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ALA Adventures in Ambiguity

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by Ellen McGrath, University at Buffalo Law Library

When I saw that the ALA Midwinter Conference would be held in Denver, Colorado, January 23-26, 2009, I could not resist attending for a couple reasons: my time is my own while I am on sabbatical this semester and I could visit my brother and his family who live near Denver. The tight budgetary situation dictated that I finance the trip myself, but ALLUNY generously awarded me a Miscellaneous Grant to cover the registration cost. How lucky am I? Thank you ALLUNY!

I still feel overwhelmed by the mass of information that I tried to absorb at the Conference, especially since most of it raised more questions than it provided answers. It is certainly true that we live in interesting times, though I would add to that by saying we also live in ambiguous times, particularly from my cataloger's perspective.

My intent in writing this report is to give you just a small taste of the sessions that I attended during my action-packed three and a half days at the Conference. But before doing that, I will define some terms which will feature significantly in this report.

FRBR or **Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records:** "A conceptual entity-relationship model developed by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) that relates user tasks of retrieval and access in online library catalogues and bibliographic databases from a user's perspective. It represents a more holistic approach to retrieval and access as the relationships between the entities provide links to navigate through the hierarchy of relationships. The model is significant because it is separate from specific cataloguing standards such as AACR2 or International Standard Bibliographic Description (ISBD)." (*Wikipedia*) The classic FRBR example is of the work *Gone With the Wind* which can be represented by the novel, a translation of the novel, the movie, a play, etc. In a FRBRized catalog, these various expressions of the same content are displayed in a related manner, possibly in a hierarchical or tree structure.

RDA or **Resource Description and Access:** "A set of instructions for the cataloguing of books and other materials held in libraries. RDA is intended to replace AACR2, a standard in widespread use in Anglo-American libraries." (*Wikipedia*)

ALCTS FRBR Interest Group (January 23, 10:30 AM-12:00 PM)

- Developing a FRBR-Based System to Effectively Support User Tasks: Yin Zhang (Associate Professor) & Athena Salaba (Assistant Professor, Kent State University, School of Library and Information Science)
- Designing Future Systems and Taking Advantage of FRBR and RDA—A Preview: Barbara Tillett (Chief, Policy and Standards Division, Library of Congress)
- FRBR Update from VTLS: John Espley (Principal Librarian, VTLS Inc.)

Resources:
http://frbr.slis.kent.edu/

Professors Zhang and Salaba described their ongoing IMLS-funded FRBR project, which covers these areas: (1) identifying key issues in FRBR development; (2) user study and evaluation of existing FRBR systems and online catalogs; (3) FRBRization of a large library collection using the OCLC Workset Algorithm; and (4) a plan to develop a FRBR-based catalog. The project is currently focused on creation of its own catalog. Dr. Tillett next presented what she called her personal view of where we are going in terms of FRBR. She also discussed RDA, since it is related and will incorporate FRBR concepts. Dr. Tillett characterized RDA as just a start with many compromises that will minimize the impact of its implementation. She said it is not perfect, but it will point us in the direction we want to go and it will evolve as it is applied. Mr. Espley described a VTLS service for non-Virtua customers that can link from a library's own catalog out to a FRBRized version and then back into its own catalog.

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Q&A/Comments:

1. Why has FRBR taken so long and is still not widely implemented? Dr. Tillett turned the question right back to the group, saying she did not know. Mr. Espley offered three reasons: lack of leadership, no funding, and librarians are afraid.
2. What can catalogers do to get ready? Mr. Espley suggested adding more uniform titles and keeping current with authority work, which fleshes out the necessary record relationships.
3. There continue to be numbers bandied about that say only about 20% of bibliographic records are related to another expression, and so need to be FRBRized. But this misconception was debunked. All records need to be FRBRized since there are relationships between records represented by access points even if the work itself is not related. So all records require FRBRization and labeling our data more exactly will help to make that happen.
4. Who will provide the necessary leadership--OCLC, Library of Congress (LC)? Dr. Tillett advised that if libraries want LC to lead us, we must tell them so. The changes FRBR would bring were described as relatively small in terms of the impact on cataloging work. FRBR has not been sold to public services staff and administrators who must justify funding such a major change to our catalogs.
5. The MARC format does not handle FRBR well and a new format(s) is needed. MARC is not the only problem, some of the blame goes to our general cataloging environment in which we each have our own catalog where we all duplicate editing the same records. I heard the first of many pleas here for a truly shared cataloging environment where the central addition/update of a bibliographic record is simply linked to by our individual catalogs. It was acknowledged that while this represents the most efficient approach, it would mean a huge political and social change within the global library community.

ALCTS CCS Forum: FRBR and RDA (January 23, 4:00-5:30 PM)
- Barbara Tillett (Library of Congress)
- Diane Vizine-Goetz (Senior Research Scientist, OCLC)
- Roland McDonald (Indiana University & Marshall Breeding (Vanderbilt)
- John Espley (VTLS)
Resources:

http://fictionfinder.oclc.org/
http://deweyresearch.oclc.org/classify2/

There was a good bit of overlap with this related session and unfortunately I could only stay to hear the first two speakers. Dr. Tillett repeated some of her observations from the morning session and detailed her "wish list":

- Templates or RDA Online workflow "wizards"
- ILS links from specific elements in input screens to RDA instructions
- Import descriptive metadata (from publishers, vendors, etc.)
- Validation of required "core" elements linked to mode of issuance
- Import controlled metadata
- Drop down menus for controlled vocabularies
- Automatic suggestion of classification/subject headings
- Automatic generation of work/expression data and links to "creator"
- Automatic prompting and validation of work/expression data
- FRBR collocating (expand and collapse elements for displays)
- Simple displays of pathways to related resources and information about related entries

It all sounds wonderful to me—if only it wasn't so difficult to bring about! Ms. Vizine-Goetz described the OCLC FictionFinder project (an example of a FRBRized system, but not currently in active development) and another OCLC project, Classify, an experimental classification service.

RDA Update Forum (January 25, 10:30 AM-12:00 PM)
- John Attig (ALA Representative to Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA)
- Nannette Naught (Information Management Team, Inc.)
- Don Chatman (ALA Publishing)
- Beacher Wiggins (Director, Acquisitions and Bibliographic Access, Library of Congress)
Resources:
http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/jsc/index.html
http://www-wsl.state.wy.us/ldo/webinararchive/RDAWebinar.ppt
http://www.rdaonline.org

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Mr. Attig said that the RDA content development period is winding down and the product development phase is ramping up. The full content will be turned over to the developers in June 2009, with substantial updates planned for the future. The RDA consultant/product designer, Ms. Naught, gave a demonstration of the web-based RDA Online, though much of it still seemed very much up in the air to me. She said a demo of it will be available on the web sometime in February. I confess that I was pretty lost during Mr. Chatham's discussion of the pricing models for RDA, although I remember that some elements of it will be freely available on the web.

Mr. Wiggins then addressed RDA testing. LC, the National Library of Medicine (NLM), and the National Agricultural Library (NAL) are working on a framework for testing the premises on which RDA is based. A meeting with representatives of approximately twenty volunteer tester libraries took place the preceding day of the conference. RDA Online is projected to be released in July 2009, so testing will begin after that. The test period will last six months, with the preliminary phase probably about October-December 2009 and the formal phase, January-March 2010. There will be a core set of control materials that will be cataloged by all testers according to both AACR2 and RDA. The resulting records will then be evaluated and a recommendation made as to whether RDA should be implemented by LC, NLM, and NAL. This timeline could slip of course, but general implementation of RDA by all libraries is not expected before summer 2010, that is IF the recommendation comes out in favor of implementing it. Mr. Wiggins also acknowledged OCLC's important role in this process.

ALCTS CCS Cataloging and Classification Research Interest Group (January 24, 10:30 AM-12:00 PM)
- Author-assigned Keywords Versus Library of Congress Subject Headings: Implications for the Cataloging of Electronic Theses and Dissertations: Rocki Strader (Assistant Professor and Catalog Librarian, Ohio State University)
- Make the WorldCat a World Catalog: How to Optimize Multilingual Searching: Charlene Chou (Catalog Librarian, Columbia University)
- Cataloging in the RDA Environment: Skill Sets, Expectations and Challenges: Sylvia D. Hall-Ellis (Associate Professor, University of Denver, Library and Information Science Program) &

JoAnne L. Patrick (Director of Operation, University of Denver, Westminster Law Library)

Ms. Strader described her study comparing 1,681 keywords and 1,181 LC subject headings (LCSH) from 285 electronic theses and dissertations at OSU in 2005. She matched all the terms manually and categorized them as exact matches, partial matches, all present/not in exact order, variant, or no match at all. The results showed over one third of the keywords did not overlap with the LCSH and one fourth of the LCSH did not correspond to the keywords. Ms. Strader's general conclusions were that LCSHs do add value, keywords can guide assignment of LCSHs, and keywords and LCSHs complement each other nicely, rather than competing with each other. Ms. Chou's study was also interesting, though less relevant to me since we have very few non-Western script titles in our collection.

Professor Hall-Ellis and Ms. Patrick's co-presentation contrasted the cataloging educator's view with that of the cataloging administrator, who must justify every dollar spent in these tough economic times. Professor Hall-Ellis has collected twelve years of job ads for catalogers, although she said most searches have been frozen for the past six months or so. She will continue to build this data set and then asked the attendees what issues she should focus on as she examines the data. A lively interchange ensued and the issue of providing cataloging training in-house was explored from many angles. Salary, retention, and practicum issues were also raised.

ALCTS CCS Cataloging Norms Interest Group (January 24, 1:30-3:30 PM)
- Metadata in ARL Libraries: Jin Ma (Catalog/Metadata Librarian, CUNY, Newman Library)
- How to Improve Interoperability of Unique Metadata Fields for Special Collections: Myung-Ja Han & Christine Cho (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)
- FRBRizing Legacy Data: Issues and Challenges: Yin Zhang & Athena Salaba (Kent State University)
- Cataloging Quality: Problems and Potential Solutions: Magda El-Sherbini (Head of Cataloging, Ohio State University Libraries)

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I was only able to stay for the first two topics, but the third was a repeat of a presentation I had seen already anyway. Ms. Ma described the SPEC survey for which she gathered data in 2007. Some of her findings: most metadata creators are catalogers, most are trained on the job, there has been a shift from metadata creation to metadata management, interoperability is critical, and there is a proliferation of metadata standards and tools. Ms. Han and Cho did a study of digitized special collections and the associated metadata. Their strongest suggestion was to be consistent in metadata creation.

PCC Participants Meeting (January 25, 4:00-6:00 PM)
- Chair: David Banish (Cornell)
- Metadata Quality: What End Users and Librarians Want: Karen Calhoun & Janet Hawk (OCLC)
Resources:
http://www.loc.gov/catdir/pcc/
http://community.oclc.org/metalogue/

PCC stands for the Program for Cooperative Cataloging, whose participants contribute to the NACO, SACO, BIBCO, and CONSER programs. Mr. Banish mentioned that a number of PCC institutions will be RDA testers. Most of the time was devoted to Ms. Calhoun's report on the results and recommendations from a large-scale 2008 study that she and Ms. Hawk conducted for OCLC. The study sought to ascertain the similarities and differences in how various end user groups and librarians define metadata quality. The presentation was very detailed and interesting and will be published in March 2009 by OCLC. One of the key points that came up was that libraries seem to be doing a pretty good job at promoting discovery, but our users become confused when it comes to delivery of that work after it has been discovered.

Next-Generation Bibliographic Control: What is the Brave New World? (January 25, 1:30-3:30 PM)
- Diane Hillmann (Metadata Management Associates and Information Institute of Syracuse)
- Corey Harper (New York University)
- Kathryn Harnish (Ex Libris)
Resources:
http://www.extensiblecatalog.org/
http://managemetadata.org/blog/

http://www.oclc.org/us/en/worldcat/catalog/policy/default.htm

Ms. Hillmann is a former technical services law librarian who can always be counted on to voice some provocative comments and she did not disappoint. She named a list of things we must leave behind: the broken ILS (integrated library system) paradigm, metadata based on catalog cards, library software that cannot sort, search engines we hate, static HTML pages, and separate silos for books vs. other formats. Ms. Hillmann said we cannot wait for all standards to be completely done, since we live in an unstable world. She held up the eXtensible Catalog (XC) as an example of a flexible system with services that operate independently and can be added onto, thus adding value at every level. Ms. Hillmann advocated a new way to look at metadata management and better use of machines, in order to limit expensive human input to where it is most important. She characterized proprietary boundaries as a disincentive to innovation and OCLC's proposed *Policy for Use and Transfer of WorldCat Records* as troublesome. To loosely paraphrase Ms. Hillmann's closing remark: We are not sure exactly what we want, but we will know it when we see it. Mr. Harper made a passionate plea for innovation and experimentation in his presentation. He too pointed to the OCLC policy as potentially shutting down an open and sharing environment.

As this session was sponsored by Ex Libris, Ms. Harnish addressed how that company's products will address the issues of metadata raised by the other speakers. She said MARC has served us well, but it is reaching the end of its useful life and we are faced with a variety of metadata formats instead. Ms. Harnish presented Ex Libris' Uniform Resource Management (URM) approach under development in which metadata is separated (or decoupled) from the inventory aspects of the record. She repeated many of the concepts that I noticed recurred frequently throughout the entire conference: flexibility, metadata management, single centralized record, crosswalks, registries, etc.

Library of Congress Genre/Form Projects (January 26, 10:30-11:00 AM)
- Janis Young (LC)
Resources:
http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/genreformgeneral.html

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http://www.aallnet.org/sis/tssis/committees/cataloging/classification/

I attended this presentation at the LC booth in the exhibit hall wearing my hat as a member of the TS-SIS group working on the Genre Terms for Law Materials Project. It is encouraging to see LC reaching out to special user communities, such as law catalogers, to advise on and even lead these genre/form projects. These terms are intended to add on to LCSH, not to replace them. It was confirmed that LC will not be going back retrospectively to assign genre headings to records that lack them, given the cost of such an undertaking.

From Linking to Thinking: How We'll Live When Information Surrounds Us (OCLC Symposium, January 23, 1:30-4:30 PM)
- Roy Tennant (Senior Programs Officer, OCLC Programs & Research)
- David Weinberger (technologist, marketing guru, author of *Everything is Miscellaneous*)
- Nova Spivack (CEO and founder of Radar Networks and semantic web pioneer)
  Resources:
  http://www.oclc.org/us/en/multimedia/2009/MWSymposium.htm
  http://www.oclc.org/us/en/multimedia/images/FromLinkingtoThinkingHandout.pdf

The speakers were dynamic and engaging, as were the questions/comments voiced at the end of their presentations. Here are a few statements (in my own words) that stuck with me:
- We don't find information, information finds us (Tennant)
- Our solution to information overload has been to generate more information in the form of metadata (Weinberger)
- The distinction between data and metadata is blurring; metadata=what you know/data=what you are looking for (Weinberger)
- Our old methods of providing metadata simply do not scale anymore (Weinberger)
- We should aim for "good enough" not perfect (Weinberger)
- The mess will always outpace order (Weinberger)
- Libraries are pragmatic and symbolic (Weinberger)
- Everything is becoming metadata and data will go away (Spivack)
- The web is functioning as an operating system (Spivack)
- Either make the data or the software smarter (Spivack)
- Creation of ontologies cannot be automated (Spivack)
- We are sacrificing depth for a broader range of information*
- We are getting smarter, but understanding less*

  * *during Q&A, not sure who said this*

I also attended the LITA Town Forum (January 26, 8:00-10:00 AM). LITA (Library & Information Technology Association) had engaged the services of Matt Barnes (R2 Consulting) to facilitate brainstorming and flipcharting exercises concerning LITA's present and future activities. I am not a member of the LITA division of ALA, but I was so impressed at the warm and friendly welcome I received at the table I joined. Many of the ideas generated during this session are applicable to any library organization, such as AALL and its SISs and chapters.

I am extremely grateful to ALLUNY for funding my registration for the ALA Midwinter Conference. I was fortunate to be able to spend some time with other law library colleagues in attendance: Kathy Winzer (ALA Committee on Cataloging: Description & Access (CC:DA) voting member), Yael Mandelstam (AALL Representative to ALA Subject Analysis Committee), and John Hostage (AALL Representative to CC:DA). I appreciated this opportunity to observe the difficult but interesting work done at ALA conferences in the constant quest to move libraries forward and to

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serve our users better. The excitement and engagement is palpable. My conference experience was invigorating and inspiring.

I even had the chance for some sightseeing. I toured the State Capitol as well as the Byers-Evans House Museum. I stopped in at the central Denver Public Library the same day that a woman delivered her baby in the foyer there, though I missed that event by a few hours. Not to worry, for I had my own memorable event. My last night in Denver was marked by a major leak in my hotel room, sort of a waterfall actually. It was no big deal for me though since I have had extensive practice in recent years at dealing with many UB Law Library water-related disasters ☺

Denver skyline from I-25 and Speer Blvd.
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