

The Public Services perspective on the 2008 Report of The Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control, *On the Record*.

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[Are You Ready? PPT slide] “On February 17, 2009, Your TV is Changing. Are You Ready?” – (now former) FCC Chairman Kevin Martin. This was the slogan of The Digital TV Transition campaign to raise awareness among the populace that on February 17, 2009, the way images and sound are delivered to television sets in the United States of America will be forever changed. Those who are left behind shall be—gasp!—sans television. Of course, this deadline has now been pushed back to June 12—although the television stations in Madison are going ahead and changing over today—so the mass anxiety brought on by the ultimatum has lessened. Is it coincidence that we are gathered here today to discuss the implications and ramifications of the LC Working Group’s report for librarians and bibliographic end users? Yes, it is. That being said, I have been wondering what the reaction within our profession might have been had Librarian of Congress James Billington decreed: “On February 17, 2009, your bibliographic universe is changing”? I think most of us would have said: “of course it is,” followed by: “but what exactly do you mean by ‘changing’?” I have been wondering why there is such an air of anxiety and entrenched opposition to what the members of this Working Group put forth in their report, given that there were not specific deadlines attached to any of their recommendations. I think this antagonism must spring from a spirit of freedom among librarians—in this case, freedom to have a say in how the bibliographic universe we live

in, maintain, and sustain is defined, and freedom from having the will of the few imposed on the many. It seems to me that there will always be procedural guidelines and standards for our profession that we all bend and tweak in our respective institutions—local practices, as we call them—and so from my Public Services perspective I wonder: “How will any of what the Working Group decided to publish affect the individuals I endeavor to assist in person, by phone, or via email or IM?” As the rants began to appear last year, not long after the report was published, I will confess that I only skimmed the text and figured it would not have a great effect on my daily efforts to help people satisfy their information needs. It wasn’t until Bruce Evans invited me to speak here that I fully delved into the substance of the report or the responses it elicited. If I sound like a greenhorn, it is because I am. I was far too busy trying to hold together a Head-less library at University of Hartford during 2007 to pay much attention to the series of meetings the LC Working Group held to open the topic up to anyone wanting to share opinions, and I was similarly indisposed in the first half of 2008 when the hubbub was at its peak. I feel like I have been asked to survey the battlefields of someone else’s war and make grand pronouncements. I cannot say that I feel quite as angry as Thomas Mann, or even David Bade, but I am always able to find something to disagree with or critique in any sort of report.

The first big question I have is: why all the fuss? The following quote appears on page 4 of *On The Record*: “The Working Group has consciously not associated time frames with any of its recommendations.” This distinguishes the findings and recommendations in this report from the mandated conversion to digital television, at least. If the recommendations aren’t binding, then why all the fuss? I know it is an

ideological battle, but it must have something to do with money, with budgets. I realize the beans have to be counted, but it seems to me we humanities folks get riled up whenever we sense findings and recommendations have been made based on quantitative analysis more than qualitative.

Speaking of ideology, I want to state for the record [**change PPT slide**] that I pledge allegiance to preservation and access, the two lofty ideals of librarianship, and I think perhaps the strong antagonism to the report is due to the sense that the recommendations are going to somehow disrupt the access side of the profession.

There is a crucial distinction I want to make from the beginning: “bibliographic control system” is the focus of the report, whereas bibliographic end users are my focus. David Bade suggests that a crucial question needs to be asked: [**change PPT slide**] who is a user? The answer, of course, is everyone. He makes the distinction between “user communities of practice” and “library communities of practice,” but he advocates for us being “involved in the same community of interests and practices.” I agree! The numbers might be skewed toward the consumers when breaking down residents of the bibliographic universe into content providers and content consumers, but we are all in the same universe.

“Community” is a term that appears many times in the report: the library community, the community, the bibliographic community, and the abstracting and indexing community, to name a few. The use of “community” throughout the report leaves me raging in the margins: WHO is in the community?!? Can there be a unified community, or communities, in this brave new bibliographic universe? Are end users

included? Or is this community a group of gatekeepers? Are there both scholars and citizens? Are these mutually exclusive groups?

Let me see a show of hands in response to the following questions:

How many of you are members of the user community of practice? Library community of practice? Bibliographic community? Reference and instruction community? Abstracting and indexing community? It seems to me there are not many of us who are members of only one community. It brings to mind what then Senator (and former Community Organizer) Barack Obama said in his famous keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention: “there is not a liberal America and a conservative America - there is the United States of America.” We are all living in the same bibliographic universe!

That being said, the bibliographic universe is not flat. Thomas Mann maintains that scholarship is different from quick-information seeking. This is a distinction with which I agree, and it brings up hierarchical divisions that make many people uncomfortable in a democratic society such as the United States. I think it is crucial to acknowledge the different types of information needs that exist among users, while keeping value judgments about one or another being better or more important out of the conversation. The report does not acknowledge that the needs of LC and other research libraries—as well as their users—are going to differ from the needs of secondary school libraries, public libraries, or special libraries and their users. “The library” is not a monolithic entity. **[change PPT slide]** Just as there are eclectic galaxies across the universe, there are diverse entities throughout the bibliographic universe. There will always be divisions, and semi-autonomous republics in the bibliographic universe—for example, the majority of libraries adopting Open Source ILS solutions to date have been

public libraries and secondary schools, a trend that highlights the division between these “communities” and the “academic library community.”

While I am touching on divisions between communities, I want to address what Deanna Marcum—in her response to *On the Record*—calls the “digital arena.” There might be such a construct, but there are many library users who are not attending events there—these people are similar to the estimated 6.5 million families still relying on analog televisions (NYT, Gail Collins Op-Ed piece, 1/31/09). Many people are still in the parking lot outside the digital arena. They aren’t yet living in this quadrant of the bibliographic universe. It is alien to them, and alienating. Think of the aggressive promotional campaign for the conversion to digital television—would it be necessary if everyone in this nation were already in the “digital arena”? I had a patron call the reference desk recently and ask if I could tell him what Schubert’s Mass sounded like, and as I conducted my reference interview I learned he was not affiliated with the university, and therefore could not take advantage of the streaming audio databases to which we subscribe in order to listen to the piece and decided for himself, and it seemed as if he was—gasp!—without either personal computer at home or a CD player. (I had recommended he try searching the public library’s holdings and going to borrow a recording, and he asked me if they might have it on an LP that he could borrow.)

The phrase “user access success” appears on page 14 of *On the Record*, and as I said before this is my primary concern in the entire discussion/debate. Recommendation 1.1.5 (p. 15) acknowledges the importance of having content correlate with user behavior, but it leaves me asking: who will conduct the user studies to gather empirical evidence?

How will the wide variety of users be accounted for? How much trust should ever be placed in statistics? What does it all mean? What, if anything, will change?

Deanna Marcum, the Associate Librarian for Library Services at LC, was unequivocal in her response to *On the Record*, published June 1, 2008. In her attempts to analyze the report, she “sought assistance from the Management Team of our Acquisitions and Bibliographic Access Directorate, from an internal working group that has been giving thought to bibliographic control as part of our Library Services unit's strategic planning efforts, and from Thomas Mann, the LC reference librarian who has been most vocal in criticizing changes proposed in our system of bibliographic control.” Mann held fast to his opposition, but the other two advised her to endorse the recommendations. I’m sure repeated listening to Meatloaf’s song “Two Out Of Three Ain’t Bad” gave Thomas Mann little comfort in the aftermath of Marcum’s response. Based on her analysis, Marcum proclaimed: “the Library of Congress accepts and endorses the recommendations of the Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control.”

Marcum concludes her Introduction with this sentence: “I am convinced that our collective determination will lead to the creation of a bibliographic system that is even more useful for connecting our users to the information they need.” The system and the users—how these two are treated in the report is at the heart of Thomas Mann and David Bade’s assessment of what is wrong with *On the Record*. I will now offer my commentary on selected recommendations.

1: Increase the efficiency of bibliographic record production and maintenance

This seems to be the core of the quantitative v. qualitative concern.

The term “others” comes up a lot in the report, and in David Bade’s responses to the report, which makes me wonder: “Who are these ‘others’?”

Publishers and foreign libraries are mentioned in recommendation 1.1.1, and *AllMusic* gets mentioned in Deanna Marcum’s response to Mann’s response. I suppose this notion of increasing reliance on the work of “others” is frightening to some people in the same way Wikipedia is frightening to some. I hold you all in high regard, and value the essential work that you do in maintaining the infrastructure of the bibliographic universe, so please bear this in mind when hearing my next remark. From my perspective, erroneous bibliographic data makes its way throughout the bibliographic universe already, but it is easily corrected for all once errors are identified by users and submitted to whomever knows the proper channels to have the changes made—I always figure this person is Jay Weitz. (Small rant: I see this all the time on MLA-L, and I always wonder why these people don’t take the time to figure out who to address these changes to at either OCLC or LC instead of filling an entire listserv’s worth of inboxes with their discoveries.) The Working Group says bibliographic control will be “dynamic, not static.” It would seem the members were thinking of how easily changes are made when we’re all connected via networks in the bibliographic universe, but the quality of bibliographic records will depend on who is involved in the production and maintenance.

1.3: Increase collaboration on authority data.

It seems to me the Working Group members make a strong case for controlled vocabularies needing to remain intact. The report makes it clear that keyword searching is “not a satisfactory substitute for controlled vocabularies.” (19) Current, valid, and unambiguous access points must be maintained. Federated search does not impress me when it is brought to bear on music. What I want to know is when the report says “engage publishers and authors themselves in the process of unambiguous creator identification,” does “engage” mean pay these people for their time and labor?

2.1.1: This focus on increasing access to “rare, unique, and other special hidden materials a high priority” seems idealistic to me, and the result of internal LC politics. I am not against it, but I think it is the job of public services librarians to assist the small subset of overall users who might actually need access to these materials in getting it. How many of you have heard of The Hathi Trust? It is a digital repository for “the nation’s great research libraries,” and was “conceived as a collaboration of the thirteen universities of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) and the University of California system.” It is promising, but it is limited to book and journal content and so will not be of much use to users seeking scores, sound recordings or videos. When it comes to Special Collections/Uncataloged Collections, every library has a backlog, and some have more than others. Until robots are made that can efficiently and correctly do the work required of humans trained to catalog these materials, this will always be the case. How will LC increase access to the piano rolls we have in the locked cage at Mills Music Library? Sure, we could apply for ARSC grant money (or other grants) and get a trained audio engineer to digitize the music and sounds contained in the media, and put it up for

streaming access via our web pages, but is that all the Working Group has in mind? We need time and money—time for the manual labor to be done, and money to pay for the labor and the equipment necessary, and money to pay for the server space and the delivery mechanism, etc. What does that have to do with Bibliographic Control? I am with Thomas Mann in his anger about this recommendation.

3.1.1: If MARC is over-the-hill and doesn't play well with others, then bring on whatever is next—those of us who are the go-betweens and the navigators will adapt. Partitioning the universe will not do. The recommendations in this section made me think of the move away from the proprietary ILS to Open Source solutions such as LibLime's Koha or Evergreen. There are no mentions of Open Source in this report, which I find surprising, considering it purports to address the future.

3.2.4: Small rant: What are “new discovery environments,” and where are they? This terminology sounds like an establishment in a strip mall parents rent for birthday parties. (4.1 provides answers: search engines, online booksellers, course management systems, specialized databases, and more.)

3.2.5: Suspend work on RDA. [**change PPT slide**] RDA bad, FRBR good! I guess the people meeting to discuss RDA during MLA are either unaware of the Working Group's feelings about it, or are feeling they have gone too far into the belly of the beast to turn back. I have only heard grumbling and griping about RDA. To me, the acronym is still primarily associated with the Recommended Daily Allowance of vitamins and minerals I

need to stay healthy. Human users should be considered, but perhaps not as much as the machines.

4.1: I laughed out loud when I read that “users” are not only people. Are systems and software really users? Aren’t they tools to be created for the assistance of bibliographic end users? This section is loaded with defeatism, and the wrongheaded paradigm that posits Google/Amazon/LibraryThing as being in direct competition with OPACs.

[change PPT slide] OPAC v. Google: to me, we are not opposed—we are complementary. Google, or any of the other search engines, is not going to replace libraries or librarians. I agree that data isolationism needs to be abandoned, but I’m not sure a “one size fits most” approach will suffice for music information retrieval purposes. I suppose this is part of why many of you are upset about this report. Am I right?

4.1.1.2: Who decides what “appropriate user-added data available via the Internet” gets linked to from library systems? Will there be new job titles created to cover this role? New SLIS courses created to teach the vetters? Here’s a potential seminar title aimed at tomorrow’s user: **[change PPT slide]** How To Determine Which Amazon Reviews Are Worthy To Appear in Your OPAC.

4.1.3.1: **[change PPT slide]** This is the recommendation that upsets me the most: “Make use of holdings and circulation information to point users to items that are most used and that may potentially be of most interest.” This practice would return us to the “dirty half-inch” days of card catalogs. Guiding users to frequently used materials will perpetuate a

partitioning of the bibliographic universe. Does quantity really equal quality? This is akin to saying gate counts are a reliable indicator of how often our libraries are being used. Those numbers don't indicate how many times someone comes in to only check email or leaves to use the restroom. It is also impossible to parse the numbers to determine how many of the ticks in the counter were the result of staff coming and going throughout the day. "Most used" is not a category that interests me as an information professional trying to help individual users satisfy their specific needs. The trouble here, and throughout the report, is in the use of "users" to mean the unwashed masses, the lay people, individuals without the proper credentials as Information Scientists to do the scientific work we professionals do in our labs high in the towers behind the fortress walls.

4.2.1: **[Tomorrowland PPT slide]** Eleven years have passed since IFLA issued its final report on the matter, and the bibliographic universe still isn't FRBR-ized?!? I'm all for a Test Plan, and a Test Action, and FRBR Implementation. I want to ride on a rocket through the bibliographic universe. When will that future of bibliographic control get here?

4.3.1: Transform LCSH

4.3.2: Pursue De-Coupling of Subject Strings

[show cheese slide] I have come to think of LCSH as a fine cheese, something that has aged and is worthy of respect. It can be imprecise—like Swiss, it has its holes—but to de-couple the subject strings in the interest of making things "easier" for a broader

audience is to treat LCSH as if it were string cheese [**show string cheese slide**]. LCSH is not string cheese! We must respect the cheese!

5: Strengthen the Library and Information Science Profession

[Librarians : Musicians slide] This seems to be loaded with boosterism rhetoric, and void of pragmatic financial awareness. I think it is important for LIS students to learn organization of information, and to have a theoretical understanding of the important ideas underlying the surface treatments of preservation and access. They will get on-the-job training in the pragmatic application of whatever cataloging skills they learned in school, and only through repetition of tasks will they stand a chance at becoming adept. It's the same way with music—you are taught theory, and you are taught technique, but it is only through practice and performance that you apply what you are taught and become a musician.

Conclusion

[universe slide] Most users set off on their adventures in the bibliographic universe with data fragments in their satchels—a name (often misspelled) or part of a title, a keyword or some part of what might be turned into a keyword via truncation—and only some seek assistance. For those brave souls willing to pull over and ask for directions, we public services librarians do our best to make them aware of the access points that will function as YOU ARE HERE beacons in their wanderings. If the access points end up getting changed as a result of any of the Working Group's recommendations being implemented, we will adapt our instructions accordingly. Road construction often impinges upon our

planned routes, but we all seem to make it to our destinations via detours. The highways might be rebuilt, and the exit numbers altered, and the options at various exits expanded (or contracted), but the travelers will continue. Will there be disgruntled travelers? Yes. There will always be those who find something to complain about, and there will always be those who get lost, and there will always be those unwilling to ask for directions. The infrastructure of the bibliographic universe will continue to be under construction, and there will always be travelers in need of assistance. No matter what changes are wrought, it will still be my job as a public services librarian to ask: **[last slide]** “How may I help you?”