

President's Message

Transforming Cataloging by Leslie Burger

I am the first to admit that I know little to nothing about cataloging. As a library director, I do all that I can to support my cataloging staff—those individuals who are responsible for performing the kinds of magical things they do to help people in our community quickly and easily locate their desired books, films, music, and audio books. Cataloging was the only library school course in which I received a B. However, I understood then and understand now that the ability to organize and locate materials, according to a predictable scheme, is what sets libraries apart from bookstores, Amazon.com, Google, and all the other ways in which people seek and find information.

The internet has transformed the way in which we locate information. People expect to find what they want by searching the way that they think. Instead, customers using our libraries find catalogs offloaded with options that offer a variety of search choices, such as Library of Congress (LC) subject headings, subject and title keywords, controlled vocabulary keyword searching, ISBN, and several other choices that can be both helpful as well as confusing and intimidating. Regular catalog users have a reasonably good chance of finding what they want, others turn to library staff for assistance, and some simply give up choosing instead to browse the shelves to find materials that come close to meeting their needs.

Recently, LC announced that it would cease conducting series authority work. Other documents under consideration by LC implied that there would be more changes to come, including the possibility of suspending cataloging in publication and doing away with LC subject headings, supplying only partial call numbers as well as other modifications that would change cataloging as we know it in the United States. LC's stated goal is to create a finding system that more closely resembles the way people search for information today. Though I agree with LC leaders that we should continuously examine cataloging practices, there are two things about these recent actions that should cause all of us to be concerned.

Good process is the key to making change.

Each year Congress provides millions of dollars to LC to, among other things, provide bibliographic data for the nation's libraries. LC records are a national resource vital for the efficient operation of all libraries. As our de facto

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national library, LC provides bibliographic utilities with records paid for by our tax dollars that are worth hundreds of millions of dollars in saved staff time. Can you imagine a world in which we all did original cataloging again?

Because of its unique role, LC should consult with its constituents, particularly ALA, before changing cataloging standards that have major implications for American libraries and the people

who use them. These changes occur most smoothly when there is mutual consent and deliberation. This sort of consultation is healthy and essential if LC is to retain the support and trust it has historically received from ALA and the general public.

It's time to change cataloging practices. I agree with LC's leadership that we must change the way we provide access to the material in our collections. New technology offers unprecedented opportunities to increase accessibility to material that might otherwise be lost to researchers. While I support LC's efforts to take leadership in enriching the ways we provide access to our collections, it must remember that transformation doesn't happen by pronouncement. We succeed at changing our institutions and practices when people work together to create a shared vision describing what that change needs to be.

In the next few months we have an opportunity to move the cataloging debate forward, to come together as a community—directors, catalogers, users, and providers—to develop a vision for cataloging practices and delivery systems for the future. It's not one organization's decision, but the wisdom of many that will transform cataloging as we know it. ALA's participation in LC's future Bibliographic Control Advisory Committee will be an important first step toward that future.

Between now and LC's June 2007 summit, ALA and its divisions will hold a series of forums, programs, and other events to give all stakeholders opportunities to contribute to this critical dialogue. I urge you to take part in the discussion. If we all work together we will be able to craft a bright future and transform cataloging for 21st-century users. 

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