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RDA for Who?

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When I think about the effort going on now with the evolving Resource Description and Access (RDA), the image that comes to my mind is some old film view of the Paris sewers, where sludge covered workers toil tirelessly and thanklessly to keep the excretions of the body politic moving. Perhaps not the best metaphor (or the best smelling one), but one important part to take from it is that this is all happening somewhat underground, far from the view of most librarians, and it concerns an important part of the infrastructure that we depend upon.

Someone will argue with me about the underground part, pointing out rightfully that the work is now going on far more transparently than in its first phase as AACR3 (when both process and product were roundly rejected by its constituency). As a former cataloger (and former MARBI member), who has now moved into the digital library world, I had resolved to keep my distance, with the hope that I'd argued my last about the minutiae of cataloging. But I kept running up against the stated goal of RDA to be relevant to the metadata world, as well as the traditional cataloging world, and sure as shootin', once I started making snarky comments, I got roped in: I'm now representing the Dublin Core community on CC:DA. Surely this is a far too onerous punishment for my sins!

I went into the process with the understanding that I was going to focus on the "big picture" not the details. This helps me avoid getting into the detailed discussions beloved of catalogers (for which I have not the time or inclination), and also has the benefit of allowing me to retain my reputation as an annoying irritant. As a former denizen of the traditional cataloging world who has emigrated permanently to another planet, I hope to bring a different perspective and worldview to the table. I'm fully reconciled to the notion that this will not increase my popularity ratings.

Due to the aforesaid reluctant involvement, I came to the discussions rather late. I'd heard, of course, some of the startling early criticism that there was not enough change from AACR2 being proposed in the early drafts, with the effort being characterized by some as "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic." Given the costs of change, said the critics, let's make sure the change is worth the investment. The Joint Steering Committee (JSC, keepers of AACR) took notice, went back to the drawing board, and started over.

But still, as I pointed out to the RDA-L mailing list a few weeks ago, there are underlying (and largely unexamined) assumptions made in RDA, most of which emanate from traditional cataloging practices. These assumptions are very dissimilar to those inherent in the world of Non-MARC Metadata (NMM) communities (a term I made up, by the way). Because traditional librarians normally work with resources that are digital

versions of published materials, they have difficulty seeing outside that familiar boundary to where the environment is much less comfortable.

I described my concerns with the current drafts as being in the following areas: transcription and specified sources of information, reliance on notes, and multiple versions.

Transcription as Identification

In the world of traditional cataloging and static published resources, consistent transcription is an important method to assure predictable metadata. However, digital resources carry no such assumption of stability—change is part of the package. In that environment, relying on use of consistently transcribed information as the primary method of identifying a resource makes much less sense. Resources in the digital environment are most often identified by a numeric or alpha-numeric string. In traditional cataloging, such identifiers are also used, of course: ISSNs and ISBNs are the most obvious examples, but they are generally not the primary identification of the resource.

As we all know, the current methodologies for identifying digital resources uniquely and unambiguously are still in flux and almost no one is satisfied with the current situation. But whatever the ultimate answer, it will not rely on transcription, nor will decisions about what constitutes a “new” or “different” resource likely be susceptible to the rules defined in AACR2 for editions or versions.

Part of the transcription tradition involves specification of sources of information from which to record. Vital to this approach is the idea that resources have commonly identified and named parts that are similar within a specific category of materials, something that is not generally the case in the digital world. Similarly, notions of whether information comes from the item itself or is supplied from somewhere else are often less important in NMM communities, even those who still deal primarily with physical, published items. In ONIX for example, information about the author (from the book jacket, reviews, or other marketing sources) is specifically tagged based on the function of the information, and it’s often not explicitly descriptive in nature.

Reliance on Notes

Oftentimes, the RDA (like traditional cataloging) herds catalogers to make decisions about what is “primary” or “secondary” and relegates the latter to the notes area. This is a significant problem for many NMM communities, who may either have no place to put these kinds of descriptive “notes” or instead rely on repetition of elements (with or without a notion of order) to capture information of the same kind within a single description, thus focusing more on access issues than descriptive integrity.

In most delivery systems for metadata (including OPACS, it must be noted), only the information in a small number of specified fields is actually displayed to the user (and we

know few users actually look at full records). Additionally, because notes can contain so many different categories of information, they may not even be indexed (when they are, only as keywords). For systems using NMM, notes information is even less likely to be displayed, and may indeed be entirely ignored, since its “human-friendly” character makes it useless for machine processing and marginal for access.

Multiple Versions and Reproductions

Many traditional catalogers are unfortunately still trying to make the case for describing an original and a reproduction on the same record, for the sake of “practicality.” If FRBR is truly the underlying model for the “new” RDA, it seems to me that this bullet must be bitten firmly and these practices explicitly marginalized within the context of the rules. In an environment where metadata of different formats, created using different rules (or no rules) must be shareable and interoperable, these residual practices keep us all from benefiting from our common enterprise.

The argument usually justifying multiple versions on one record is that most library vendor systems do not display resources with multiple editions and versions acceptably, but responding to this problem by undercutting the usefulness of our data by manipulating it to overcome specific system inadequacies is not the answer. We seem to be in deep denial that the approaches we’ve used in the past to overcome the inadequacies of our vendor systems are in fact serious kludges, that will not allow us to either share data effectively or take advantage of some of the FRBR-based approaches to improved display of manifestations and expressions. A great example of what might be possible can be seen in the work OCLC has done with FictionFinder--all based on the notion that there is for the most part sufficient data in the (admittedly MARC) records to associate them more usefully for display than current library vendors now offer.

Interestingly, my post to the RDA-L list flushed out a few lurkers from the archives and museums community who said to me, in essence: “RDA doesn’t reflect the needs of our communities either, not any better than AACR2 did.” Most of these folks are not speaking out publicly, and I suspect that may well be a reflection of the fact that they have been cut out of the conversation so long they’ve given up. It’s interesting to note that in most cases they’ve gone off and created their own content standards, and in the days when such silos were a reasonable and acceptable solution, one could hardly blame them. Now, it’s a different matter—we all need to be thinking more broadly, as the traditional boundaries between what we’re doing dissolve. As Karen Coyle recently pointed out, we can plan for these changes ourselves, or someone else will do it for us.

I know that the organizers of the RDA effort are trying personfully to come up with a solution that is acceptable to catalogers and to those whose view is more to the forests. But, unfortunately, most of the conversation molding RDA is happening at the level of the workers under the streets, in hip boots navigating the sludge, who aren’t seeing the warning lights flashing above them: *WARNING, WARNING, the end of the world as we know it is upon us*. I’m afraid that the more we depend on catalogers to build the new RDA, the more likely that it will be used only in traditional library settings—which I

think most of us believe are becoming a smaller and more marginal part of what libraries do. If we want something else besides AACR3 by another name, we'd better start paying attention and participating, lest we waste yet another opportunity to move out ahead of change, instead of constantly cleaning up after the parade's gone by.