

# Born-Again Cataloging in the Online Networks

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*Participation in an online network means that the work of individual libraries and their catalogers becomes visible to, and utilized by, many other libraries. Network affiliated libraries and network quality control personnel thus become participants in evaluating each cataloger's work. Results of a 1983-84 case study of six academic libraries indicate that the shift from in-house to nationwide evaluation of catalogers' records creates enhanced status and influence for cataloging peer groups and provides both networks and individual libraries new opportunities to identify master catalogers by online inspection of their work.*



ne of the most important developments affecting library and information agencies in the past decade has been the growing reliance by individual libraries on the services of automated cooperative networks, also known as bibliographic utilities. These utilities offer a range of products designed to help libraries exploit the fact that work done at one institution can often be utilized by another library with little or no change being required. Since adherence to cataloging codes is a mandated professional requirement, catalogers everywhere are theoretically able to use each other's work. Thus, development of a huge online catalog, accessible to all member institutions, should result in a vast overall saving of catalogers' time without the dilution of quality inherent in most mass production activities.

Network participation also creates new ways to evaluate quality. Access to the network's communal catalog makes an immense public record visible nationwide on every participating library's terminal. Because cataloging departments and/or their individual catalogers attach identifying codes to these records, it is possible for peers, managers, critics, and consultants to evaluate cataloging successes and fail-

ures. This remarkable increase in the groups concerned with evaluating an individual library's product has received little attention in the library research literature despite the fact that sociologists and other social scientists have developed numerous case studies indicating that increased work visibility tends to lead to decreased professional status and loss of ability to maintain professional quality standards.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, as part of my doctoral research at the University of California, I developed a case study designed to explore how catalogers adapted to work in an online environment, how this shift affected their work assignments and professional status, and whether countervailing strategies had been developed by these library professionals to retain control over cataloging standards and reinforce their professional authority.

## METHODOLOGY

The case study was conducted during 1983-84 and focused on sixty-eight in-depth interviews with catalogers, library administrators, and network quality control personnel. In addition, I had an opportunity to attend the OCLC network-sponsored Oglebay Conference on Quality Control and was able to interview

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many network-identified master catalogers at that meeting.

Six academic libraries were the sites for most of my interviews. One criterion for selecting these libraries was that they belong to a cataloging network (Online Computer Library Center [OCLC], Research Libraries Information Network [RLIN], or Washington Library Network [WLN]). They were also required to have a budget over \$1 million. This criterion was imposed in order to guarantee that they would have a cataloging department of sufficient size to be able to develop a sample group or quote without danger of improperly identifying one's source.

Finally, geographic and financial considerations limited my research to a sample located on the west coast of the United States. (Stanford University, University of California-Berkeley, University of Washington, San Francisco State University, Sonoma State University). However, since librarianship is an occupation characterized by national norms, national networks, and national job markets, this regional sample should still reflect current American practice.

## RESULTS

In every library that I visited, the catalogers, even the subject specialists, had extremely limited contact with students and with faculty. They tended to work alone in offices or in partitioned alcoves so that they could devote intense attention to the literature that they were describing. Since most of the catalogers interviewed were isolated from users, especially knowledgeable faculty members, their only sources for evaluating their cataloging work were the cataloging rules and the approval of other catalogers.

In an isolated work environment network visibility can provide potential benefits for catalogers who feel proud of their work and seek to enlarge the audience that is able to appreciate it. Many catalogers in the sample libraries, especially the three large research libraries, fall into this category. Thus Berkeley catalogers bemoan the fact that their initials are removed from the bibliographic record before it is input into RLIN. True, their qual-

ity work is still identified as a Berkeley product, but their individual contributions to their institution's prestige will not be known to other catalogers.

On the other hand, all of the catalogers that I interviewed were aware of the potential negative effects of visibility. They mentioned the growing number of library blacklists of institutions whose cataloging was deemed to be unacceptable. At some of the sample libraries, catalogers were aware of these lists. Department members even admitted to creating these lists. On balance, however, catalogers showed far more interest in the white lists developed by their departments—lists of libraries whose cataloging could be accepted with little or no revision or of libraries that were especially esteemed for some area of specialized cataloging (e.g., music scores). Although catalogers interviewed had not actually compared their lists with colleagues in other institutions, most felt confident that the same names would appear on the majority of library white lists.

Network quality-control personnel were also aware of and used white lists to create spin-off products. Because OCLC, its regional networks, and its cataloging advisory groups know where the high-quality cataloging departments are located, they were confident in, and capable of, assigning these departments the task of revising errors in the database. Project Enhance, inaugurated in December 1983, with its initial designation of twenty revising libraries, is a direct offspring of network visibility, quality control, and evaluation.

Both OCLC and WLN have compiled resource lists of catalogers knowledgeable about cataloging rules and network procedures, and these lists are available to institutions seeking expert consultants. Of course, the lists also provide the source from which new members of network advisory committees can be drawn.

It is true that acknowledged nationwide cataloging experts existed in the library profession prior to networks. They were usually identified because of their rank (e.g., heads of cataloging departments of major research libraries), their articles in the library literature, or their membership

in important state or national cataloging committees. Network participation has added two new possibilities for nationwide renown—participation in network committees and/or quality of cataloging prepared by the individual or the department that he/she represents. In some ways the first of the new possibilities is simply a variation on the old requirements for approval by the establishment. After all, being head of a catalog department, being selected to publish in refereed library journals, or being appointed to national committees is a function of the cataloger's ability to meet the standards of the existing power structure of the library world. The second of the new paths to cataloging stardom, however, does not fit comfortably into the traditional mold. It stresses performance and peer evaluation rather than administrative approval and political alliances. While this phenomenon is much too new to be realistically assessed, interviews with catalogers reveal a great interest in, and approval of, working peers, especially those that are associated with the networks. In fact, among the catalogers interviewed there appeared to be a high level of consensus that peer group representatives are worthy leaders who have publicly proved their high ethical standards by adhering to quality professional cataloging standards, even when doing so sometimes becomes unpleasant. One cataloger at the Oglebay Conference saw things this way:

Quality control is a lot like cleaning a cat box. It is expected—that is your fellow librarians expect you to keep their data base clean.<sup>2</sup>

But, of course, people who clean out cat litter boxes sometimes develop such strong aversions to their contents that they decide to get rid of the animals responsible for producing the mess. Discussions with network quality-control personnel indicate that master catalogers are characterized both by the high quality of their work and their tendency to report substandard cataloging done by others. In fact, error reporting is one way that OCLC regional networks identify resource people and potential members of their advisory groups. These networks analyze the

error reports sent to them, examine the documentation that accompanies the report in order to establish that the record is indeed in error, and develop files of individuals dedicated to maintaining a "clean" database. The regional networks then review online the work produced by each cataloger, and if that work is ranked superior, the error-spotting catalogers will begin to be invited to participate in network committees. In time, this participation will often lead to invitations to join nationwide cataloging advisory committees.

While this process is favorable for the error reporter, what impact does it have on the individuals or departments that errors are assessed against? In general, in the sample libraries, some resentment at errors assigned the institution was expressed and, in at least three of them, serious effort was made to review the record and determine if substandard cataloging had actually occurred.

It was only when speaking to network quality control personnel, however, that the rage of the embattled cataloger against whom errors were assessed could be discerned. At all three networks, quality personnel expressed some feelings of stress resulting from having to deal with librarians whose records allegedly contained errors.

Some of the catalogers felt personally compelled to develop huge and thoroughly indexed documentation justifying their innocence. If, despite these protests, their records were revised at the network office, they took personal affront at what they considered to be stains on their professional record. In one of the networks, the strain of dealing with this small, but outraged and vocal, constituency took a noticeable toll upon the entire quality control staff. Network administrators became so concerned that they ordered that group members use some company time to take classes in biofeedback and thus relieve their stress. Unfortunately, this enlightened management strategy was not totally successful. Several biofeedback students experienced additional stress worrying that their bosses would monitor their biofeedback performance and find them at

fault for not having relaxed enough. Thus visibility doth make victims of us all!

At another network, the chief reviser separated catalogers into two groups—"those that want to dance and those that want to fence." The dancers are willing to accept revisions for the sake of the consistency of the network database. The fencers, usually the more renowned catalogers, are supremely confident of their own judgments and will contest every error call. The network reviser (obviously a natural-born fencer) enjoys the contest, admires the combatants, and often makes mental notes that they possess the right stuff needed to become members of network committees.

All of the network quality-control personnel commented on what they consider to be a statistically insignificant but fascinating aberration—some catalogers, aware of the visibility and publicity that network participation creates, are deliberately using error reports to disparage the work of colleagues in other institutions. Instances of this type occur most often when there are competing cataloging departments, especially in institutions that have had traditional football rivalries with each other. In this case, technology has made it possible for a new form of the Super Bowl to be played on video screens by competing catalog departments.

But, in general, maintaining standards is not a game to catalogers. It is serious and important work. One of the most striking impressions that emerges from reviewing cataloging literature is the judgmental and moral world view of catalogers, especially in the area of standard setting and enforcement. Moreover, during the course of my interviews phrases like "lapses from grace," "worthy peers," and "born-again catalogers," appeared to form natural parts of the cataloger's vocabulary—an in-group tone and use of language that an outsider would be more likely to associate with the ministry than with the technical experts catalogers pride themselves on being.

Because they are engaged in protecting the purity of cataloging standards, the emerging subgroups of master catalogers and cataloging peer groups appear to

have, quite unconsciously, cloaked themselves in the mantle of the righteous. Like any group of the "elect" they are sometimes disliked and resented, but no serious collegial challenge to their right to discover and assign error has yet emerged. In fact, network designation as resource consultants, as approved revisers (e.g., Project Enhance), as "buddies" for new or wayward cataloging departments, provides new cataloging peer groups with nationwide influence, power, and prestige. This same combination of factors then makes it possible for those groups to pressure networks for the retention of standards and the very detailed records so dear to catalogers' hearts.

This enhanced status is, of course, bestowed on a very small minority of catalogers through network participation. The vast majority of these librarians are threatened by loss of jobs and the many deprofessionalizing trends that standardized and routine network work processes create. Despite this, many catalogers expressed more hope for the survival of their professional ideals as a result of the work of peer groups than through the continued activities of their individual departments.

In two of the libraries, comment was made about networks providing a new opportunity and a new forum to discuss standards. Moreover, as one San Francisco State cataloger noted, "Networks might be worrisome because they assign errors, but at least they have some interest in discovering them. Most libraries don't care anymore."

In "The Professionalization of Everyone?" Wilensky points out that the optimal knowledge base for professionals is "neither too vague nor too precise, too broad or too narrow."<sup>3</sup> Cataloging work may well fall into the too narrow and too precise category, which is susceptible to being broken into ever smaller components that can then be taught to workers with lesser skills. On the other hand, Wilensky also argues that

many of us might construct a homemade bookcase, few would forego a clergyman at the grave. The key difference is that the clergy's tasks and tools, unlike the carpenter's, belong

to the realm of the sacred—which reinforces a jurisdictional claim grounded in formal training and indoctrination. Occupations which successfully identify themselves with the sacred may achieve as much of a mandate by monopoly as those that identify themselves with science.<sup>4</sup>

Thus he charts many paths used by occupational groups in their ascent to the peak of professionalism. At present, there is certainly no evidence that catalogers are consciously trying to replace a diminished knowledge base with an expanded claim to moral superiority. Indeed, striving toward some abstract ideal has always characterized these professionals and turned them inward in a search for collegial approval. But with the rise of designated master workers and knowledgeable peer

groups, catalogers appear to be developing a breed of colleagues whose knowledge base is expanding to include an overview of network systems and whose standard-setting influence is acknowledged by network personnel as well as by other catalogers. These workers could possibly develop into new hybrid catalogers, possessing some measure of automation expertise, political clout, and devotion to traditional cataloging standards. If so, there is a chance that they are harbingers of the reprofessionalization of cataloging.

Thus, while the network has sowed the seeds for the deprofessionalization of cataloging, it has also reaped the crop of the new breed of born-again catalogers.

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#### REFERENCES

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