "Metadata mayhem," neatly encapsulated some of the problems that the digital environment has produced for resource describers: "New dimensions to the cataloguing process ... a new role for the catalogue ... development from traditional cataloguing."⁴ Historians will regard this period as one of change, confusion and uncertainty. Catalogue managers had a new vision or goal and were attempting to incorporate that goal. At the same time they or their resource describers were just not quite letting go of the past. The two ideals coexisted uneasily. The drowning man was reaching out to the lifeboat, but could not make himself let go of the sinking ship he was standing on.

Who are we cataloguing for?

So just who or what are we cataloguing for? Our customers? A March 2003 study reported, "Librarians in New Zealand are currently under threat from having an insufficiently clear idea of who their customers are."⁵ Speaking from personal experience, after recently moving into the public library sector I appreciate how little I previously understood who my customers were. Cataloguers focus too much on the abstract "catalogue user" as their customers and not enough on the "physical" customer. But what if customers are not the primary motivation? What if there are other factors that have a role in the why and how of our resource describing? Factors such as ourselves: are we engaged in some kind of unconscious therapeutic activity with its roots lost, fulfilling a desire to organise that has developed over millennia? Or our organisations: when we describe the resources of a collection we are often constrained by the demands of that collection. These constraints often come from staff with little or no (or forgotten) knowledge of the standards we use and whose only consideration is enabling access. When conflict arises is the resolution always guided by the resource describer? I am not saying that it should always be so, but how often is it? We have a new breed of manager who wants numerical results, the widest possible access, derived copy at any cost and who focuses on increasing productivity with static or diminishing resources. As we have experienced, the two simplest ways to increase the productivity of resource describers are to shrink the size of professional staff, and to spend less time on each description.

The OPAC dictates practice. For example, AACR2, 1.1 is quite clear that if a GMD is used, it should be the last element of the *title proper*.⁶ At Auckland City Libraries the GMD for non-book resources follows the *other title information*. This is due to a software limitation. We, as resource describers, have not demanded alterations to the OPAC software – instead, we have altered our practices to fit in with the software.

The ethereal digital environment has caused the catalogue to evolve into an integrated system with multiple functions. There have even been calls in library literature for the abandonment of the term OPAC, as it doesn't adequately express the system's function. Whether it should evolve this way, however, has not been discussed with much frequency. To suggest that perhaps it shouldn't is tantamount to heresy.

Do our customers understand this shift in emphasis? Do they care? Do they understand that they have used the OPAC as a portal and that the resource displayed on their terminal is not actually available because it is located in a collection in Florida, for example, and not in the physical library in which they are sitting?

Judith Pearce, Director of Web resources at the National Library of Australia (NLA) has undertaken log analysis of the NLA's website, and reports that many customers could not differentiate the catalogue from the homepage and used the "site search" option to search for items from the catalogue.⁷

How would a philosopher describe what we are doing? What if we are engaged in an activity that simply represents another step in unfathomable human behaviour? We describe resources because they exist and we need to organise.

Each of these factors has an impact on our descriptions. Is one uppermost in our mind as we undertake these descriptions. Are we conscious of what we are doing as we do it? Is resource description a conscious or a sub-conscious activity? A person describing their fifteenth resource that day is not fully attentive to the place that item will have in the catalogue. Their concentration is split between a number of topics; the description, the illustrations, the subject matter, tonight's television or their evening meal. Search any catalogue, review any describer's work, examine items queried with cataloguing departments and what are the majority of errors found? – not incorrect access points, not incorrect interpretations of rules but minor typographical and coding errors. These errors occur for three basic reasons: lack of concentration, inadequate knowledge and training, and the modern trend for not undertaking peer review.

Everybody else is digitising, why aren't we?

The digital environment is growing at an unparalleled rate. It is so new, so prevalent, so variable in quality and so ephemeral that it is unlike anything else that has gone before. It is folly to attempt to treat it the same way the written word has been, yet the profession seems determined to try.

In 1998 OCLC began an annual Web analysis. The 2002 results record that, of 100% of IP addresses for websites identified in 1998, only 13% still exist. Year after year, approximately half of addresses no longer exist. In addition, sites not ready for access (euphemistically called "under construction" or with meaningless content) averaged 36% during the five-year period.⁸ A recent news item reports that Congress has allocated the Library of Congress \$US25 million for the National Digital Information Infrastructure Program (NDIPP) with another \$US75 million to be raised by LC itself. A total of \$US100 million for one programme, or approaching four years total budget for our National Library.⁹ Other programmes include *Gallica 2000* (Bibliothèque nationale de France) – 15 million pages, *In Place* (British Library) – 100,000 images and sounds, and *National Autonomous University of Mexico Newspaper Library* – 20 million pages.

Where has the drive to describe and make available this digital heritage come from? Where is the reasoning behind it? Dare nobody question it? Dare nobody say why are we doing this? We pour resources into producing descriptions of electronic resources for which we already have a description: for example, a digital version of an 1889 Te Aroha News¹⁰ in the *Papers Past* database, yet at the same time our basements are full of items without descriptions at all. OCLC recently reported that "The estimated annual production of materials in 'Web-ready formats' (by the year 2007) is projected to be 'too large to estimate' by many analysts."¹¹

Catalogue managers baulk at handling traditional resources twice, yet do not see a problem if one version of the resource is electronic. All these projects, all this labour, at some uncalculated and incalculable cost to other activities, are being undertaken without a real sense of far-reaching purpose. Nowhere is this more evident than in Seamus Ross' *Digital Library Development Review* undertaken for the National Library in July 2003, when he says "The costs of selection, acquisition, ingest and

cataloguing of digital content remain a matter of guesswork.”¹² And yet “The Library will embark on developing its digital library without any prediction of costs per object.”¹³

Why is making a digital image of something already represented in the catalogue deemed a more worthy use of expertise, time and systems than adding to the catalogue items that are currently unknown? We must race ahead and digitise, digitise, digitise. Catalogue managers are hesitant to fund conventional resource description, but submit a proposal for digitising resources and the money, support, technology, etc. will appear as if by magic. It is heartening to hear the British Library’s newly appointed Director of e-Strategy, Richard Boulderstone’s opinions that conventional cataloguing is suffering due to the clamour for access and that metadata projects should be scrutinised more closely before steaming ahead.¹⁴

Resource relationships

Classical thinking dictates that a catalogue is built like a wall, one brick at a time, coming together in relation to other bricks to form a solid whole. The primary function of the catalogue is to express these relationships through collocation. Barbara Tillett’s Ph.D. dissertation presented in 1987¹⁵ was the ground-breaking catalyst that has led to the today’s work on the new conceptual framework, the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Resources (FRBR). The FRBR’s relevance to relationships cannot be too highly stressed. Alan Danskin, commenting on the FRBR model, has reiterated that it is the underlying structure of bibliographic data that is key to both FRBR and customer’s resource discovery.¹⁶ Tillett identified seven types of relationship and her dissertation examined MARC records created by LC from 1968-1986, in which she found relationships in 75% of records. (If Tillett’s examination of MARC records was repeated from 1986 onwards, I’ll wager a year’s salary that the percentage of records displaying a relationship has dropped below the 75% she recorded.)

The function of AACR2 is to ensure that relationships are identified and descriptions are linked. For example, a description would be of little use unless an access point was formulated, and an access point that had numerous variations would be of little use unless references were established for it. This codification of the construction of relationships is dependent on three caveats:

- We all follow the same rules.
- The rules are interpreted the same way.
- We understand the catalogue exists in a global environment.

AACR2 fails as a cataloguing code for the global environment. Although theoretically there will be consistency within the local catalogue, there cannot be in the global catalogue due to the use of options and varying interpretations. But right at the heart of the failure is 1.0D: “Base the choice of a level of description on the purpose of the catalogue or catalogues for which the entry is constructed”¹⁷ – a phrase unchanged from the 1978 second edition.

These failures place the responsibility for determining relationships on the customer. Yet today’s instant-knowledge, keyword-searching, “Google-compliant” society cannot do this. The onus should be on the resource describer, not the customer. If I take my car for a service, I do not expect it to be returned with the expectation that I will change the oil filter. I expect the mechanic to have completed the service.

How have we reacted to this? By dumbing down the resource description and the catalogue so that it accommodates the customer's approach to information retrieval, by making our catalogues look and "feel" like a Web search engine when in fact they are far more powerful tools. It is hoped that AACR3 will address many of these failures, but with publication not envisaged until after 2007 it will be next decade before real progress is made.

Roy Tenant's oft-repeated mantra that MARC is dead/dying/must die¹⁸ adds nothing new and serves only to sensationalise the debate. From a technological viewpoint, the MARC format has been redundant for many years. Theorists such as Gorman, Leazer and Tillett have all discussed new models for data transfer modes – Leazer as long ago as 1992. Something Tenant, and we, must appreciate is that no vendor is going to switch from a AACR/MARC system to an FRBR/XML system in the foreseeable future. The profession as a whole has to accept the following about the MARC format:

- Few catalogues are not built on it
- Vast amounts of money are invested in it
- Viable alternatives are either theoretical or untested on a large scale
- There would be a huge impact on the profession of adopting another format:
- It is going to be in use for many years to come.

The profession should place resources in revising or revamping the format before it declares the patient dead. It was Mark Twain who famously declared "*Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated*".

The library is not Dymocks

Until recently the library had a unique role to play as a disseminator of knowledge, information and entertainment. In order to do this it was staffed by professional people whose goal was clear. The whole organisation worked towards this goal. Then thinking changed. Society demanded more, competition arrived from the Web, and gratification had to be instant and voluminous. The library lost its point of difference from Dymocks. In response it began to compete. It pampered to what it thought the customer wanted. We call it "access;" bookshops call it "volume" – pile it high and sell it cheap. Specialist staffs are not required to provide popular fiction, and intellectual content is displaced by items with high turnover. Managers demand issues, and selectors provide stock that competes with bookshops. OPACs are made simpler to navigate, and the detail in them is reduced in accuracy and content.

Conclusion

The catalogue remains at the core of the service provided by the library. We have all failed to grasp the impact of the digital environment on what we do. The shift from ownership to access has occurred without the import and long term effects being understood. As the complexities of resource relationships grow we dumb down or simplify, according to some kind of inverse rule. We clamour to make our on-line catalogues appear and behave like Web search engines and expect our customers to be able to make sense of the results.

What we should be doing is focusing on a greater than ever need for organising what we provide access to and what is provided in the resource description. I am not advocating a return to some mythical golden age, merely that we all take a step back and think about what we do.

Notes:

- ¹ Lerner, F. *The Story of Libraries*. New York: Continuum, 1990. p. 200.
- ² Swan, E. *The changing landscape for (research) librarians : from monasteries to phone booths* [Webpage]. Available from: <http://www.confer.co.nz/lianza2002/PDFs/Swan.pdf>
- ³ Law, D. *Electrical storms : electronic information management issues and their impact on libraries* [Webpage]. Available from: <http://www.confer.co.nz/lianza2002/PDFs/Law.pdf>
- ⁴ Todd, C. *Metadata mayhem : cataloguing electronic resources in the National Library of New Zealand* [Webpage]. Available from: <http://www.confer.co.nz/lianza2002/PDFs/Todd.pdf>
- ⁵ Pope, A. "The impacts of the Internet on public library use : an analysis of the consumer market for library and Internet services in New Zealand." *New Zealand libraries*, vol. 49, no. 8 (March 2003), pp. 271-279. Also available from: www.adampope.net
- ⁶ *Anglo-American cataloging rules*. 2nd ed., 2002 revision. Ottawa, Canadian Library Association, 2002. pp. 1-7-1-12.
- ⁷ Pearce, J. "One search : don't make me think" [Webpage]. Available from: <http://www.nla.gov.au/lis/stdnrds/grps/acoc/papers.html>
- ⁸ Storey, T. "The Web after five years." *OCLC newsletter*, no. 259 (Jan. 2003), pp. 16-17.
- ⁹ *Library journal*, vol. 128, no. 5 (March 15, 2003), p. 17.
- ¹⁰ Available from: <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/index.html>
- ¹¹ Five-year information format trends. Dublin, Ohio, OCLC, 2003. p.1.
- ¹² Ross, S. (2003). Digital library development review, Wellington, N.Z., National Library of New Zealand, p. 43.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- ¹⁴ *Library and information update*, vol. 2 (5) (May 2003), p. 12.
- ¹⁵ Tillett, B. *Bibliographic relationships : towards a conceptual structure of bibliographic information used in cataloguing*, Los Angeles, UCLA, 1987.
- ¹⁶ Danskin, A. and Chapman, A. "Bibliographic records in the computer age." *Library and information update*, vol. 2 (8) (Sept. 2003). Also available from: <http://www.cilip.org.uk/update/issues/sept03/sept.html>
- ¹⁷ *Anglo-American cataloging rules*. 2nd ed., 2002 revision. Ottawa, Canadian Library Association, 2002. pp. 1-4.
- ¹⁸ Most recently at the Voyager User's General Meeting, 2003. Available from: <http://escholarship.cdlib.org/rtenant/presentations/2003end/enduserRT.pdf>

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