

Soapbox: The A-Team is back in Demand

Update, November 2006

The Information Service Manager's Viewpoint

In today's information world, there seems to be a trend towards the de-skilling of librarians, namely in cataloguing and classification. However, as the manager of an information and library service providing both virtual and physical libraries, I have become more and more conscious of the need for these skills. With the volume of information available today, the key to accessing it lies in how it is organised and described.

Much is made about the "new skills" of information architecture and taxonomy design, but, for me, these are about the construction of a structure or the organisation of information, and the use of controlled language or classification to describe concepts.

In a library, for example, information architecture is a combination of our cataloguing, and indexing systems and the physical organisation of the collection on shelves. On the Web, information architecture is a combination of organising a site's content into categories and creating an interface and navigation systems to support them in order to help people retrieve information successfully. What information professionals have to offer are our cataloguing, indexing and abstracting skills – the crucial components of successful information architecture.

We also have knowledge to share about design. Many websites are quite wordy and content-heavy, whereas we can capitalise on our experience of scanning literature and apply it to the Internet. Many people find reading the web difficult, which has led to the emergence of the "scan reader", who is impatient and battered by information overload. What they want is to identify the salient points through short headings, summaries, and sentences in clear, simple language: again the skills of cataloguing and description are invaluable.

In my time at DrugScope, my view on cataloguing and classification has changed from seeing it as a backroom task to knowing it is the light in the front room. Why? Because it is the key to good information retrieval - answering our enquiries, creating information products on our website, and disseminating information through modern current awareness services, such as our blog. In essence, without good cataloguing and indexing resources, I feel that we would not be able to produce effective, efficient and comprehensive information services.

Christine Goodair, Head of Website & Information Services, DrugScope

The Career Cataloguer's Viewpoint

Having qualified in the mid-nineties, the current atmosphere of doom surrounding cataloguing feels very familiar. I learned and began plying my trade in the era when free-text retrieval was being vaunted as a cure for all searching ills while thesaurus

construction and controlled vocabularies were sniffed at as outmoded and, that crime of all information crimes, not user-friendly.

It soon became clear, however, that we can't "Google the world" – or, rather, when we Google, it *is* the whole world that we retrieve. At the same time, organisations were discovering that their databases had deteriorated under the stewardship of poorly-paid, low-status, often unqualified individuals – multiple entries, inconsistently-entered titles or subjects, and hideously mangled corporate bodies all contributed to databases that were difficult to search and impossible to integrate – Z39.50 and its successors all need *some* level of data matching, after all.

Suddenly, cataloguing and indexing skills were in demand again. Commercial information providers were hiring - and paying executive salaries. Website producers were looking for taxonomers (or, if American, *taxonomists*). Libraries who had retained their professional catalogues (and cataloguers) were held up as examples of best practice, while those who had not were looking for consultants to sort out their issues.

And so the wheel turns: in the good (well-paid, well-recognised) times, we the career cataloguers sort out the databases, train staff in international and national standards and, like tightrope walking or sword swallowing, make cat and class look as natural and easy as breathing in fresh air. After all, how hard is data entry? Surely anyone can follow some simple rules? Don't phone companies employ people straight from school to create their directories? (And have you *tried* any of the 118 services recently)?

It concerns me to hear that some cataloguing grades are being moved from Academic-Related to Clerical-Related scales. It concerns me that the grading structure of technical services is being treated differently from that of front-of-house services like enquiries. How long will it be before another review comes along and argues that if those who work the enquiry desk have the same qualifications and length of experience as their lower-graded cataloguer colleagues, shouldn't *they* be regraded too? That concerns me as well.

However, having survived the last cat and class recession, I know that this trend is cyclical. Ultimately, I believe that the rumour of fewer and fewer young people with practical cataloguing experience is bad news for employers, not cataloguers. It's all about supply and demand, and the demand will rise again when database quality bottoms out.

When that time comes, I believe that we children of the 1980s whose Saturday tea-time was accompanied by *The A-Team* will find just cause to use the show's trailer-line (my italics): "If you have a problem; if no-one else can help, *and if you can find them*, maybe you can hire" someone with the skills to make your materials accessible.

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Author Biographies

Christine Goodair has been Head of Website & Information Services at DrugScope for the last four years. One of her first actions in post was to raise funding for professional cataloguing and indexing posts. She has written and spoken about information management at national and international level and is the keynote speaker at the November meeting of School Drug Education Co-ordinators.

Anne Welsh is Information Officer – Bibliographic Services at DrugScope. The new editor of *Catalogue & Index: Periodical of the CILIP Cataloguing & Indexing Group*, she has worked as a cataloguer, indexer and / or taxonomer for a variety of special libraries and commercial organisations. A regular conference speaker, she is presenting on international taxonomy design at Internet Librarian International in October.