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One Catalog or No Catalog?

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At the heart of the profession of librarianship is the organization of information. And at the heart of information organization created by professionals is authority control. We justify calling ourselves professionals because of the intellectual work involved in deciding whether two different names represent the same author, whether the same name actually represents two different authors, whether two items represent the same work or two different works, and whether two items are on the same subject or two different subjects (and because of the public good of the permanent and infinitely expandable cultural record that results). This work is the most expensive, because it is the most labor-intensive, that professional catalogers do. However, it is also the only justification for hiring professionals to do cataloging. Without authority control, there is no difference between catalog records and either a book catalog produced by a publisher, or the results of a Web search done using AltaVista—except that the catalog records cost a great deal more to produce!

Catalog librarians and technical services administrators have always recognized that authority control is expensive and that the tax-paying public and even the higher administration in libraries has little understanding of why it is important and why it costs so much. (The huge popularity of Yahoo! for Web access provides evidence, however, that the public, while it may not understand what we do, prefers information organized by human beings rather than using the brute keyword searching with relevance ranking based on mathematical algorithms so beloved of the information scientists.)

Because we know about this lack of understanding on the part of the public and library administration, we have done everything we can to cut costs. One of the major ways we do this is to practice shared cataloging. Yet, while we pride ourselves on our frugality in practicing shared cataloging, in fact we do not share the highly professional work that is at the heart of our professional status—we do not share the editing of our catalogs to bring them under authority control. Let me explain.

When, in the course of my NACO work, I differentiate an actor and a physicist who have the same name by adding a birth date to one of the names, I notify OCLC to change bibliographic records affected in the OCLC database, I notify LC to change bibliographic records affected in their catalogs, and I change records affected in my local catalog. However, for years to come, all the other catalogs in the country will carry undifferentiated names for these two different people. The other catalogs will only become updated over time as they acquire new materials by or about the actor or the physicist. With all of the automated authority checking algorithms being used

nowadays, there is a danger that many of those catalogs will not be updated even then, for when computers find two strings that match, they do not notify catalogers that one person seems to be an actor and the other seems to be a physicist.

If the Internet eventually fulfills its promise and becomes cheap, fast and readily available telecommunication (and the World Wide Wait isn't there yet, is it?), we could begin to share the intellectual labor of imposing authority control on our records by sharing a *single catalog*, whether it be a catalog created by putting all of our records into a single database that is remotely accessible, or whether it be a virtual catalog created by complex cataloging software that pulls records together from remote locations and displays them in complex ways (similar to the BOPAC project).

Imagine, if you will, a future in which libraries share a single catalog in this fashion. When I differentiate my actor and my physicist, I make a single change, which is immediately visible to catalogers and library users all over the world. No time or money needs to be spent updating any other catalogs, and no catalogs are left out of the communication loop.

If a single catalog were to become possible, the following additional benefits could accrue:

1. Surely we could save a great deal of money if:
 - a.) We no longer had to edit thousands of different local catalogs to bring them under authority control.
 - b.) We no longer had to integrate copy cataloging records under various degrees of authority control into thousands of different local catalogs. Instead, the process of adding an item to a collection would involve either adding a holdings symbol to an existing record in the single catalog (together perhaps with a link down to local circulation, acquisition, bindery, etc. records), or adding a new record to the single catalog which would be immediately accessible to the next library to acquire that item.
 - c.) We could globally update one catalog when there is a change in practice such as the recent change in the USMARC subfield code for a form subdivision.
 - d.) Just one piece of software had to change to accommodate changes in data coding such as the recent form subdivision change described above.
 - e.) Individual libraries no longer had to pay commercial vendors for new cataloging software and undergo the attendant disruption every time the software changes every few years.
 - f.) Individual libraries no longer had to devote thousands of hours of staff time to writing RFP's and customization specifications for new cataloging

software every few years.

2. Perhaps we could devote the resources we save in this fashion to adding to our catalogs more records for Web resources that are of permanent scholarly value. Or perhaps we could devote more resources to adding records to our catalogs for things that we have not been able to afford to add up until now, such as individual cuts on sound recordings, analytics for poems, short stories, etc. published in collections, backlogs of rare and special materials, and so forth.
3. The single catalog could also be the solution to the so-called multiple versions problem (or as I would prefer to call it, the problem of format variants). We could build complex hierarchical records that identify all of the format variations available for a particular edition. If we no longer had to *communicate* records, we could build these and many other kinds of complex links between and among our records, which would be permanent, which would be immediately visible to catalogers and library users all over the world, and which would not have to be communicated to other catalogs in which one or another end of a link may not be present—as is the case now.
4. Existing OPAC software performs poorly in carrying out the complex functions involved in presenting cataloging information to the public. I have come to wonder whether the real problem isn't that a commercial vendor cannot make a profit if it devotes all of the programming time necessary to design such a complex system in such a way that it can appear simple to those who use it. Any company that actually did design such a complex program might not be able to make its money back from libraries, poor as they generally are. Perhaps it is time to ask ourselves if effective OPAC software is not an extremely expensive public good that properly ought to be paid for with tax dollars and then shared with all libraries throughout the country, and even throughout the world.
5. If we could share the complex intellectual labor and the expensive programming involved in designing effective OPAC software, this could have a beneficial effect on the standardization of such software. Library users could learn to use one catalog and never have to learn to use another. Children could be taught to search the catalog shortly after learning the ABCs and know how to search the catalog for the rest of their lives. (It is somewhat ironic that we have developed a relatively permanent format for our data (MARC21), so that we can move our data from system to system without having to reinput it, but we have not been able to develop a way to transport the complex intellectual labor involved in designing catalog software from system to system. That must be redone from scratch each time, at considerable expense.)

Of course there are dangers in this. For one thing, the single-catalog approach would not work if we were not willing to

recognize the professional expertise required to be an effective cataloger. If we do not limit editing capability in the single catalog to well-educated and well-trained (perhaps even licensed) practitioners, we will end up with the same bibliographic chaos we see now in OCLC. For another, as long as we continue to live in a world in which physical collections exist, we must find ways to allow institutions to manage their physical collections locally, and we must build in ways for users to request catalog views that are limited geographically, for example, by library, by branch or by geographic area.

If we cannot find a way to share and thereby lower the costs of the expensive intellectual labor that is at the heart of our profession, I believe our profession is in danger of becoming obsolete. At the moment, it is rare for a local catalog to be under good authority control. Many catalogs have not integrated the syndetic structure of *LCSH* because they have not been able to afford to edit older subject headings to newer forms. As a result, users are forced to use LC subject headings without the see references that are critical in many cases to lead them from their entry terms to the headings used (e.g., Blimps, see Airships). Many catalogs have the same author under two or more forms of name because of retrospective conversion projects that will never be completed due to lack of resources. Most catalogs fail to use uniform titles to bring together all the editions of a work, again due to lack of resources. A catalog that has been allowed to lapse from authority control in this fashion is no better than the Web—and much more expensive. We must find ways to share the expense of bringing our records under authority control, or face the prospect of a world in which the permanent cultural record it is our professional duty to create no longer exists.

With each issue of *ALCTS Newsletter Online*, Viewpoints features a unique perspective on an aspect of library work within the ALCTS scope of interest. Contributions and responses to Viewpoints are welcome and encouraged. Submit contributions to the editor at dale_swensen@byu.edu.

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