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Rule Maker or Rule Breaker? [Conference Report]

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How could any self-respecting cataloger resist a program called "Rule Maker or Rule Breaker?" It was impossible for me to pass up, though the primary target audience was listed as public services librarians. This program took place on July 21, 2002 during the AALL Annual Meeting in Orlando, Florida and was sponsored by the OBS-SIS. Mary Strouse (Catholic University of America) was the coordinator and moderator. Michelle Wu (University of Houston O'Quinn Law Library) and Richard Amelung (St. Louis University Law Library) were the speakers.

Mary Strouse began with an introduction to the topic. Taking a show of hands, she noted the presence of a number of non-catalogers in attendance. She laid the groundwork by emphasizing the importance of having a user-centered catalog. The optimal situation of having the highest quality catalog record, with numerous access points and completely adapted to the needs of the library's users, is not always possible. Ms. Strouse noted the practical issues of workflow efficiencies that come into play. Creating the perfect catalog record every time significantly slows down the volume of cataloging work that can be achieved. The need to make the material available quickly is at odds with the need to do that in the most economical manner possible.

Ms. Strouse described a typical situation: A reference librarian comes to the cataloger and says that a record is wrong and asks that s/he fix it, as well as all other similar records in the catalog too. The cataloger responds that changing the record would violate a national standard. The reference librarian understands this to mean that the cataloger is not interested in the needs of the user. The purpose of this program was to restructure that

conversation in such a way that the national standard comment is the beginning of the conversation, not the end.

Violating standards is very different than adapting standards, or what Ms. Strouse calls "disciplined rule breaking." The goal of national standards is consistency. If the decision is made to consistently catalog differently than the national standards, then there is a higher cost outcome associated with that decision since every shared catalog record will need to be changed to meet the local standard. This cumulates over time and slows the cataloging process considerably, thus affecting how much cataloging can be accomplished. It also introduces the possibility of more human error if records must be edited extensively every time. If you do choose to differ from standards, be sure you know why you are doing it and document it. The goal of cooperative cataloging is to get more records into the bibliographic utilities quickly, so that catalogers can spend saved time adding extra value to records that will benefit their catalog users. When such value is added (e.g., adding table of contents), it is essential that this value be added in such a way that all libraries may benefit from it.

Public services librarians and administrators need to know the conflicting needs facing catalogers. Ms. Strouse cautioned that the cataloging manager is balancing many different needs. S/he is constantly juggling competing concerns and reprioritizing on the fly. It is best to recognize the fact that there will always be records in the catalog that do not meet all users' needs. Knowing the specific needs of users helps cataloging managers to better meet them. As an advocate for the user, the reference librarian is well-situated to advise the cataloger of those needs.

Michelle Wu began by stating that technical and public services librarians are reaching for the same goal, though perhaps in a slightly different way. It is therefore imperative that they work together. The common goal is simply to serve the patron and this goal is accomplished by providing:
- Easy access
- Predictability/consistency
- Portability (users should be able to take knowledge to other situations/ libraries)

Ms. Wu outlined, from a reference librarian's perspective, what should be done if a catalog record is not meeting a need. Catalogers try to anticipate users' needs but this is not always possible. So the need for a change should be analyzed. Can the situation be addressed by user education? Is the problem recurring often? The end objective should be pinpointed before the reference librarian approaches the cataloger. But once that is done, the reference librarian must talk to the expert (cataloger), without telling the cataloger what to do. Reference librarians know how users use the catalog and they should convey that knowledge, while leaving judgments about the rules to the cataloger.

Practical examples of enhancements and alterations that can be made to catalog records by collaboration between reference librarians and catalogers were presented next.
- Location determination (e.g. move item to Reserve if often used or goes missing)
- Added titles or subjects (popular names, e.g. commonly know as "Green book")
- Scope notes (reference librarians should ask catalogers how certain subject headings are assigned; cataloger may point to authority record)
- Related links (guides that go along with related works)
- Form/genre (format) information

Other examples of innovations were then given:
- Local changes (only for your patrons)
- Call numbers and subject headings (SACO)
- Names, uniform titles (NACO)
- Changes to MARC standards (MARBI)

Ms. Wu summed up by saying that catalogers and reference librarians can work together to create a better catalog and to address the differences between actual use of the catalog and anticipated use of the catalog. This dialog is essential!

"Standards and Real Life: Reasonable Accommodation in the Law Library" was the title Richard Amelung gave to his portion of the program. He advised steering clear of the "just say no" approach to catalog change requests. Standards are guidelines that work to our benefit by providing:
- Predictability (it always displays right here on the screen because it is stored in the same place in the record; if not there, it is lacking or not appropriate)
- Possibility (if x is like this, then y should be like that; allows user to make analogies)
- Portability (different definition: data transferability from one system to another)

It is best to be able to recognize what is a reasonable accommodation (or not) and why. Mr. Amelung then proceeded to sketch out seven request situations. Except for one, these situations were all real. He read the request, listed all the cataloging tools the cataloger must consult, asked for a judgment from Mary and Michelle as to whether the request was reasonable or not, and then described how the situation could be handled. During this process, Mr. Amelung raised pertinent questions that must be asked, as well as both the short and long-term ramifications that must be considered.

As an example, request #1 read: "Our professor just wrote a book with three friends, but can't find it in the catalog under his name. Please add his name to the record."

Mr. Amelung responded by saying that they now encourage their professors not to write with so many people, but if they must, that they should be sure their name is listed first. Moving on to a

more serious response, he listed the relevant standards involved. In this particular case, they are: AACR2, the LCRIs (*Library of Congress Rule Interpretations*), and the *Descriptive Cataloging Manual*. He quoted the shared responsibility rule, or as he referred to it, the rule of four, which says that in such a situation, access to only the first named author should be given. However, the rules do advise that if a heading will provide important access, the cataloger should add it. Mr. Amelung said that this should be done locally. Ms. Strouse and Ms. Wu agreed that this was a reasonable request.

The remaining six request situations illustrated very nicely the profusion of standards that catalogers are faced with on a daily basis: AACR2, LCRIs, LCSH (*Library of Congress Subject Headings*), SCM (*Subject Cataloging Manual: Subject Headings*), LCC (Library of Congress classification schedules), MARC 21, bibliographic utility standards (OCLC and RLIN), and

local and consortium systems standards. There are numerous forces driving technical services, not just AACR2. It is all the standards, all the time, coming at catalogers, who must consider and apply them as appropriate.

In seeking solutions, Mr. Amelung suggested that certain questions must be asked:
- Who is being served? (Think of primary patrons first.)
- What is the desired outcome? What, not how?
- While x is being done, y is not being done. Is that acceptable?
- Can you achieve the same thing another way?
- Can you have it all? (Answer: probably not! Tradeoffs are necessary.)

Ms. Strouse closed with the comment that continuous education is essential for catalogers. If they take the opportunity to participate in the national discussion that changes those rules and standards, they can influence

the changes and thereby better meet the needs of their users.

This was a terrific program! It reinforced the importance of establishing an ongoing dialog between catalogers and public services staff in a clear and clever way and it achieved its goal of attracting non-catalogers to the presentation. The title was deliberately provocative. If it were up to me, I might have renamed it "Rule Maker or Rule Bender." I never think of myself as "breaking" the cataloging rules, though I have at times seen myself as "bending" them a bit to better meet the needs of our users. After all, since the overall philosophy underlying the cataloging rules and standards is to provide the best possible service to library users, how can we really be "breaking" those rules when we do all we can to achieve that goal? The trick, as pointed out so well in this program, is to weigh all the ramifications of your decisions carefully and to do your best to achieve a balance that provides the consistency so essential to our users.