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More on the Future of Bibliographic Control

by Ellen McGrath, University at Buffalo Law Library

As a follow-up to Joan Hoolihan's informative "Technical Tips" column in the last issue of this newsletter, I present this account of the Hot Topic Program sponsored by the Technical Services Special Interest Section (TS-SIS) during the AALL conference in New Orleans on July 16, 2007. The program's title "Does Cataloging Have a Future? An Update from the Library of Congress (LC) Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control" was intriguing and there was a large crowd on hand. (I co-coordinated the program with Teresa Parker-Bellamy.)

Richard Amelung, Associate Director, Saint Louis University Law Library and AALL's representative on the LC Working Group, was the main speaker. Dr. Jose-Marie Griffiths, Dean of the School of Library and Information Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Chair of the LC Working Group, attended the conference as the VIP for the SEAALL chapter and was very welcome as an addition to this program. Dr. Griffiths began by outlining the timeline for the Working Group, which must present its final report to LC in November of this year. Comments from the public were still being accepted up until August 7th and that deadline had been extended. A short-term task force to draft testimony on behalf of the TS-SIS Cataloging and Classification Standing Committee was formed during the conference.

Mr. Amelung presented an overview of the efforts of the Working Group to date. The original purpose of the Group was to hold a national conference, but they changed course and instead adopted a model used by standards bodies, such as NISO (National Information Standards Organization). This involved three regional hearings, each on a slightly different topic. A great deal of information from these hearings, including webcasts, is available on the Group's website at <http://www.loc.gov/bibliographic-future/>. Here are some of the points from the hearings as highlighted by Mr. Amelung.

"Users and Uses of Bibliographic Data" (March 8, 2007, Mountain View, California)

- Users viewed as on a continuum from novice to expert; role changes for each user for different searches.
- Does the web organize itself?
- What is authority and how is it conveyed across communities?
- Data is used by more than our patrons.
- Should there be two separate systems? One for management and one for discovery.
- Should there be more authority control? Along the lines of differentiation (I don't know who you are, but I know who you are not).
- Should content suppliers create metadata? Referred to as "crowdsourcing."

"Structures and Standards for Bibliographic Data" (May 9, 2007, Chicago, Illinois)

- Data should be created at highest possible level of detail, since that will also satisfy needs of lower level users.
- FRBR and all standards should be interoperable.
- We must consult with non-library communities, but we must choose communities that share library vision and goals.

"Economics and Organization of Bibliographic Data" (July 9, 2007, Washington, D.C.)

- We are reactive—we wait for object to arrive. Can we create data earlier and take advantage of existing data instead? This will save us time.
- Calhoun Report (<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/calhoun-report-final.pdf>) included things many of us stopped doing a long time ago, although some are still doing them. Karen Calhoun's presentation at this hearing is at http://www.loc.gov/bibliographic-future/meetings/docs/LC_WG_Bibliographic_Control_Briefing-Calhoun_1.pdf
- Standards process is too long and it increases costs of cataloging. Could RDA delivery be moved up?
- Repurposing (created for one purpose and then used for another) data, while more efficient, can also cause problems.

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- We should not write standards as though automation doesn't exist.
- Are we undervaluing metadata we create?
- Should there be payment for creating authority records?
- We need to change our attitude about monograph records being done all at once and instead adapt to working on them at various points in process.
- There is so much we need to know!

The word “disappointing” as used by Mr. Amelung to describe the hearings stuck in my mind. He characterized the comments and presentations as focused on today, not the future—“this is what we do” rather than “what could we do?” It seems the Group was expecting more in the way of solutions, as opposed to the listing of problems they received. This should make writing their final report quite challenging.

Toward the end of the program, a question from the floor asked whether this Group was a “political cover” for LC. The responses from both Mr. Amelung and Dr. Griffiths emphasized the independence of the Group, which composed its own charge. The members of the Group were not chosen by LC, but by library organizations. And LC will not be present during the final deliberations of the Group. It was noted that LC will continue to support LCSH (LC subject headings) and to perform authority work, two complex (and therefore expensive) activities that seemed to be on the chopping block. But the push is definitely on for LC to discover ways to make both more efficient.

The members of the Group are presumably now hard at work pulling together the massive amount of input they collected. I commend the willingness of this Group to take on such an overwhelming and difficult task. I eagerly anticipate reading its final report at the end of this year. Stay tuned!
