On the Dublin Core front

by Norm Medeiros
Associate Librarian of the College
Haverford College
Haverford, PA

Good Enough is Good Enough:
Cataloging Lessons from the University of California Libraries

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> *"Baseball is like church. Many attend, few understand."* -- Leo Durocher

ABSTRACT
This article reviews the recent report, "Rethinking How We Provide Bibliographic Services for the University of California." It discusses some of the report's recommendations in light of similar initiatives underway. The article includes comments from John Riemer, Chair of the Bibliographic Services Task Force, the group responsible for the report. The article concludes by affirming many of the suggestions detailed in the report.

KEYWORDS
Bibliographic services ; cataloging ; metadata ; University of California Libraries ; John Riemer

*L*iving in interesting times, as the saying goes, is either a blessing or a curse, and I suspect those administering academic technical services over the next few years will have very strong opinions on this matter. Library patrons to a large degree are growing dissatisfied with the fragmented and ever-expanding array of information tools that confront them, none of which seem terribly easy to use. The online catalog (opac) is a particular source of frustration for many users. In light of this dissatisfaction, I read with much interest the recent report issued by the Bibliographic Services Task Force (BSTF) at the University of California (UC) Libraries. "Rethinking How We Provide Bibliographic Services for the University of California" <http://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/sopag/BSTF/Final.pdf> describes means by which academic libraries can continue to provide relevant, sophisticated bibliographic services to their constituents. There is much hard truth in the 79-page document, and it comes at a time when similar questions regarding the future of library services are at the forefront of many minds.

"Only through knowing our audience, respecting their needs, and imaginatively reengineering our operations, can we revitalize the library's suite of bibliographic services." **–UC report**

UC's Systemwide Operations and Planning Advisory Group (SOPAG) established the Bibliographic Services Task Force (BSTF), charging it with assessing means by which bibliographic services can provide similar experiences as those provided by Amazon and Google. Not surprisingly, BSTF's resulting report references Amazon 18 times and Google 23 times. SOPAG clearly recognized these commercial enterprises as the standards to which UC should aspire. John Riemer (UCLA), Chair of the BSTF, identified the rapidly growing stable of non-interoperable information tools as a prevailing factor which led to the formation and charge of the group (Riemer, 2006). As Riemer notes, students usually don't know which tool will satisfy a particularly information need, and thus these stymied users often abandon library resources for the immediate gratification provided by the general Web. Moreover, given the declining need for undergraduates to visit campus libraries, the noticeable migration of users away from the virtual library is a cause for alarm.

In the course of performing its work, the BSTF reviewed a large assortment of papers on the topic of improving bibliographic access to information, while also soliciting the informed opinions of library

The UNIVERSITY of CALIFORNIA LIBRARIES

FINAL REPORT: DECEMBER 2005
Bibliographic Services Task Force

leaders and visionaries such as John Byrum, recently-retired Chief of the Regional and Cooperative Cataloging Division, Library of Congress; Lorcan Dempsey, Vice President and Chief Strategist, OCLC; Clifford Lynch, Director, Coalition for Networked Information; and Roy Tennant, User Services Architect, Digital Library Services, California Digital Library.

The resulting report provides a succinct, persuasive set of recommendations for improving the way libraries provide bibliographic services.

The executive summary states the obvious: Library systems can't compete with tools provided by juggernauts Amazon and Google. The summary continues with the less obvious statement, however, that libraries offer fragmented systems to users, the distinctions of each being lost on nearly all undergraduates. Moreover, libraries are expending great effort – too much effort it's argued – at maintaining these fragmented systems. The summary ends on a deservingly ominous note, stating that the recommendations contained within the report must be implemented if libraries "are to remain viable in the information marketplace."

"For the past 10 years online searching has become simpler and more effective everywhere, except in library catalogs." –UC report

Focusing on a few of the UC recommendations should provide a sense of the simple, practical, and essential activities that academic libraries must learn to provide and/or incorporate into their bibliographic provision:

➔ Offer alternative actions for failed or suspect searches
I can't count the number of times Google has saved me from a failed search, simply by recognizing a misspelled word within my query. For instance, if one searches for *Champange Jam* in Google, Google's first response is to ask whether I meant *Champagne Jam*. After acknowledging that I did mean *Champagne Jam*, I am brought to a results list that links me to information about the Atlanta Rhythm Section's album. My library's catalog, however, returns no results when the query is entered

mistakenly. It suggests I search *Champange Jam* as keywords, but this too yields no results since the catalog is helpless against misspellings. To users, it looks as though the library doesn't own a copy of this album, though in fact we do.   As a result, users are too harshly punished for misspelling and mistyping, and may harbor dissatisfaction towards the library, particularly given the ease with which Google recognizes and corrects obvious spelling errors.

➔ Provide relevance ranking and leverage full-text
Library catalogs are increasing in size while user search strategies are becoming less sophisticated -- a recipe for very large result sets. Even the most dedicated bibliographic instruction program will only effect change in a small number of students. Rather than fight the tide, results should be ranked and/or clustered as a means of helping searchers more ably access the most desired results. Given the expectation of immediate gratification, part of the relevancy could be based on the availability of an electronic version of the desired object.   It's not unreasonable to think that librarians could develop criteria that would provide useful relevancy regardless of the simplicity or sophistication of the query. Yet many opacs don't allow anything beyond the most rudimentary relevancy setting.

➔ Automate metadata creation / manually enrich metadata in important areas
The title of this article is a quote from the UC report section referencing the need to automate metadata creation. From an administrative perspective, I think it's critical for library cataloging departments to cease seeking perfection. There are many reasons for my position, chief among them the need to deploy cataloging staff to other projects that require fairly complex levels of cataloging. It's inconceivable for cataloging staffs to continue to provide near-perfect bibliographic records while also immersing themselves into an ever-growing array of non-MARC/AACR digital projects. Moreover, from a strictly utilitarian perspective, maintenance of such near-perfection is not warranted. Libraries should determine acceptable error rates for different parts of the bibliographic record and be comfortable adhering to them. There are simply too many competing demands to allow legacy cataloging practices to inhibit such progress.

"If we wish to remain a contender in the information marketplace, we need to incorporate efficient ways for obtaining, creating, and exporting metadata." –UC report

It did not go unnoticed that the above quote says *contender* rather than *leader*. The implication is that the library community has surrendered the top spot in providing information to undergraduates, and it's likely we will never regain it. The UC report is sprinkled with a sufficient and warranted number of similarly alarming statements about the future of libraries. It should serve as a wake-up call. Indeed if it doesn't, academic libraries jeopardize their existence.

WORKS CITED

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