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Titel: The Virtual Catalogue: Practical Implications and Managerial Aspects

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Ort: Graz

Jahr: 1995

PURL: https://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?514854804_0005|log85

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The Virtual Catalogue: Practical Implications and Managerial Aspects

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I have to say at the outset that coming into this conference somewhat late in its planning cycle, and not to mention half-way through its duration, that I was not at first altogether sure how for the present purposes a virtual catalogue was being defined. What I understand it to be is a bibliographic database built up from a variety of sources, but in which differences between those sources and the means of accessing individual records from particular files are largely invisible to the user. If that is not what I am supposed to be talking about, then perhaps I had better leave now. Otherwise, I shall be speaking in particular about standards and management and on how I see the concept of a virtual catalogue developing. I shall be calling on my experience in managing Britain's Copyright Libraries Shared Cataloguing Programme, and before that the union catalogue of LASER, one of the UK's regional library systems. It is my experience of the former, however, on which I would like to draw some of what I want to say this morning.

Actually, my definition of a virtual catalogue is not unlike that of a union catalogue. In its *Guidelines for the compilation of union catalogues of serials* Unesco proposes that a union catalogue is "a catalogue based on two or more collections, either in different institutions, or in different libraries in the same institution...".[2] The important similarity is that the union catalogue and the virtual catalogue both bring together information compiled in different circumstances into a single entity. The important difference is that whereas the user of the former will usually be aware that this information derives from a number of sources, the virtual catalogue user, because of the way in which he or she is consulting the catalogue, may be quite unaware that this is not the catalogue of a single collection - or if aware, may think it a matter of no great importance. While the situation in which the user has to wait for an item to be delivered from another library is not unfamiliar, the format of the virtual catalogue is such that

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[1]   Paper presented at the LIBER Annual Conference, Leuven 1995.

[2]   Unesco, 1982. (PGI-83/WS/1) p.3.

he or she may be deceived into thinking that the particular item is immediately available. Peter Lewis, formerly Director General of the British Library Bibliographic Services, expressed this rather well in another context, when he suggested that "if what is on the menus cannot be produced from the kitchens, [diners] do not get their nourishment by eating the menus instead".[3] In other words, virtual catalogues may raise false expectations.

I would like to suggest that for either a union catalogue or a virtual catalogue to be effective the following criteria must be met: a commitment by participants to common aims, the adoption of common standards (including, where necessary, local reconsideration of long established procedures) and perhaps most importantly the long term view, the vision, with the flexibility that must accompany it. It has to be said, however, that in many cases these things just happen, rather than come about by design or planning, but that need not prevent us from giving them a veneer of rationalisation.

What is it that co-operation is meant to achieve? There may well be a warm feeling of altruism, in the sense that what is being done is for the greater good; but one needs to ask oneself just what that greater good is. Is co-operation necessarily a goal in itself? I suspect that our motives are a little more fundamental than that. For example, we need to save money by using less staff time on original record creation, or we are obliged to demonstrate to whichever government body that allocates our funds that we are being cost-effective, or we find ourselves having to compensate for the deficiencies in our acquisitions budgets by becoming dependent on those libraries with better resources. But one can turn each of these somewhat negative attitudes into something more positive: is it justifiable for a number of libraries each to catalogue the same item several times over? shouldn't we in any case and at all times be fully accountable for the public funds that we spend? in these days of fax and digital transmission, is the concept of a single integral and physical collection of documents still a valid one?

So, we have to convince ourselves that the virtual catalogue is something towards which we should be aiming, a desirable development facilitated by the current technology and the means by which our collections can be opened up more fully, democratising their use in the sense that a person's physical location does not restrict his or her access to material. I used the word "democratising" a moment ago. This is one of those words whose meaning varies from person to person and from circumstance to circumstance, but I use it to suggest a degree of equality, and equality in the sense of the adoption of common standards is where I want to start.

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3   Lewis, P.R. "The future of the national bibliography" In: *Proceedings of the National Bibliographies Seminar, Brighton, 18 August 1987*. London : IFLA Universal Bibliographic Control and International MARC Programme, 1988. pp.59-62.

When in Great Britain we embarked on the Copyright Libraries Shared Cataloguing Programme, the adoption of common standards was one of those high sounding phrases endorsed enthusiastically by all the participants. Yet it became apparent soon that although the principle of whole hearted adoption of the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR)* and the *UK MARC Manual*, both in their most recent editions, was supported, none of us, including ourselves at the British Library, could honestly admit that these codes were being followed to the letter. It is inevitable that in a large library with a long history behind it local practices and preferences will emerge, although deviations from standards may be dressed up as "interpretations". There are a number of aspects to this problem:

a) how much do variations actually matter? I would suggest that some will be apparent only to the trained cataloguer's eye and not at all to the catalogue user, such as the use of certain punctuation symbols in the display of a record. I would draw your attention to an article by Bryant, in which he reported the reaction of end-users to a variety of serials records; their reaction to many of the features of those records was one of puzzlement.[4] In other cases, however, variations may affect effective access, for example when a particular form of an author's name, which is appropriate to that library but does not conform with the AACR standard, is used ;

b) where variations or "interpretations" do exist, there may be excellent reasons. One of these I have hinted at a moment ago, that they may be totally appropriate to the particular library. Others may be present because they have always been present, and even if they are perpetuated in the local catalogue, it would be costly to make changes when those same records are input to a networked database. Nevertheless, one of the Shared Cataloguing Programme's contributors, the National Library of Scotland, is prepared to convert its records from the original USMARC to the agreed UKMARC format, presumably because it believes that the cost is outweighed by the overriding national benefit of being part of the Programme;

c) when variations are identified, it may be that the standard itself is less than ideal. How practical it is to propose an amendment to a standard which is formulated at national or international level within an acceptable timescale is another matter, but when there are good

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[4] Bryant, Philip. "What is that hyphen doing anyway? - cataloguing and classification of serials and the new technologies". *International Cataloguing and Bibliographic Control*, 18 (2), April-June 1989. pp.27-29.

reasons for varying from that standard that might indicate that there is a problem with it;

d)   in the end, participants may simply agree to disagree, and compromises may have to be worked out. In the Shared Cataloguing Programme, the National Library of Wales, which operates on a bilingual basis in the same way as do the National Library of Canada and the Royal Library in this country, argues, quite rightly, that its Welsh name headings for Welsh official bodies are in its particular circumstances correct and insists that it cannot use their equally official English form for the purposes of the Programme. Since the cataloguing rules state that the language of the catalogue record is the language of the country - that is, the United Kingdom - we have an impasse, resolved by the British Library changing such headings back into English on receipt. Thus, Welsh *amour propre* and AACR integrity are both maintained.

These are issues arising out of our experience with the Shared Cataloguing Programme. How far they are applicable to the topic under discussion is another matter, but I can see some parallels. Standards are practical means by which communication can take place. They represent a professional consensus, but their formulation has to be a continuing process: as circumstances change, so standards must change as well. I would suggest that as we move into the era of the virtual catalogue so we must reconsider our present standards and where necessary modify them as appropriate. Now, how far we can continue to maintain local practices is another matter, indeed a political issue. But let me attempt to identify some of the areas that need such reconsideration.

1.   Access is the most visible of these areas. Without agreement on how particular headings should be expressed, items in our virtual catalogue by the same author or in the same series will be scattered. Fortunately, name authority work has received a considerable amount of international attention in recent years, mostly but not exclusively commissioned by IFLA. In particular, can I draw your attention to the following initiatives:

-   the series of name authority listings published by the IFLA UBCIM Programme over the last 20 years, including especially *Anonymous classics* and *Names of persons*, both now in the course of much-needed revision;

-   also from the IFLA UBCIM Programme, a series of related monographs - some of which, alas, no longer in print, such as Eva

Verona's pioneering work on corporate headings[5] - but including also a more recent study by Beaudiquez and Bourdon of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France;[6]

-    the ISSN International Centre in Paris, formerly the International Centre of the International Serials Data System (ISDS), has for over 20 years been disseminating key-titles for series;

-    the British Library, the Library of Congress and other major libraries in the UK and North America are in the process of establishing a joint name authority file, to be known as the Anglo-American Authority File (AAAF), and this is due to be implemented next year;

-    the European Commission is funding a feasibility study, under its CoBRA initiative,[7] known as AUTHOR, which is looking into the networking of national name authority files as a means of supporting and encouraging standardisation within Europe.

-    perhaps the distinction between record and text is becoming blurred. A proposal has recently gone to the Commission, again as part of CoBRA, to investigate the integration of bibliographic data with electronic text. We await the Commission's decision on this proposal.

2.   Display of bibliographic records has become a more significant issue. In many respects, the way in which we look at records is still very like the way we used to look at catalogue cards. I wonder whether more work needs to be done on the optimum means by which bibliographic information can be viewed. For example, what use should be made of colour and different type faces? Would the use of icons be helpful? In these days of networking, is there an application for HTML, HyperText Mark-up Language? I can envisage, for example, the inclusion of links from the names of authors, subjects, publishers, and so forth. The big question: should this be left to the

[5]   Verona, Eva. *Corporate headings : their use in library catalogues and national bibliographies : a comparative and critical study*. London : IFLA Committee on Cataloguing, 1975.

[6]   Beaudiquez, Marcelle, and Bordon, Françoise. *Management and use of name authority files : personal names, corporate bodies and uniform titles : evaluation and prospects*. München : Saur, 1991. (UBCIM Publications - new series ; vol. 5)

[7]   More information about CoBRA is available from its Secretary, Robert Smith, at the British Library National Bibliographic Service, Boston Spa, Wetherby, West Yorkshire LS23 7BQ UK (tel.: + 44 1937 546580, fax: + 44 1937 546586, e-mail: robert.smith@bl.uk).

cataloguers? Since the Internet can be accessed at home, perhaps we should be asking these questions of end-users!

3. Searching techniques vary from database to database. Although there are strong family resemblances between different systems, the requirements of the virtual catalogue are such that users should be able to move effortlessly from library file to different library file without being aware that they are doing so. As more bibliographic searching is liable to take place in one's study rather than at one's desk or in a library, so we must start thinking seriously about the implications of not having a trained librarian to assist the end-user. Indeed, the Co-ordinating Board of IFLA's Division of Bibliographic Control has been considering whether it should set up a project to investigate common searching procedures; the matter will be discussed further during this year's conference in Istanbul, and if it can define satisfactory terms of reference some work could start to take place in this area relatively soon.

I want now to say something about the governance of the virtual catalogue. As I believe I have suggested, the requirements of the union catalogue and collaborative cataloguing are such that to a large extent it is possible, when it is desirable, to perpetuate local variations. I think this should also be true of the wider virtual catalogue, but the obligations imposed by the degree of co-operation that is required - the total acceptance of certain standards for one, the need to take account of wider national and international considerations for another - may put local variations under some strain, causing their cost to be questioned. But how should the process be managed? This must vary from situation to situation, but I would suggest that where there is already an organisation - such as LIBER itself, for example, or IFLA or a national body like the Higher Education Funding Councils in the UK - such an organisation carries a respect that may take longer for a new ad hoc body to acquire. On the other hand, the actual act of co-operation is something with which libraries and librarians are already familiar. We have been working with one another long enough on such matters as interlibrary loan, preservation and collaborative cataloguing itself to know how to give and take. What is new is that we may be expecting one another to make greater sacrifices in order to achieve a higher degree of standardisation. Understanding of each other's problems will be necessary; we will have to work harder to establish consensus on standards and we will need to monitor closely our performance through the adoption of different quality measures.

What may be unfamiliar to some of you is what I believe to be the importance of being alert to developments outside our particular sector. I am a great observer of what is happening in the banks and supermarkets that I visit, on the television screens that I watch and in travel agencies when I book a holiday, because there may be something to be learnt in these places that we can adopt for our own purposes. In recent years, I have become involved in a body called Book Industry Communication or BIC.[8] BIC is a UK body which is jointly funded by the Booksellers, Publishers and Library Associations and by the British Library; its aim is: "to facilitate the provision and communication of information throughout the book industry, and to be responsible for the development and promotion of standards for the format and transmission of bibliographic information, commercial messages and other information designed to increase efficiency and effectiveness in trading and supply within the industry".

In the few years of its existence BIC has been active in establishing standards that both libraries and the book trade can share, especially in the area of EDI order messages. The librarians amongst us in BIC have also made significant steps in persuading our publishing and retailing friends that we can teach them a lot about collecting and presenting bibliographic information. But the point I want to make is that the book trade is already being very energetic in putting up book information on the Internet. Some publishers and some utilities, like the Internet Bookshop and other similar operations, have developed what are essentially bibliographic services which Internet users can access and use to initiate orders. These Web pages may include not only conventional bibliographic information such as authors and titles but also publisher blurbs, contents pages and images of the cover. I believe we ought to be learning from this, indeed co-operating with publishers in order to sell our services to a wider public, the public that may or may not use our libraries but would be attracted by the comprehensiveness of a bibliographic file that transcends the distance between libraries. BIC, as I say, has been breaking down barriers; its European equivalent, EDItEUR, which is funded by national book trade associations, is starting to do the same. I wonder whether, with such examples of co-operation between libraries and the book trade, upon whom, after all, we depend vitally, it is not just a little short-sighted to ignore what they are doing and build up our virtual catalogues without learning from their marketing and display expertise. Indeed, although I know that there are differences between us - we agree to disagree on the moral principle of photocopying - I believe it would make sense to maximise our common interests.

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[8] More information about BIC is available from its Managing Agent, Brian Green, at BIC, 39-41 North Road, London N7 9DP, UK (tel.: + 44 171 607 0021, fax: + 44 171 607 0415, e-mail: brian@bic.org.uk).

I should like to conclude by emphasising three points I hope I have been able to put across to you this morning.

- We may need to reconsider some of the standards we already use and to put a greater stress on others which in the past have seemed less important.

- Local variations are going to be harder to justify when users have the facility to navigate seamlessly between our bibliographic files. We are already familiar with the methods of co-operation, but greater sacrifices may have to be made at local level.

- We should not be afraid of learning from other sectors and in particular there would be great gains in co-operating actively with the book trade in order to maximise the use of published information, which is after all our common aim.

Colleagues, I think the day of the virtual catalogue is very close and I hope I have been able to contribute towards the debate.