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RDA: The Emperor's New Code. A brief Essay

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A moral fable

The Danish author Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) is renowned for his stories that are called "fairy tales" in English (though their collective title-*Eventyr*-translates as "adventures"). The stories were written for children but they have deep moral purpose and much to teach adults. One of the most famous of his stories - "*The emperor's new clothes*" (*Kejserens nye Klæder*) - tells a seemingly simple tale of two villainous weavers who persuade an emperor to buy clothes made of a non-existent material that they say is so fine and luxurious that it is invisible to people who are too stupid to appreciate such finery. The emperor is so vain and his attendants, hangers-on, etc., so toadying and venal, that they ignore the fact that the material they are praising does not exist and that the emperor, thinking he is preening himself in his fine new clothes, is, in fact, naked. A small child is the only person who sees the reality and has the courage and simplicity to tell the world the emperor is not wearing any clothes. This powerful story is a parable about pretentiousness and the ability of humans to ignore uncomfortable truths through vanity and the desire to impress.

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The objectives of a catalogue

The rules called *Resource Description & Access* (*RDA*) are an expensive answer to a non-existent problem. RDA has its roots in a complex theoretical framework (*Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records–FRBR*) that was devised for no practical purpose and was used to create a structure of cataloguing rules to replace one (AACR2) that was well-established; had gained wide international acceptance; could accommodate useful change; and was perfectly adequate to the realities of modern cataloguing.

When considered dispassionately, a bibliographic record has three components:

- a standardized *description* of the entity (resource) being catalogued (whether that entity is a physical object or an assemblage of electronic data);
- standardized *access points* (names, titles, subjects, etc.) devised according to authority control rules that ensure individualization of those names, titles, subjects, etc. and, thus, differentiation between similar names, titles, subjects, etc.;
- a *location* indicating where a resource may be found or giving access to that resource.

In addition, *authority control* structures allow related names, titles, subjects, etc., and related bibliographic records to be correlated.

There, in eight lines, are the functional requirements of bibliographic records in plain and practical terms.

In 1876, the American librarian Charles Ammi Cutter, laid out his "Objectives" for a catalogue. They were:

1. *To enable a person to find a book of which either*
   - A. *the author;*
   - B. *the title; or*
   - C. *the subject is known*
2. *To show what the library has*
   - D. *by a given author*
   - E. *on a given subject*
   - F. *in a given kind of literature*
3. *To assist in the choice of a book*

Reworded for contemporary realities:

1. *To enable a person to find a resource of which either*
   - A. *the creator(s);*
   - B. *the title; or*
   - C. *the subject is known*
2. *To show what the library has*
   - D. *by a given author or title*
   - E. *on a given subject*
   - F. *of a given kind*
3. *To assist in the choice of a resource*

These objectives are as true today as they were more than 140 years ago. AACR2 met all the objectives in a clear and coherent framework.

Realities of cataloguing today

I am not competent to examine the psychology of those who, presented with the realities of libraries and cataloguing today, decide to spend years and hundreds of thousands of dollars to create a cataloguing code that nobody asked for and was

completely unnecessary, but it might be worthwhile to lay out those realities before talking about RDA and its creation.

- Libraries are being squeezed financially as never before.
- Cataloguing is being devalued by library administrators to the extent that cataloguing departments are greatly diminished, in some cases done away with and, in others, deprofessionalized.
- Shrunken or non-existent cataloguing departments mean that many rely on commercial services to supply bibliographic data and that data is of inconsistent quality.
- A generation of people, particularly young people, have been brought up using search engines that deliver random results that they have to sift through in hopes of finding something relevant. Moreover, those results will not contain all the documents relevant to the search. Thus, search engines fail both of the two fundamental tests of information retrieval systems—*relevance* (are the documents that are retrieved relevant to the search?); and *recall* (are all relevant documents retrieved?)
- The result of keywords and search engines is that people now have low expectations of information retrieval systems. This has led many administrators to believe that fully staffed cataloguing departments are not necessary and, in some cases, that catalogues themselves should be replaced by disorganized databases accessible only by keyword searching.

A rational person would have come to the conclusion that, in such an environment, the last thing anyone needed was the disruption of a new cataloguing code and that the expense of such a disruption could only be justified by a new code that achieved (a) dramatically better results; (b) simplified and more

efficient cataloguing procedures. I would submit that RDA fails to achieve either of these. That is:

- the few improvements that are achieved could have been dealt with by speedy and inexpensive alterations within the AACR2 framework. I have demonstrated this latter by producing, in collaboration with Mac Elrod of SLC in Canada, a draft of unofficial "rule interpretations" (called MRIs[1] for AACR2 that incorporated all the changes produced in RDA;[2]
- creating those MRIs took a week or so and could easily have been accomplished officially and cheaply;
- the structure of RDA is Byzantine and incoherent and contains many instances of lack of clarity;
- obscure, erroneous, and confusing examples in RDA have made the job of the cataloguer more not less complicated;
- application of RDA results in inconsistency of access points - for example, the same access point may or may not have a qualifier and, thus, may be represented in an authority file in two or more forms.

All this after the expenditure of large sums of money (realised from the immensely profitable AACR2), and inordinate amount of time (many years filled with false starts, not to mention countless expensive meetings).

The International Standard Bibliographic Description

[1] These "rule interpretations" were prepared by Michael Gorman in collaboration with Mac Elrod. MRIs can stand for "Michael's Rule Interpretations" or "Mac's Rule Interpretations."
[2] http://special-cataloguing.com/mris

The most successful bibliographic standard in history is the *International Standard Bibliographic Description* (*ISBD*). I have described it and written its history elsewhere (Gorman 2014). Suffice it to say that the largest part of internationally standardized catalogue records has, because of the ISBD, contained descriptive data that is presented in a standard order, demarcated by standard punctuation, and, thus, rendered useful and usable, irrespective of the language of the description. The ISBD has been adopted by almost all countries and by all major cataloguing traditions. It is important to note that ISBD (like the MARC format) is not a *content* standard (like AACR2 or what RDA aspires to be) but a *framework* standard - that is, it can accommodate a variety of content, as long as that content is presented in a standard order and demarcated according to a standard. In other words, the ISBD does not dictate the content prescribed by national cataloguing codes, thus making it internationally acceptable. These attributes - international acceptance on an unprecedented scale and adaptability to national usages - make the decision of those responsible for RDA to abandon the ISBD both inexplicable and irresponsible. There can be no conceivable rationale for retreating from universally accepted standardization that was hard won over decades - a retreat that will lead to more not less confusion in catalogue records. Surely, a prime mission of cataloguing codes is to reduce confusion and increase comprehension.

Abbreviations

Probably the most noticeable result of the application of RDA for catalogue users will be the result of the generally welcome decision to abandon abbreviations in catalogue records (replacing *p.* with *pages* and *ill.* with *illustrations*, etcetera). I have two

comments on this change. First, the change could easily have been accommodated within AACR2 (or any other national or language code), initially by issuing a series of rule interpretations and then by issuing a reprint of AACR2 (or other code) with the rules and examples changed. That could have been accomplished quickly and with only minimal expenditure. Second, the substitution of English words for abbreviations such as *p.* that are recognizable across languages and for the Latin abbreviations used by the ISBD (*S.l., s.n.*, etcetera) makes the descriptions more understandable for English speakers but less suitable for international comprehension and international exchange of bibliographic records.

Cui bono?

I do not have the space in this essay to dissect the many failings in expression, organization, prescriptions, and examples in RDA or the many ways in which RDA makes both cataloguing and catalogue use more confusing. My examination of the text revealed many errors, confusions, misleading examples, and unclear wordings. A cataloguing code must, above all, be clear and correct—RDA fails dismally on that account. I would like, however, to pose a series of simple questions that bypass the minutiae of catalogue code construction and content and go to the content and use of the catalogue records that will result from the application of RDA.

Q1. What are the differences in access points and descriptions as they will be found in RDA based catalogues compared with AACR2 based catalogues?

Q2. Do those differences make the use of catalogue records more or less effective?

Q3. Which of those differences could have been accomplished within AACR2 without the vast expenditures of time, effort, and funds that RDA consumed?

When you read articles on RDA, ignore the theoretical discussions and the puffery and concentrate on these three questions. Viewed thus and objectively, it soon becomes evident that the differences in the final catalogue records referred in Q1 are relatively few; that some of them detract from the usefulness of the catalogue records produced (see Q2); and that the useful changes could easily have been accomplished through the vehicle of AACR2 far more quickly and far less expensively.

According to Cicero, the Roman jurist Lucius Cassius Longinus Ravilla asked "*Cui bono*?" (Who benefits?) of all legal questions. Surely, it is a question that should be asked of all cataloguing codes. Do the users of catalogue records benefit? Is that benefit commensurate with the money and time expended? Is cataloguing and librarianship in general better off because of this code? I would contend that you do not have to be a clear-eyed small child to point out that RDA - the Emperor's New Code - does not come close to meeting these tests. It may be an uncomfortable truth but an objective assessment will reveal that RDA has been a colossal waste of time, effort, and money and to quote another Roman - this time Horatius Quintus Flaccus (Horace) - *Parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus* (The mountains will be in labor, an absurd mouse will be born).

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ABSTRACT: Argues that the RDA was an unnecessary waste of time and money. The few improvements it makes in catalogue records could have been accomplished far more cheaply, promptly, and easily by modifying AACR2. Argues that RDA's abandonment of the ISBD is a retrograde and damaging step.

KEYWORDS: Cataloguing. RDA. ISBD. AACR2.

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