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A Year of Cataloging Research

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Year of Cataloging Research

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Guest Editorial

A Year of Cataloging Research

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Library Resources and Technical Services *is celebrating 2010 as the Year of Cataloging Research by publishing guest editorials and highlighting papers that advance this important initiative.*

Evidence-based cataloging. The phrase has been popping up frequently since the 2008 release of *On the Record*: *Report of the Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control*.[1] While the historical record would indicate an unbroken string of cataloging research and publication going back at least a century, a general dissatisfaction with our efforts to date is palpable, and former apologists are increasingly becoming catalogers' most vociferous critics. In the middle of what increasingly feels like a tug-of-war stands the practitioner observing that for every librarian ready to add to a tradition built on the likes of Charles A. Cutter and Seymour Lubetzky, there is another looking at the same corpus reiterating Gertrude Stein's classic observation that "there's no there there." Clearly, a fundamental reappraisal of the importance of the bibliographic work traditionally done by catalogers is taking place.

While the outcome of that reevaluation is anything but clear, the result is certain to be less than ideal if the emerging consensus is one based on anecdote or built on inquiry into what has become a rapidly disappearing environment. The authors of *On the Record* are unambiguous in their description of a field where research has lagged behind events and where the knowledge base provides woefully inadequate support for making decisions certain to have a profound effect on the future of libraries and the profession. Given the situation, it comes as no surprise that the Working Group's use of the word "evidence" has become a *de facto* rallying cry for those seeking to revitalize research in information-seeking behavior and the value of bibliographic metadata.

Keenly aware of the state of affairs and inspired by the Library of Congress report, members of the American Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS) Implementation Task Group on the LCWGR (Library of Congress Working Group Report) are working to promote 2010 as the Year of Cataloging Research. The effort is in the organizational stage, and the list of tasks to be accomplished is long—working with the ALCTS Programming Committee, trying to get American Library Association buy-in; promoting the idea in such venues as the American Society for Information Science and Technology, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, and the International Society for Knowledge Organization; writing editorials; and creating buzz in general. A significant measure of the initiative's success, however, will lie in the degree to which the Implementation

Task Group is able to secure the involvement and support of those outside the cataloging community. The geometrically expanding network, with its proliferation of communication options, all but guarantees that much of the research that determines the future of bibliographic control will take place outside the library and that the reporting of it will take place outside traditional venues.

There is no guarantee that library catalogers and metadata specialists will play a significant role in shaping the future of bibliographic control. Although well positioned for the task by an understanding of bibliographic description, relationships between entities, and subject analysis, librarians are not in control of the research agenda, and seats at the table are unlikely to be awarded on the basis of job description. Much of our cataloging research, although useful, is focused on a delivery environment (the local catalog) and an information unit (the bibliographic record) that are likely to disappear in the near future. Too many catalogers still get a blank look on their faces when terms like *Semantic Web* or *cloud computing* turn up in conversation. This disconnect does not bode well for the widespread participation of traditional catalogers in the developing discussion—an omission that represents a loss for all as a deep and profound understanding of conventional publications and their complex relationships is unlikely be part of the conversation.

Individuals who are comfortable with the evolving information environment and use evidence-based arguments to support their views are likely to find that they have a voice in the development of the new bibliographic order. Those who can add to these characteristics the additional ability to collaborate with leaders from other information cultures will find they have real influence. An initiative like the Year of Cataloging Research presents an opportunity to insert savvy and talented library leaders into the larger discussion; it also can serve as a vehicle for assessing the current state of cataloging research relative to that of other groups.

Accepting the premise that the quality of our investigations is somehow wanting does not necessarily imply that cataloging researchers are doing shoddy work or that they are plowing already-plowed ground. The problem is more likely one of library and cataloger insularity. If the usefulness of library research is dependent on the quality of the questions being asked, it could be that we are asking the wrong questions. Perhaps there is no need for another study of the way in which undergraduates approach the local catalog if the importance of that catalog is diminishing over time. Then, too, how important is it to continue to study the use of our bibliographic data within the framework of the MARC record when MARC is a legacy format and the long-term existence of the unified bibliographic record is doubtful? There may indeed be good reasons for doing this sort of research, but increasingly such efforts need to be viewed through the prism of an environment where machine-actionable, linked data will become the norm and the primary engines for discovery will reside on the network.

It would be nothing short of astonishing if the results of a renewed commitment to research were to somehow bolster the case for a continuation of traditional cataloging practices. Thirty years of library experience—including twenty in my current role as a cataloger—have convinced me that our current practices for providing access to information resources are neither sustainable nor in the profession's best interest. Semantic data is the future, and what we think of as the bibliographic record is destined to become little more than a collection of links. As researchers explore this new environment, I would not be surprised to learn that much of our thinking about access to information objects is fundamentally sound, but that the infrastructure we have created to support that access will need to be jettisoned.

The visionaries working to make library cataloging data a part of the Semantic Web have a gut-level understanding of the importance of their work. Most practitioners and managers—groups that produce much of our research—do not. The divide does not serve us well. Librarians working with semantic data are increasingly reluctant to publish for an audience that "doesn't get it," and researchers who do not understand the emerging environment are running the risk of creating a product that is increasingly irrelevant. The situation bodes ill for creating a body of evidence that will ensure us a place in the evolving digital environment.

A Year of Cataloging Research—let's hope we have the courage to ask the right questions.

Reference

1. Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control, *On the Record: Report of the Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2008), www.loc.gov/bibliographic-future/news/lcwg-ontherecord-jan08-final.pdf (accessed Sept. 13, 2008).

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