

# Year of Cataloging Research

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## Guest Editorial



### Cataloging Research Guided by Values

Allyson Carlyle

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Last fall, I taught a course on history and foundations of libraries and librarianship. During the course, we read Gorman's *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century*.<sup>1</sup> We had lively discussions about the definitions of each value and how each interacts with the challenges libraries are currently facing. When asked to write an editorial about the Year of Cataloging Research, I did not plan on framing a discussion of research in the context of values. However, teaching the course has placed the concept of values in the forefront of much of my thinking lately, and it seems timely and highly appropriate to bring values to the research conversation. How better to answer the question "What kind of research should we be doing?" than to first consider it in the light of the values we see as critical to sustaining our libraries and our profession?

Librarians have believed for many years that the provision of access to library materials through high-quality cataloging supports the fundamental values of the profession. To begin, I introduce values identified by Gorman, with examples of how the library practice of bibliographic description—full-level cataloging and classification—has buttressed each of them.

#### Stewardship of the World's Knowledge

The professional practice and international standards apparatus of cataloging supports stewardship by giving us detailed information about what we have and, for some collections, what condition it is in. Many of us provide detailed information for collection materials in part to let the world know what we have so as to not waste money buying duplicates; in other words, high-quality bibliographic descriptions facilitate wise expenditures of scarce resources. These descriptions help us make decisions about what to weed and what to keep. They help us make decisions collectively about which libraries will take on the responsibility of ensuring that copies of important materials are preserved, how many copies should be retained, and where they should be housed. Cataloging records may be used to keep track of which materials need preservation, and when they need attention.

#### Service to the World's Communities

High-quality cataloging records make it possible for our local users as well as users throughout the world to find and gain access to the library materials they

need. They make it possible for reference librarians to mediate user queries. They help interlibrary loan librarians find the exact items sought by scholars, students, and users from other libraries. High-quality cataloging records save the time of the user (Ranganathan's fourth law) by making it easy to determine whether a library has a specific edition of a work.<sup>2</sup> The assignment of class numbers makes browsing and discovery of library materials possible both online and in person. Through maintenance of collective cataloging databases, we share our work so that libraries all over the world do not have to waste time and money describing the same items according to the same standards over and over again.

### Equity of Access

Cataloging standards such as the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules and the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) have the potential to assist all users in finding materials that will be useful to them. Some may argue, justifiably, that standards such as these may also get in the way of large groups of users (children, minorities, non-English speakers, nonspecialists) gaining access to the materials they need. However, with sufficient flexibility by those who create these standards and effort by catalogers, cataloging standards could

most certainly be made more accommodating of the needs of disparate user groups. We want to make sure that all library users are led to all the items that they need. To paraphrase Ranganathan, to all users the resources they need; to all resources the users who need them.

### Literacy and Learning

People do not often recognize that the two primary classification schemes in use in the world, Dewey Decimal Classification and Library of Congress Classification, organize materials through positioning them in a disciplinary context. Organization of library materials on the basis of academic discipline directly supports the educational missions of many libraries. Classification provides shelf arrangements, physical and virtual, that facilitate users' abilities to educate themselves in a particular area or on a particular topic. The syndetic structure provided in tools such as LCSH facilitates movement through hierarchically arranged terminology. As a children's reference librarian at one point in my career, I used this structure to help children and their parents learn more about the area they were investigating. If implemented creatively and intelligently, the syndetic structures of our controlled vocabularies can provide fun and exciting ways to



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navigate the world's knowledge. To put it somewhat differently, they can teach as well as provide access.

## Democracy

Democracy thrives in an atmosphere of open discussion and informed decision-making. Librarians in public libraries aim to support these democratic ideals by creating collections that reflect multiple viewpoints. Collections are maintained and expanded intelligently and effectively by knowing what we have. Information can often be derived directly by mapping library holdings using the disciplinary context provided by class numbers. "Undercataloging" is a term used by Berman to describe minimal (and other less than full) cataloging.<sup>3</sup> When we decide to catalog segments of our collections less fully than other segments, we should be fully aware that we are making value judgments. These judgments may privilege one type of material over another, leaving users without access to the materials they need for decision-making and engaged civic involvement.

## Conclusion

Although research cannot support our values in and of itself, our values can and should inform and guide our research. The quality of access we give to our materials through bibliographic descriptions has—or so we have believed, as evidenced by the examples above—an enormous impact on how effectively we are supporting those values. This belief is being challenged more strenuously with each passing year. Precious resources are at stake, and research can provide data we need to guide decision-making processes in libraries. This is, I believe, one of the reasons the Library of Congress Task Force on the Future of Bibliographic Control devoted an entire section of *On the Record* to recommendations for evaluation and research.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the kind of research that is needed to support the critical decisions we are facing is extremely difficult to design and carry out. For instance, how do we

determine the effectiveness of full-level cataloging versus more basic level cataloging? Although research projects have attempted to answer this question, they have been poorly designed and executed, and the results themselves poorly communicated. We know how much the Library of Congress spends on individual elements of description, but we do not have a method of determining whether the money spent for each of those elements is worthwhile. We do not know, for instance, whether some elements are more critical for the description of some types of materials than others. We do not know whether some elements are more critical to certain groups of users than others. We do not know how much each element contributes to the searching, selecting, and use of library materials. We do not know the impact of users *not* finding what they need because of inadequate cataloging records. Although planning and implementing research on these topics would be very challenging, we must find ways to do it if we take our responsibilities to our users and our collections seriously.

Research can help guide us in a time when priorities seem not only to be unclear but also to be in conflict with each other. Librarians always have had to make difficult and critical decisions. It is up to all of us to make sure the data we need to make these critical decisions is informed by research that is well designed, well executed, and reported clearly and without bias or agenda.

## References

1. Michael Gorman, *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century* (Chicago: ALA, 2000).
2. S. R. Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science* (Madras, India: Madras Library Association, 1931).
3. Sandy Berman, "Ethnic Access," in *The Joy of Cataloging: Essays, Letters, Reviews and Other Expositions* (Phoenix, Ariz.: Onyx, 1981): 108.
4. Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control, *On the Record* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2008), [www.loc.gov/bibliographic-future/news/lwv-ontherecord-jan08-final.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/bibliographic-future/news/lwv-ontherecord-jan08-final.pdf) (accessed Mar. 17, 2010).

## Erratum

"Google Books as a General Research Collection," by Edgar Jones, in the April 2010 issue contains an error on page 85. The sample should be 398 titles in Figure 1 and 300 in Figure 2. The editor apologizes for the error.