Year of Cataloging Research

Guest Editorial

New Areas for Cataloging Research

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LRTS is celebrating 2010 as the Year of Cataloging Research by publishing guest editorials and highlighting papers that advance this important initiative.

The ALCTS-sponsored Year of Cataloging Research gives us the opportunity to take stock of where cataloging research has been and to consider a vision for future research initiatives. During the last few centuries, libraries and library catalogs were the only game in town. With no Internet, a person who wanted information either had to go to a library to find information, or to the source (e.g., the researcher, archives) to find information. We librarians used our time well in researching user behavior, developing subject-access schema, and honing cataloging codes to deal with an ever-growing number of publication types with an increasing array of complex publication patterns. Yes, in the good old days, we had the corner on the information discovery market, and there appeared to be little need to go beyond our boundaries to investigate how our work might intersect with seeming disparate disciplines.

What has changed? Of course, the Internet hit us. At first the search engines were clunky. Their imprecision and the large numbers of items returned for each search made users feel like they were drinking from a fire hose. Librarians could be arrogant and claim that the filters just were not robust enough to compete with the strict organization that only a cataloger can bring. As Web content multiplied at an exponential rate, search engines began to improve and users became better at using them. At the very least, users now feel that they are successful in finding information on the Web. Librarians began to say that users need us to help them decide what information is reliable and what is not. More recently, we have recognized the draw of the Web and now, in addition to creating finding aids, we provide tips to researchers on anything from how to choose a search engine to how to compose a dependable search query.

During the last twenty years, search engines have become more vigorous and dynamic. Other entities can afford to put a lot more resources into building search engines, including relevance ranking, full-text data mining, and filters. While no single search engine is the silver bullet in the world of discovery, we do know that the preferred finding tool is not the online public access catalog (OPAC). This news should be a wake-up call to all librarians—not just catalogers. It should be the inspiration to embark upon new research that will motivate all of us to find ways we can contribute our organizational skills. As Roeder said in the January *LRTS* guest editorial, the last thing we need to do is perform another user assessment and then change the OPAC.[1] More lipstick on our catalogs is not going to make our OPACs the search engine of tomorrow.

Are libraries and librarians the only groups to feel the shift? I think not. A few weeks ago, I was having a conversation with one of my colleagues on the University of Maryland teaching faculty. He told me that the Web has forever changed the way professors teach. He was not bemoaning the change, but simply remarking on it. He said that the former way of teaching was professor-centric and based on a limited sphere of knowledge. The professor created a series of lectures by pulling together the content, shaping it, and presenting it. The professor was the go-to person for all questions about the content. The library collection augmented the course content and provided more in-depth information to allow the student to expand on the specific course topics, but the Web has changed the entire framework of teaching. It provides access to more information, with varying levels of accuracy. My faculty colleague went on to say that to be an effective professor today and tomorrow, the professor must be more like a spiritual guide through the morass of a "universe of unstructured knowledge." The professor must be able to teach students not only how to search but how to analyze what they find and transform the collective knowledge into thoughts, ideas, and conclusions. He added that it is important to recognize that the nature of the ideas and conclusions also may be changing. The student, using the infinite associative power of the Web, has a very different sense of a conclusion or an idea than those of his or her counterparts of twenty years ago. Both librarians and professors will have to learn what an idea means in this new era. Librarians, whether they work in reference or cataloging, will play more active roles in both the searching and teaching arena.

What does all of this have to do with cataloging research? I think the changes in our environment indicate that we must move our investigations away from the traditional cataloging codes and subject schemas. Instead, we need to conduct research that helps us better comprehend the information environment of today to build a greater understanding of how we can integrate our library skills into the discovery and learning milieu. We have a great deal to learn about how traditional cataloging principles fit (or do not fit) with the architecture of the current search engines, the language of searching and tagging, and the organization of search results.

We can also learn a lot about the role of social software in discovery and learning. How do users employ folksonomic services? How do they apply and arrange tags? What do we know about how these arrangements affect how the researcher thinks about a work or rethinks about a work? And how do users respond and learn from the ways others have deployed tags? The historical knowledge regarding subject access and organization of information that catalogers can bring to this research will help the community reshape its thinking in this area.

What about the Maryland professor who sees a new pedagogical framework in the unstructured universe of knowledge and his desire for librarians to play a complimentary role in the teaching environment? Knowing the landscape of search tools, how they are designed, and how to maximize their use can help us help our faculty.

Our research into these new areas (that is, new for us) will help us find fresh avenues through which to apply our organizational skills. It will put us in a stronger position to amplify search engine design, make the most of the social software services available, and remain true partners in the learning and teaching missions of our institutions.

To accomplish these research goals, we need library leaders who are willing to encourage and support librarians as they delve into these new areas of study. We also need catalogers who understand the Web environment well enough to be able to formulate research inquires that will move the profession forward. In this Year of Cataloging Research, we should celebrate the research our profession has carried out in the past and, at the same time, roll up our sleeves and write some new chapters.

Reference

1. Randy Roeder, "Guest Editorial: A Year of Cataloging Research," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 54, no.1 (Jan. 2010): 2–3.