

“Just where’s the damn book?” or,
Rediscovering the art of cataloging

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From the annual report of the Librarian of Congress, the problems of cataloging are well known, “A virtual breakdown in administration, a huge expansion in accessions, a steady branching out in the scope of the Library’s collections and static appropriations for personnel.” Couple that with an outside consultant’s acute observation, “Many new problems of administrators have served to busy the administrator, and most catalogers have had more work than enough, with the result that administrators have come to know less and less of cataloging, and catalogers have come to know less and less about general library administration.” Indeed, budgets are tight, while user expectations remain high.

Sounds like a fitting rationale for current discussions on the future of cataloging, but sadly, hindsight is 20/20, as the comments above were made in describing the “crisis in cataloging” at the Library of Congress in 1940! (Yee, 1987 and Osborn, 1941.) A sobering fact for even the most optimistic leader, hoping to finally solve this apparently never ending “crisis.” To be sure, leadership doesn’t come with a bulletproof vest.

Moreover, in upholding full disclosure, I readily admit my “youth” in this debate. I have worked in libraries since 1999, earning my MSLS in 2001. So while I can’t provide a comprehensive list of why things have remained the same, I can offer a novice perspective, gleaned from more years as a user of libraries than a librarian and balanced by a scholarly background in theology

and pastoral training. Even in a secular context, all humans are similarly endowed, as various theologians and anthropologists have concluded, to be “meaning makers,” seeking creativity, community, and a commitment to service in dealing with information and making it useful.

New challenges posed by the Internet, both in fragmentation and interconnectivity, have ushered in a “brave, new world” (pun intended), scary to some, enlightening to others, but each profession, including librarians, can no longer ignore its power to transform traditional roles and responsibilities. However, the disconnect happens in misunderstanding the purpose of tradition. As Jaroslav Pelikan, the late church historian at Yale, once remarked, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living” (Pelikan, 1986).

In a 2004 essay, Karen Calhoun details the importance of cataloging and catalogers by asking her readers to “focus on the needs that catalog librarians meet, rather than the methods they use” (my emphasis). Interestingly, 60 years ago, the chief of descriptive cataloging at LC focused similar attention at an ALA conference, “The only way we can hope to cut costs by simplifying cataloging is to return to cataloging as an art, which requires that the best judgment be exercised for its accomplishment” (Yee, 1987).

Echoing Calhoun’s sentiments is Richard Detweiler, whose 2006 essay in Digital Library Development espouses that real change in higher education

(and libraries) will only come from “an entirely new frame of reference based on the function of education and then us[ing] technology to support a form of education that is truly transformational.” That is to say, the forms, tools, and methods of a profession are a reflection of how a profession views itself, its function, and mission. Is it wrong then to follow a scientific method? Don’t organizational realities and practicalities demand it? Of course, once a path is chosen, it is the role of a profession to convince others of its effectiveness, through trial and error, investigation, and successful replication. Nevertheless, the literary critic and theologian, C.S. Lewis, identified great authors (in my mind, any profession, including librarians) as “innovators, pioneers, explorers; bad authors bunch in schools and follow models ... of every idea and of every method [the great author] will ask not, is it mine?, but is it good?” (Lewis, 1939.) Thus, the problem is: the catalog, while still functional, is no longer good.

But carefully constructed catalogs result in valuable recall and logical precision, right? When used correctly and thoroughly, the catalog provides answers; the latest Internet search engine, in contrast, produces wide-ranging and irregular guesses, with little control of linguistic or cultural variations. Users are left in a sea of confusion and quickly walk away from any type of anonymous, automated solutions. True, to an extent, until we consider what has been known about users for the past 30 years, i.e., the principle of least

effort (Bates, 1989). One can easily find similar observations in using only print resources, such as this researcher's conclusion from 1969, "The most efficient printed index will be a failure with the users if its convenience parameter [ease of use and up-to-date] is low, and vice versa, an index that is simple and easy to use will gain wide popularity even if its retrieval performance is not very high" (Lancaster, 1998). If printed resources were judged by users in this way, is it any wonder that the Googles and Amazons of the world continue to bask in the same limelight?

While there has been a longstanding perception among librarians that little is known about how people seek information and evaluate information resources, much can be gleaned from research in communications, education, psychology, marketing, and now even computer science. The difference has been: while librarians focus on the information sources (books, periodicals, etc.) and systems (catalogs and other databases), little attention is paid to how people actually react to information and the process they employ in its discovery (Calhoun, 2006).

This is the more challenging research, as two investigators in Canada discovered recently in observing university students' use of Internet search engines versus library catalogs (Campbell and Fast, 2004). Instead of asking these students to describe "what they were doing" while searching, they asked the students to focus on "what they were thinking." A subtle, yet powerful,

distinction was noted in how these students approached the Internet versus a library catalog. In searching a library catalog, the students proceeded cautiously, spending a good deal of time in analyzing the results, be they searching by keywords or controlled terms. In contrast, when the students searched the Internet, their analysis of results was much faster, unpredictable, and social, drawing upon various human elements on the Web which collectively produced authority. In a library, there were rules that they didn't understand, but felt compelled to follow, a community that they respected, but didn't capture their way of communicating. While searching for the same results on both the Internet and in a library catalog, i.e., "identifying identical texts and differentiating different texts," the students felt guided on the Internet to the evaluation of others, i.e., a community, which gave "coherence ... on a large scale" after accepting the "absence of rules" or "causing chaos on a small scale."

This is not surprising. Xerox PARC researchers, in writing on the "social life of information," reported from a 1987 study that the average 17 year old picks up vocabulary at the rate of 5,000 words per year from age 1-16 by talking, listening, and reading; conversely, restricting a child to only reading garners 100-200 words per year. Moreover, in 1988, a prediction was made that 66% of people would work from home by the year 2000; the actual figure

now is only 6%. Why? “It is not shared stories or shared information so much as shared interpretation that binds people together” (Brown and Duguid, 2000).

Humans provide meaning behind the information found; meaning that librarians strive to keep anonymous and objective, but in reality can never be. Indeed, the search for meaning then turns the search for information into a much more serendipitous, rather than controlled, process. In other words, Google is not just a search engine, and a highly technical one at that, but it is people who make the 21st century definition of search, “to google,” a verb. People applied meaning to Google while librarians stayed in the back rooms and behind the desk. Simply put, there is no going back.

In libraries, the transformation is inevitable. The future of the catalog, the future of librarianship, may follow Thomas Kuhn’s lead, in writing of the chaos and fear inherent in paradigm shifts, “If we can learn to substitute evolution-from-what-we-do-know for evolution-toward-what-we-wish-to-know, a number of vexing problems may vanish in the process” (Kuhn, 1970). Only then will librarians be judged not for what they know, but for what people know they can find. Only then will the transformation be complete.

Sometimes, though, I am left wondering if the “crisis in cataloging” has continued simply because too many librarians answer C.S. Lewis’ question, yes,

it is mine, and I don't care if it is good or not. By taking intellectual possession of the library, they hold it captive.

The solution? Partly, all librarians need to understand their library's history and the foundational principles from which it grew. As Sydney Pierce laments in teaching the principles of librarianship, “[S]tudents are given too many rules, precepts, and policies as the theoretical approach to such issues. (I am as guilty of this as any faculty member.) ... A librarian exposed to a hundred years of classic attempts to wrestle with censorship [or cataloging] issues is far better equipped to deal with contemporary challenges than one whose reading is limited to a selection of ALA policies [or AACR2, MARC, LCSH, etc.], no matter how useful these policies are” (Pierce, 1992). Thus, unless there is consensus that the problems in cataloging, for instance, do not involve merely adding or dropping a rule for access, revising production statistics, or even eliminating controlled vocabulary, the solution, the “evolution-toward-what-we-wish-to-know,” cannot be articulated, which requires a thorough knowledge of past successes and failures.

Today, it is clear to me that partnerships are key, both inside and outside the library. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that securing grants and additional funding has been haphazard in many libraries. It is like the pigs' admission at the end of Orwell's 1984, “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (Orwell, 1949). We need to open our doors to more

research and risk, and staff who are capable of spending 25 to 50 percent of their time brainstorming, evaluating performance, and offering “an integrated approach to exploring and developing creative sources of non-tax support for library services as well as to introduce new services to the community” (Clay and Bangs, 2000).

To be sure, it will not be easy. Again, leadership doesn’t come with a bulletproof vest. People are human, they make mistakes, even sin (no matter how you define that), but people also have an incredible capacity to forgive. Partnerships are forged when guns are lowered: more locally when innovations in one area of the library aren’t seen in isolation to innovations in another. As Deanna Marcum aptly points out in a New York Times column, “Librarians and archivists know that a good collection, like a good book, is made in the editing” (Marcum, 1998). Otherwise, we are really out to prove that “some animals are more equal than others,” that nothing is good unless it is mine, and that the cynic’s question, “Just where’s the damn book?,” is about who will find it first.

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