

Future catalogers: Essential colleagues or anachronisms?

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Broadening the idea of cataloging to "organization of information"

Do we need on-site professional catalogers?" A recent ALA conference program addressed this issue for public libraries, but the question is valid for academic libraries as well. Most of the speakers validated the presence of catalogers, offering comforting platitudes and long lists of essential cataloging tasks. I believe the catalogers in the audience left feeling affirmed and hopeful that theirs was a profession with a future. But I left with two serious concerns. First, although discussing the future, the primary focus of almost every speaker remained the traditional cataloger in a status quo, book-oriented environment. Second, while cataloging skills were presented as a universal good, no one discussed how they should be employed beyond traditional tasks. Rather than feeling uplifted, I walked away with a sense of foreboding; I had seen the enemy and it was us!

In the academic arena we are questioning the future of the cataloger in an increasingly electronic environment. I believe this future ultimately will depend on eschewing a narrow, job-specific focus, and adopting a more holistic approach that broadens the concept from "cataloging" to the "organization of information," a phrase often used but rarely applied in its broadest sense. Future catalogers must extend their view of the organizing process beyond one particular cataloging code or record structure, and beyond the "item in hand" as the object of bibliographic control. This broader perspective also requires a shift in self-perception from "cataloger" to "organizer of information," and allows for the creation of catalogs and information databases in any structure and anywhere within the information environment.

The future cataloger

As a cataloging educator I am committed to the future of bibliographic control and those who practice it. But as many library administrators view outsourcing as a more efficient alternative to retaining on-site professional catalogers who function in a limited capacity, traditional commitment is not enough. In order to secure positions in times of scarce resources, both administrators and catalogers must understand the wider applicability of organizational concepts. The knowledge now used to organize the local library collection must extend beyond tangible objects and local OPACs. The cataloger must understand the increasing variety and uses of bibliographic data, and the database structures that might best employ data elements. Such conceptual understanding is the hallmark of professional catalogers. It enables them to design and restructure bibliographic tools in response to evolving needs, and renders catalogers indispensable in the changing information environment.

If the goal of libraries is to provide access to information, it is the organizational tools created by catalogers that help the library meet this goal. These tools become even more crucial in the chaotic Internet environment, where robot-generated indexes and search engines often result in information overload rather than relevant information access. Thus, bibliographic records for electronic resources must provide enough information to enable users to evaluate the quality, value, and appropriateness of the remote source. In order to accomplish this, bibliographic records must be enhanced, customized, and linked to evaluative sources and to the documents themselves. Possibilities abound for creating hypermedia catalogs that are incisive tools for evaluating and accessing information, but their infrastructure depends on an understanding of object description, hierar-

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chies, indexing concepts, bibliographic relationships, linkages, classification, database structures, local collections, and user needs. Again, it is the conceptual understanding of the professional cataloger that is needed to develop and oversee these structures, not the well-trained but task-oriented paraprofessional.

The cataloger as colleague

The image of the cataloger as a backroom isolationist has damaged the reputation of cataloging and reduced the ability of catalogers to interact effectively within the library environment. Regardless of the validity of this image, the reality must be different. Catalogers should be integrated into a team ethos, and regarded as conceptual problem-solvers who create and maintain organizational systems.

In academe we have many opportunities for collegial interaction. Who better to work with reference staff to develop an Information and Referral (I&R) database using the MARC Community Information Format, or to create an OPAC-based selective dissemination of information (SDI) system? The professional cataloger offers extensive knowledge of MARC structure and the authority control process critical to I&R corporate name access, as well as experience with subject systems used for query matches in SDI tools. Such collaborative efforts would use the cataloger's knowledge within a broader context, and bring a consistency to the entries and language in the local databases and OPAC that users would find a distinct advantage.

Catalogers are also prime candidates to instruct users on OPAC content, structure, and search techniques. As physical presence near the catalog is no longer required, having catalogers respond to requests for OPAC assistance from off-site users is an ideal way to enable reference staff to concentrate on true reference queries, while keeping catalogers in contact with users of the databases they created.

A potential partnership also exists between catalogers and scholars working on electronic text encoding projects and creating Web sites. Document "headers," equivalent to a printed book's title page, are generally encoded using SGML tagging for various data elements. The cataloger's knowledge of the elements required

for object description and access, and familiarity with encoding concepts are valuable for both creation of the document header and mapping the header to a MARC record for bibliographic access. Also, knowledge of hierarchical structures, bibliographic relationships, and linkages makes the cataloger an ideal consultant for anyone creating a hypertext Web site. Finally, it is time for everyone to realize that bibliographic data have wider application than their latent residency in an OPAC suggests. These data are used in automated collection assessment tools based on the RLG Conspectus, and in management information systems relevant to many library operations. Catalogers must be aware of potential uses for bibliographic data, and provide the type of information that can be exploited within many different contexts, while administrators must capitalize on catalogers' expertise when information systems based on their work are developed.

Conclusions

On-site professional catalogers *are* needed in academic libraries, and although aspects of their jobs will change, catalogers should not feel threatened by this change. History suggests that for centuries the cataloging community successfully applied the newest technology to the organization of information in a way that enriched our catalogs and benefited users. History has also shown, however, that frequently it was the visionaries within other professions who spearheaded many of these changes. I believe, as Michael Gorman has stated, that bibliographic control is the "framework for all practical expressions of librarianship."¹ It is now up to the cataloging community to put this belief into operation, broaden its perspective, and take control of its future. As the debate over the necessity of catalogers continues, I hope it will be the catalogers themselves who emerge as the innovative leaders, guiding us towards the Universal Bibliographic Control envisioned a century ago by Otlet and La Fontaine.

Notes

1. Michael Gorman, "How Cataloging and Classification Should Be Taught," *American Libraries* 23 (September 1992): 694. ■