Guest Editorial

Entering an Alternate Universe: Some Consequences of Implementing Recommendations of the Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control

By Janet Swan Hill

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In its final report, *On the Record*, the Library of Congress (LC) Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control suggested that our future depends in part on defining the bibliographic universe as reaching "beyond libraries, publishers and database producers to include creators, vendors, distributors, stores, and user communities, among others, across sectors and international boundaries."[1]

Implementation of all of the Working Group's recommendations, however, requires more than mere redefinitions. In some senses, it requires us to take up residence in an alternate universe, with new understandings, new perspectives, and new responsibilities. In this editorial I will describe what I regard as some of the important aspects of that alternate universe. In order to convey the extent of change that they represent, I will begin by describing salient features of the universe in which we have long been living.

The Old Universe

When I entered the profession in 1970, it was taken for granted that libraries were a public good, that services that libraries offered were a public good, and that obtaining those services was a right of all the people. The fruits of using libraries—education, knowledge, information, and improving oneself—were recognized as unassailably worthy. Whatever it took to provide those things was considered reasonable.

Libraries, whether public or academic, were viewed as genteel places. We

were a part of polite society. Doing it right was important. Doing it fast was less crucial. After all, good things may take time. Doing it cheaper would be nice, but doing it on the cheap was a betrayal of what we were about. That genteel world developed around print on paper, books, journals, and literature, and all of our practices were well suited to that world. Other kinds of materials were just that—the "other stuff"—of lesser importance to us and to our users. Consequently, the other stuff got less attention, and we made what we did with it fit into the pattern of what we did for books and journals.

In our gentility, we treasured rare and valuable items, and we cared about them both as carriers of content and as artifacts. We did not lend them out, and we restricted access to them even within our own buildings. We described them with infinite care—when we could get around to it—and filed the information about them in separate catalogs or in printed finding aids. Access to the material required physical presence, and often required intermediation by a curator who watched over both the reader and the materials while they were in use. If we could not get around to describing the materials, well, there was always the curator to help the reader find them. Readers and scholars in distant places had to guess that we might have something of interest to them, had to write to us, or even come for a visit just to find out what we had. In that genteel world, we cared about serving people, and we cared about not wasting money and about not wasting time, but our perception of how much trouble, or money, or time was a waste was different from what it is today.

We know that we are part of a graying profession, and that somewhere between 30 and 40 percent of librarians are going to be retiring within the next ten years.[2] Data derived from 2005 show that one third of the professionals employed in the Association for Research Libraries (ARL) libraries are aged fifty-five or above, and indicate that "in US ARL libraries, high levels of retirements appear inevitable through 2015."[3] Although these data are only for libraries that are a part of the ARL, they are suggestive for the profession at large. The Future of Librarians in the Workforce (http://libraryworkforce.org/tiki-index.php), a project funded by the Institute for Museums and Library Services, will provide data for the whole profession.

We also know that because technical services librarians skew somewhat older than the rest of the profession, the proportion of technical services librarians that will be retiring is greater than in the rest of the field.[4] This means that one-third or more of technical services librarians currently in the workforce have been working as librarians for a really long time, and probably another third have been working for at least a moderately long time. When most of us grew up professionally, we were suffused with that traditional conviction that however long it takes to do something, and

however much money, or however many people it takes to do it, the price must be borne, because it is a public good. And although most of us have learned new attitudes and outlooks, and have learned to do cost analyses and to cut corners and to live with it, the basis of what we absorbed as baby librarians has stayed with us in our core.

Those of us who entered the profession in the late 1960s and early 1970s entered at the time of the Great Society.[5] Education, information, and libraries were considered critical factors in improving society, in providing the means for individuals to improve themselves and to improve their lot in life. Libraries and educational institutions experienced a tremendous influx of funding. New positions were created, and there was a period of years in which library schools could barely keep up with the demand for librarians. In this atmosphere, we developed as professionals, expecting that it was universally understood that what we were doing was worth whatever it cost; believing that if we could only figure out the right arguments to make, or if we could only make those arguments often enough, or with enough passion, eventually someone would recognize the rightness of our position, and somehow they would find the money for us to do it.

Unfortunately, the Great Society was never fully realized, and the pie of funding that libraries and other educational institutions briefly enjoyed began to dwindle. Libraries began to get a smaller piece of the pie overall, and internally within libraries, technical services' piece was proportionally even smaller. And so, we librarians took up a kind of double life—a schizophrenic approach to the real world. We still believed in the value of our work and in its standing as a public good. We still believed that the information and services we were providing were what people needed and that if it took time, it took time. If it took money, it took money. If it took people, it took people. But at the same time we began to understand that we were not going to have the same amount of time, money, and people that we used to, and that we needed to figure out ways to accomplish what had to be done with less in the way of resources.

Fortunately, at about this time, automation really took hold in libraries. Automated circulation systems entered our sphere in the 1960s, starting with some fairly unsophisticated mechanisms. One such system was the "McBee" cards: edge-punched cards recording data about library materials. A wire pin was inserted through a data-specific hole in a deck of cards, and those cards in which the hole had been notched to indicate presence of the data element dropped out of the pack. These systems gradually got fancier, faster, more broadly functional, more reliable, and more universally utilized. Automation expanded into other library functions. The MARC format was developed in the 1960s, and published for use in 1967, as were the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR)*.[6] OCLC was incorporated in the

same year, and we began to use automation for cataloging operations in a really big way.

It got easier and easier to find preexisting catalog cards for the materials we put in our collections, and the delivery of cards got faster. We began to wrestle with questions about whether the cards we got from the LC—whether we ordered them directly or got them through some other vendor—could be used in our catalogs as is, or whether the time-honored cataloging practices that we had developed locally were so important to us that we needed to continue them. Soon we wondered about the cards from our bibliographic utilities that were derived from records that had been contributed by member libraries, and we learned to disdain the work of our peers, and not to trust it.

Time passed. Automation was introduced to more and more facets of our work: acquisitions, serials control, authority control, the public catalog. Library vendors began to operate increasingly online. The profile of our personnel shifted to encompass a majority of support staff and a minority of librarians. Our concentration on hit rates, on throughput rates, on streamlining, and on having work done at the least skilled level possible contributed to our administrators more and more seeing technical services work as a kind of manufacture instead of as a professional endeavor.

Increasingly, we were pressed to make do with fewer resources, and so we learned more about cutting corners, doing without, and providing less. We made the most we could out of library automation. All the savings we could realize through these stratagems were important because at last we began to recognize that books and journals are not the only kinds of information resources that were worth having, nor the only kinds of things in which our users are interested. As the light dawned, we started to recognize that providing access to this other stuff in information ghettos such as separate catalogs and separate databases was a bad thing and poor service. Next, as we finally acknowledged our obligations to nonbook materials such as photos and maps and video recordings, people began inventing new kinds of materials, and we began collecting them, and we began having to figure out how to catalog them. Because we did not have as much money or staff as we used to, library automation was our salvation. By using it well we managed to accomplish much more than we had in the past, even while utilizing far less in the way of personnel resources.

Harbingers of the Alternate Universe

And so we come to the near present. For some time, we had collectively realized that the world of bibliographic control was getting out of hand. Not only were we collecting physical materials, we were collecting virtual things;

people now had a choice for how to search for information, and they were increasingly opting for the Internet. Fewer and fewer librarians were going into technical services, and the proportion of librarians that understood anything at all about cataloging was increasingly minuscule. It was becoming obvious to just about everyone that Universal Bibliographic Control, that holy grail of past decades in which everything that any library might want to collect would be cataloged with a single approach, was never going to happen.

For some years, people had been writing papers and commissioning reports that said that we had to change. We had conferences to talk about the need for change and the directions we needed to go, and proceedings were published.[7] But for the most part, we wrote the reports, and we read them, and we forwarded them to our administrators (or they forwarded them to us), and we took little action.

Then came 2006. Early in that year, LC announced its decision to no longer create or maintain series authority records for the materials it cataloged. And we fainted—figuratively speaking. And then we picked ourselves up off the floor and started throwing punches.

It must be noted that LC was not the only library that had been reacting to changes in its environment and trying to figure out how to move forward. Many of our own libraries had been doing soul-searching and making painful decisions to cease or cut back on work that we had once considered essential. Although we worried that it would lead to patrons being satisfied with less because they did not know enough to know what would be possible if only money were limitless, we kept cutting because we did not have any other choice.

Of course, when my library decided that it could no longer keep up with new headings lists in the face of massive and unpredictable database loads, or when some other library decided to cut back on something else, the impact of our decisions was scarcely felt beyond our own walls. But when LC decides to change anything in the way it handles bibliographic control, it affects all of us.

LC's response to the uproar about series was to delay implementation of the decision by a month; to conclude that it had blundered in how it had made and communicated its decision; and to form the LC Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control. The group's Web site (www.loc.gov/bibliographic-future) contains the charge, membership, interim report, and much more. That group of sixteen members and two consultants met for the first time in November 2006. It labored for a year, and delivered a draft report to the LC and to the nation via a live Web cast (that few people actually saw live because of the highest demand that LC had ever experienced for a Web cast) in November 2007. The final report, called *On the Record*, which took into account 135 single-spaced pages of comment on the draft,

was delivered to LC on January 8, 2008, and put up on the Web the next day.

The recommendations of the Working Group were many and they were clustered into five areas:

- Increase the Efficiency of Bibliographic Record Production and Maintenance.
- Enhance Access to Rare, Unique, and Other Special Hidden Materials.
- Position our Technology for the Future.
- Position Our Community for the Future.
- Strengthen the Library and Information Science Profession.

Most recommendations were not controversial or particularly radical, at least in concept.[8] The combination of the recommendations, however, if we act on them, takes us from our accustomed universe and into the alternate universe of this editorial's title. This new universe will require substantial change in the way we view ourselves, our libraries, our collections, our finding tools, our work, and our obligations to each other—and it will require us to make changes in how we make decisions about where to put our efforts. Operating in this new universe calls for us to recognize and act on five major concepts.

Concepts for the Alternate Universe

Recognize the importance of all types of information resources in all formats. We are far removed from the world in which print materials and books and journals were what really mattered. Everything matters now, and we have to figure out how to provide control and access for it all. Books, journals, newspapers, prints, photographs, microforms, archival materials, maps, globes, audio, video, realia, data files, software, Web sites, digital images—all of it. Our definition of "mainstream" has to change because it is all mainstream now. No longer is it going to be enough for a cataloging department to have only people who can handle traditional materials. No longer can we allow our workflows to put the weird stuff aside until we are in the mood for it, or until the one person who knows how to handle it comes back from vacation. No longer can we afford to have the weird stuff handled by people who are isolated from the rest of the library, and who may make decisions based on what they think is best for their particular narrow specialized audience without regard to the impact it has on the whole. For that matter, no longer can we think of it as weird stuff. Either that, or, we need to begin regarding "weird" as a term of endearment.

If you have read *On the Record*, you will have noted that it has an entire section devoted to providing access to material that has long been neglected, that is, rare, unique, and special materials that may be held by only one, or only a few libraries. Earlier I mentioned our historical approach to such materials. We took great care over their description—when we had the time—and we restricted physical access to them. By allowing backlogs to build, and by filing records in separate catalogs or databases, we also restricted intellectual access to the materials, although we did not consciously think of it that way. Because we regarded the items as artifacts, we thought that providing access on-site was entirely sufficient. Serious scholars would find out about the collection through their colleagues or through the grapevine, or occasionally through published finding aids and articles, and they would come to visit the collection in person, where guidance by a curator was considered entirely appropriate and adequate.

The initial purpose and development of bibliographic utilities was such that libraries thought that contributing records for their rare or unique materials was a largely useless exercise, since the number of libraries that could benefit from using the copy ranged from very few to zero. With the growth of bibliographic utilities, however, and their transformation from just being sources of copy to being public sources of information about the existence and location of materials, and with the availability of local catalogs on the Internet, the old reasons for not paying attention to cataloging our rare, unique, and special materials no longer apply. Even the issues of restrictions on lending, and requiring carefully monitored physical access to the materials are becoming less important as we digitize rare objects (or parts of them, such as decorative spines or marginalia) and as we make images available through our central discovery tools. And so, we have reached the point where it is time actually to take action on our "hidden collections." As the Working Group report says, it is time to "Make the Discovery of Rare, Unique, and other Special Hidden Materials a High Priority."[9]

The report goes on to suggest some additional efforts that will require significant separation from past practice. These include directions to "adopt as a guiding principle that some level of access must be provided to all materials as a first step to comprehensive access," to "Allow for different cataloging levels," and to "establish cataloging practices that are practicable and flexible, and that reflect the needs of users and the reality of limited resources."[10]

These instructions are nothing we have not thought of before, and perhaps even espoused, but, taken all in all, we have done very little about them. Accomplishing these things will require a major change in mindset at individual libraries, as well as a shift in priorities, and concomitant changes in processes that will enable us to provide appropriate access to ordinary materials while at last providing sufficient access to things for which we have not previously felt ourselves to be responsible.

Recognition that a single set of rules, a single mechanism, a single type of discovery tool cannot accomplish everything that needs to be accomplished. When I first started cataloging in 1970, and for decades afterward, there was a single primary set of rules to be followed (if you consider the combination of descriptive, subject, classification, and markup standards to be a "single set"). There was a single mechanism for doing the cataloging, although the mechanism itself changed over time. There was a single type of discovery tool: a local catalog. Even if you were, as I was, a cataloger of something other than books, you were very likely still using the same rules, processes, and discovery tools as everybody else.

This held true for a long time, but again, time passes. Our belief that a single set of rules, or sets of rules derived from the holy scripture that was *AACR* (and its revisions) was adequate for all types of materials weakened over time, but even with the first serious departures from it—such as the development of the Dublin Core metadata standard—we could still manage to think of our approaches as essentially unitary.[11] In larger libraries, it was still possible for most catalogers to be good at only one sort of cataloging, and to leave dealing with newer formats to more recent library school graduates.

Alas, no more. At some point we adopted a new word—metadata—probably partly in recognition that, to many people, the word "cataloging" was inextricably linked to *AACR2* and books and other physical objects. We started recognizing that some kinds of materials were never going to be cataloged according to *AACR2*, or coded in MARC, or even interfiled with all other entries in our finding tool. We learned about Encoded Archival Description (EAD), and moved on from there. We started digitizing objects and describing them in separate databases, to which we linked as best we could. We bought huge databases of digital images, and added to them from our own collections, but we stored the images and the descriptions somewhere outside the single catalog filing system. We made the various metadata schema speak to each other (more or less) with crosswalks. And as you have noticed, we began speaking a new dialect.

It was the digital materials—whether obtained from the Internet, created locally, or purchased in databases—that pushed us to the edge of our old universe. Now we must realize that in order to provide access to the information that our users need, we have to be good at more than one kind of cataloging. We have to be able to recognize and retain awareness of the principles that these methods have in common, while dealing with the differences in materials in practice. Maybe those who are close to retirement age can resist for a few more precious months or years, but everyone else has little choice but to enter the wormhole that leads to the alternate universe.

Recognition that entities other than libraries can, want to, and will contribute to the information-finding construct. The need and ability to accept and utilize the work of others permeates the report of the LC Working Group. Ever since the early days of bibliographic networks when libraries developed lists of whose copy they would accept and whose they would not, and when libraries did studies and published numerous papers about how much copy was acceptable, and what kinds of libraries produced it, we have paid close attention to how much better *our* work is than the work of others, and taken on faith that *our* way of doing things, and *our* standards are not only superior, but are essential to accomplishing our goals.

If we got data from some nonlibrary entity such as a materials vendor, for example, we subjected it to intense scrutiny and often simply redid it. In more recent years we have scorned the attempts of nonlibrarians attempting to create subject access in places like YouTube, Flickr, or Pandora. We have marveled at how dreadful and bewildering retrieval can be through Google or other Web search engines, and scoffed at the ineffectiveness and deceit of "relevance ranking."

Then along comes a report from a group of information professionals, most of whom are librarians whose careers started in cataloging, suggesting ways in which we may be able to improve our ability to provide service, including letting other people fiddle with our records. Anathema! But think. Haven't some of us already been adding table of contents information from vendors? Haven't some of us linked to or included publishers' blurbs in our catalogs? These things may not have seemed threatening because wholesale supplying of tables of contents and including blurbs is service that we were never able to provide in the past, and work that we did not regard as our responsibility—so we did not see it as trespassing on our territory. But it is a start along the path of expanding the sources of information that we incorporate into our finding tools.

In fact, it is how the recommendations in *On the Record* start—with "1.1.1 Make Use of More Bibliographic Data Available Earlier in the Supply Chain."[12] The report recommends to LC and the whole bibliographic community that they accept bibliographic data from publishers and foreign libraries even if it is not done exactly as we like; that LC work with publishers participating in the Cataloging in Publication (CIP) program, and require them to provide descriptive cataloging in good form, and that libraries then use that data; that libraries use descriptive cataloging provided by materials vendors; and that ways to harvest data mechanically be actively sought.

Those recommendations all have to do with utilizing data supplied by entities that form an accepted part of the bibliographic control apparatus. Some of the recommendations from *On the Record* go farther afield. For instance,

there is a recommendation to find ways to link reviews and ratings to bibliographic records, and even to develop a capability to link to user-generated data on the Internet (such as through Amazon, LibraryThing, and Wikipedia). As foreign as this may seem at first, if we pause to consider the reality of our situation, we may see that we can use all the help we can get. If we can get publishers and vendors—and even users—to supply data that is at least acceptable, perhaps then we can spend more of our time getting to the materials we have never been able to tackle before.

And isn't it just a little amusing for those of us who have chosen to be catalogers and have seen how few of our librarian colleagues choose to follow the same path, to see that there are people outside of libraries who find what we do to be not just necessary, but fun? Isn't it amusing to discover that there are ordinary people out in the world who actually want to create subject data and add it to our records, who are discovering the value of controlled vocabulary all on their own and devising their own little thesauri?

Recognition that all of us are a part of the whole, and that it is an interdependent relationship, not the relationship of an all-powerful mothership to a lot of smaller shuttlecraft. You remember that I have talked about libraries and what they do as being a public good. We have lived for a century or so believing that not just we, but other people also recognized them as a public good—specifically that Congress recognized the services of LC to all the nation's libraries as being a Good Thing, an unassailable thing, a thing that they would always fund, a thing that we could rely on.

So much did we rely on it that through using LC cataloging, guidance, and leadership, we gradually gave away our independence. If our local practices did not jibe with LC's because it was too costly to keep changing LC's records, we changed our practices instead. As the amount of copy we could find through bibliographic networks or other sources increased from 50 percent to 70 percent to 90 percent and above, we decreased our local workforce, and leaned on LC and on the other members of our networks. Maybe we should have taken the staff we saved by using copy, and put it to handling materials that we had not paid much attention to before—such as government publications, maps, special collections, scores, audio recordings, and archives, but for the most part we did not. The realization that we should have done so has come a few decades too late.

To the extent that any of us contributed copy to our networks, we were sharing the combined burden of cataloging. To the extent that we set up processes to wait for someone else to catalog things, we were like mistletoe—putting on a pretty show, but parasites nevertheless.

Some libraries did perceive that there were advantages to sharing in the responsibility to provide high-quality cataloging and authority control to the national database, at first through CONSER (Cooperative Online Serials Program), then NACO (Name Authority Cooperative Program), SACO (Subject Authority Cooperative Program), and PCC (Program for Cooperative Cataloging). Those advantages were largely intangible, and included things like status, knowledge, training, and job skills, as well as the warm feeling that came from knowing we were doing the right thing, but only a small segment of the community of libraries either could participate in such efforts, or chose to.

It is tempting to answer a call to share in the burden of creating the national database by saying, "But wait! We simply don't have the staff to help out!" and to believe that that is an adequate answer. We may not have the staff now, but we used to. Over time, that staff disappeared. It disappeared to budget cuts. It disappeared to be reallocated elsewhere in the library as libraries assumed more kinds of functions in the sphere of direct public service. It disappeared because we have been so good at increasing our efficiency and so good at looking at our services and product in terms of throughput and money, and not so good at looking at them or convincing others to look at them in terms of value. And so, our libraries chose to relocate staff to direct public services, but they can also choose to send them back. Now is the time.

Over the past half century we have cut our capacity to provide cataloging just about as much as we can, and now we experience the time-space discontinuity that is the Internet and digital information resources, and expanded discovery tools, and suddenly we see that there is so much more to do than we had thought.

Unfortunately for us, LC is a lot like us, except that it is bigger. LC's funding agency is having a hard time regarding it as a public good, and is buying into the hype that everything is or will be available on the Internet, and that it will all be easy to find (and free). Meanwhile, LC is taking on more and more direct public service functions. LC has, just as many of us, a certain segment of their workforce that is resistant to change. LC has, just as we all do, all of the inertia and impediment to change that comes from longstanding habits and practices, and processes that were developed to address problems that may not even exist any longer. LC, just like us, is trying to do too much with too little, and puts its resources into the things that its funding agency understands, and takes it away from cataloging. And, just like us, LC needs to find things that it can do better, as well as things that it simply will not do anymore.

You may recall that I mentioned that many of us believe—perhaps not always consciously—that if we can only figure out the right arguments to make, or if we can make those arguments often enough, and with enough pas-

sion, eventually people will recognize the rightness of our position, and they will somehow find the money for us to do it. It is a touching belief, but we cannot count on it. There are too many other worthy causes being argued by too many effective advocates for our priorities always to be the ones that get adopted.

We thought that LC would always be there, doing everything we need it to do, but we have to realize that it will not. And so, we need to readjust our attitude. All of us, including our libraries, our consortia, our associations, our cooperative groups, our vendors, and all other participants in the bibliographic sphere have to stop looking to LC as the mother ship and ourselves as tiny dependent shuttlecraft. We have to start thinking of all of us as more of a fleet. Some ships are larger than others. Some have different specialties and different capacities, but they are all part of an interdependent whole. More of us have to accept some of the responsibility to contribute more to the coordinated bibliographic control endeavor. We will continue to look to LC to help us out, but LC also has to be able to look to some of us to help them.

Because most of us are already operating pretty close to the bone, using some of our resources to help others and sharing more of the responsibility is not going to be easy. It will require a tremendous cultural shift, and that shift will take time and determination—but we need to make it. The result will be better service, wider dispersal of expertise, greater importance and standing, and less vulnerability to unexpected change.

Because we have viewed the value of cooperative cataloging in terms of per-record cost and in terms of limiting as much as possible the amount of original cataloging that we have to do for so long that it seems counterintuitive to say, "If we do more of the hard work, it will cost us all less in the end." It may help to understand how doing more will cost us less by considering an analogy. Cooperative cataloging works like a chain letter, but not a chain letter that you receive and immediately delete. It works how chain letters would work if everyone followed the instructions. Consider: You get a message that says, "Put your name at the bottom of the list below. Forward this message to five friends. Send a pair of socks to the person at the top of the list. In just a few weeks, you will get dozens of pairs of socks." If everybody followed all of the instructions, you would get dozens of pairs of socks, in exchange for sending one pair and forwarding the e-mail. On the other hand, if you do not follow the instructions, and almost nobody else does either, you get no socks. Even the person who actually does follow through gets no socks.

Cooperative cataloging is what happens when we all send the socks and forward the messages as instructed. After a while we get dozens of pairs of socks in return. Cooperative cataloging works because nearly everybody is contributing socks. There are some who just forward the messages and do not send socks, and they reap the benefits of all the other people who are actually sending socks. If there are not many such noncontributors, the system works well enough to keep the contributors both happy and contributing. But if a significant segment of the population stops contributing, the flow of socks dwindles, and those who are still contributing begin seeing less return on their effort, and begin to question whether the cost of their effort outweighs the value of their return.

In cooperative cataloging, no one is threatening bad luck if you break the chain, but the consequences to us all if enough people drop out of the chain are unsustainable. Keeping the chain going, on the other hand, requires a minimal investment, and results in whopping returns.

Recognition that the way we have made decisions in the past may no longer serve us well. This is the final aspect of the alternate universe that I will describe. As a lead-in, I need to do a brief recap of what we are like, what we believe, and how we have worked.

As a profession we regard what we do as a public good: something whose worth is so great that we have difficulty questioning its cost. From our perspective, we could write an ad, "An economics treatise: $125. Cataloging that treatise: $85 Marking it: $1. Getting the information inside that book to someone who wants it: Priceless."

We believe that the work we do should serve all segments of society, no matter how small, and that it should answer all legitimate needs. We believe in careful, comprehensive work, and we can tell stories about times when an error or oversight or shortcut has—or could have—prevented someone from finding something that might have answered their need. No matter when we entered the profession, we have been affected by these attitudes and by the sense of libraries as being a special part of a civilized society. We are not oblivious to changes around us and we do not reject innovation. We have adapted to change. We have even invited it and championed it, but it does not alter our view of the profession, its purpose, and its value.

Change is coming faster than ever before, and is involving virtually every aspect of our work. The planets have aligned, and along comes a report that tells us that we need to make even more changes—changes in operations, attitudes, and beliefs. We understand that the changes recommended are not important because they are in *On the Record*, but that they are in this report because they are important. Nevertheless, as we read the recommendations and what is in between the lines in *On the Record*, we see a daunting future. We could barely stretch our resources to provide access to the old mainstream materials, and now we are supposed to extend our efforts to all kinds of materials, even some that are very peculiar. We had trouble learn-

ing how to handle the old materials, and library schools had trouble teaching it, and now we are going to have to handle many more types, using a variety of standards and mechanisms. We have carefully protected the integrity of the information we supply by placing restrictions on who can contribute data, and by checking over any data that we do receive from others, and now we are supposed to solicit and welcome contributions by others, including commercial entities, and the great unwashed.

We have been used to relying on others to do a large part of our work, and used to reducing our own capacity to do that work in the belief that those others would always be there, and would always regard it as their bounden duty to keep on doing the work for us. We have not regarded ourselves as partners in the bibliographic control endeavor so much as dependents. Now we are asked to become real partners, and to provide substantive aid to each other as well as to the entity that has helped us for so long. It is like growing up and growing older and discovering that your parents need your help to do their shopping, to manage their affairs, and to get to the doctor. These new demands mean that we now need to look more carefully at our habits, our coping mechanisms, our outlook, and our decision processes, and realize that no matter how well they served us in the past, they may no longer be appropriate.

We as a group are extremely good at identifying all the possible negative consequences of making any changes. Some years ago my library brought in an "organizational culture" consultant, who administered some tests and determined that of all the groups that had been profiled utilizing those assessment tools, our culture was most similar to people operating nuclear power plants—people used to working in a milieu where the tiniest mistake could have disastrous consequences. People who were more than just risk averse, but who were belt, suspenders, glue, and jump-suit people; where redundant checks were nearly universal, and where deviation from what was prescribed was severely punished.

If we are considering something as simple-seeming as ceasing to write call numbers inside books, for instance, we think of all that could possibly go wrong, and may not ask ourselves how often mistakes occur, or whether the negative consequences of a few mistakes would be outweighed by the lessened workload and greater speed. If we are receiving shelf-ready books, we notice the one record that is not for the piece we received, and do not think about the thousands that were just fine. We think about how to prevent problems, even at great expense, even though we know that we can never prevent 100 percent of them. We are not nearly so likely to consider how much it would cost to correct those problems after the fact as opposed to how much it would cost to try to prevent them. In other words, we tend to make our decisions according to the exceptions, rather than the

rules. No matter how attractive perfection might be, we are not a nuclear power plant, so maybe it is time to seek other modes of making decisions.

In my other life, I am a figure skating judge, though one at a fairly low level. I judge primarily tests, including tests of what are called "Moves in the Field." Each move is a prescribed sequence of steps that has to be performed at a particular level of skill. Each pattern is established to teach and demonstrate particular competencies and concepts, and each move has a primary focus, and usually a secondary focus. For example, a move on the Pre-Juvenile test is called "Backward Perimeter Power Crossover Stroking." It consists of essentially six steps—three, mirrored by three in the other direction—with the whole sequence repeated for both lengths of the rink, with plain crossovers around the ends. The primary focus of this move is power, with edge quality secondary. The move as a whole is designed to teach how to generate power from weight shift, and from pressure against a dynamic edge, how to generate power from every step of a sequence, including the understroke of a crossover. To pass this move, you have to demonstrate these things while also demonstrating that you can do the correct steps according to the pattern prescribed, and that you can actually step on the correct edge in all places and maintain a clean edge.

If you do not realize what the purposes of the move are, you may well do it wrong. In fact, this move is done wrong so frequently that I have developed standard comments to write on test papers. The litany goes like this: "The primary focus of this move is power. All steps must generate power. The held edge is not a rest. The held edge must start and stay on a strong inside edge. When you start the third edge on an outside or a flat, you lose power." I deal the same way with all of the moves. If a pattern calls for three to five repeats and a certain shape, then the skater ought to be able to achieve the shape and size with the prescribed number of repeats. Not because it says so, but because being able to do it demonstrates a particular set of required skills.

Each move demonstrates a variety of skills, and sometimes a skater will be bad at one, but good enough at the rest that the overall quality is sufficient to pass the move at that level. Sometimes a skater will be bad at one move on the test, but very good at others, so you mark the bad move down, and mark the good ones up, and if the overall result is passing, you pass the test.

Why is this relevant to libraries? It is relevant because if we do not know why we are doing something, we cannot tell if we are doing it well, we cannot make good decisions about it, and we do not know what to concentrate on to make it better. If you think that speed is the same thing as power, and that the move is about getting down the ice quickly, you may do a very small pattern with shallow edges that does not develop power from edges or weight shift. It is relevant because it encourages us to recognize that perfection is not

to be expected, and to look instead for a result that weighs different factors against each other. It is relevant because it is a system in which it is acceptable to achieve a result that is "good enough" for the defined purposes, and that recognizes that "good enough" is not a pejorative term.

In libraries as in skating, we need to ask: What is our purpose? How does what we are doing achieve that purpose? Are some of the things we are paying attention to irrelevant to that purpose? Do any of the things we are concentrating on distract from the main purpose? We need to be aware of what is the level of quality that is reasonably achievable and accomplishes all of what is essential and much of what is desirable. We need to accept that it is not reasonable to expect every skater to be Michelle Kwan, and that a skater who cannot land quadruple jumps is not a failure. We need to recognize when something that we are obsessing about does not really matter. The color of the costume does not affect the sitspin. We need to recognize when something that might seem trivial actually serves an important purpose. Pointing your toe along the tracing makes a stronger edge and pressing your palms down stabilizes a turn.

We need to catch ourselves when we start talking about rules and practices as if they were the end itself. We need to catch ourselves when we make decisions based on the few problems, instead of the overall benefit, and we especially need to catch ourselves when we start to make decisions based on a few imagined or anticipated but rarely seen problems.

If we can school ourselves to ask the right questions and really to pay attention to the answers, we may find that it is possible and acceptable to introduce changes in practice that will save so much time, trouble, or money that we have a real chance of being able to turn our attention the new work that we need to handle.

Conclusion

The alternate universe that I have been talking about is not different from where we have been living, but in this universe, people all across the bibliographic community can and must assume a position of greater importance, power, and responsibility. This universe will have us operating in a way that better enables us to do what we had in mind all the time—that is, to make information available to everyone. And so, despite what it may take to get used to it, and despite the possibly frightening trip through the wormhole, we should be happy to make the passage to this new universe.

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