Chapter 1

Introduction

As I begin what is now my sixth issue of *Library Technology Reports*, I find myself reminiscing about a career that is now in its midlife stages. Having been a library support staff person for ten years before obtaining the "professional" degree and then steadily rising through the administrative ranks from cataloger to department head to associate university librarian at various universities during the last eleven years, I am struck by how my viewpoints and opinions regarding my vocation have changed and how the landscape itself has changed. I remember doing music score cataloging and how wonderful it felt as a music graduate student to see all the new library materials coming in and to search OCLC for the record, and how exciting it was to find that record using the arcane and intricate search strategies granted only to those so blessed to be scheduled time to use OCLC (back when they charged by the minute). I remember how exciting it was, without an MLS degree, to be working with NASA in the early 1990s on building and digitizing what would become a real-time medical library on the International Space Station. I remember my first professional position as a telecataloger in the mid-1990s, cataloging computer files for eight major universities from my home in Houston for an early version of the National Digital Library. And I remember learning early on that, if I wanted to make a difference in my profession both locally and globally, both doing scholarly research and becoming involved in administration were the ways to achieve those goals.

I also remember how vigorously I defended, early in my career, the importance of the library catalog. Despite the fact that users had a hard time learning how to search our data, and despite all of the time and effort that we spent "training" users to interact with our clunky interfaces, the user didn't have much of a choice when looking for information with the library as a monopoly in the world of information access and retrieval. And I remember, as an MLS student in 1994, with Sherri Kelly first bringing the term *metadata* in front of the almighty ALCTS Committee on Cataloging: Description and Access (CC:DA), telling the committee that we needed to focus on getting the data to users in standards that they understood and could work with instead of fiddling with periods and spaces in MARC. Even after the "public" Internet first appeared on the scene, as one of six voting members on CC:DA, I participated in a number of the early metadata task forces and chaired the one that examined ONIX.

And now that I am a library administrator dealing with staffing and budget issues on a daily basis, it has become quite clear that the way libraries do business just isn't working. In the first place, we are no longer the information monopoly. Users quickly showed us that they were quite happy with "good enough" information, without authentication or legitimacy, gotten quickly and efficiently through search engines on the Internet. Second, interaction with our clunky catalog interfaces was abandoned, as first students and then even faculty began to search the Internet for their information needs. Third, the position of libraries within larger organizational structures has become precarious, as declining organizational budgets and resources no longer guarantee that the library budget can or will be maintained as it always has, especially in academia. Finally, as a result of the reasons above (and many others), the economics of library budgets vs. actual user interaction with library resources no longer makes any sense. The bottom line is that libraries spend most of their operational funds on personnel: salaries and benefits. For the Library of Congress and for academic libraries, most of these funds have been spent in the previous century on technical services personnel and

the creation of a standardized, cross-referenced database of purchased information for the user to access. The need to personalize this information for local users was the justification for redundant cataloging operations within libraries, despite the fact that almost everyone could use the same catalog record for an item with little to no adjustment. The numbers indicate that most libraries are spending 60–70 percent of their operational resources on something that only 10 percent of the users are actually accessing: the library catalog.

As a long-time library cataloger, I truly feel the pain that technical services personnel have known for a long time: the era of the library OPAC is over. As a library administrator, I know that it has nothing to do with the issue of the importance, relevance, tradition, or superior quality of data organization and retrieval that the library catalog provides above and beyond what is available on the Internet. It has to do with return on investment. No business can stay solvent if 70 percent of the budget is allocated to a product that the customer isn't using or doesn't want to use. This became quite clear to me at the ALA 2006 annual conference in New Orleans at the Technical Services Big Heads meeting, where the downsizing of technical services staff was revealed to be a strategic objective of the large academic libraries, in order to reallocate resources elsewhere and to begin to change the organizational culture within their libraries. And that, again, is the crux of the matter: the economic model that libraries have followed in the past is no longer viable. As an administrator with a static budget (which means declining, because of inflation), I have to weigh the benefits of fixed costs (costs that cannot be changed, like personnel salaries and the accompanying benefits) against variable costs (costs that I can manipulate and exchange on a regular basis). Whenever a library staff member leaves, it is an opportunity for administration to move from a fixed cost (hiring another full-time person) to a variable cost (move work to others in the department, outsource, stop doing something, etc.), which usually is less expensive. The revenue freed up can then be used to help the organization stay solvent and/or to move forward into new initiatives and directions.

As I monitor the unfolding drama related to Library of Congress changes, especially the Working Group that catalogers feel is important to the process, I already know that politics are in control. In other words, changes are going to happen at LC. As a funded agency mandated to serve Congress (not the rest of the American library community), LC is in a political ballgame similar in many respects to academia. It must compete against numerous other players and show its worth and efficiencies to Congress. Unfortunately, cataloging just isn't sexy or important enough to get congressmen elected. Digitization of and public access to the many treasures of LC, however, is and has been something that many congressmen are able to show to their constituents as a good and effective use of tax money, and thus an accomplishment to showcase in their drives for re-election. This is why millions of dollars are allocated to American Memory, and why LC cataloging operations are slowly being dismantled, outsourced, and abandoned. We in library administration have known about LC's economic and political problems for a number of years, since LC's cataloging operations are just a larger behemoth of our own unbalanced and unrealistic economic models.

So, going beyond the arguments about whether the library catalog is important or of value (it is), and going beyond the arguments about whether structured metadata, in MARC or something else, is important and of value (it definitely is), the reality is that libraries have limited resources to compete and position ourselves in the new information universe. We have gone from a monopoly, which could impose whatever rules and software and search strategies that we wanted on our users, to a bit player in a market overflowing with technological gadgets, tools, and algorithms that capture the attention of the public and leave libraries with but a slim slice of the information pie, all in the space of approximately 15 years. In other words, we are being left in the dust. The library as place seems to be a pretty solid marketing tool in the current environment, but where will that place be if the next generation is used to virtual, online collaboration, gaming, and resources, and if they view their living room or bedroom as their information "place"? The library as a societal necessity is focused on providing resources to those who cannot afford them, but this notion is based on a welfare state where taxes are allocated towards a greater good. What happens when the welfare state crumbles and Social Security becomes insolvent, or (God forbid) if taxpayers decide that a library is no longer needed or a priority in their community (because "everything is on the Internet already, right?")? What happens as mass digitization undermines the concept of copyright, and everything begins to be available online, including all books ever published?

It is this larger picture that library administrators must keep in mind on a daily basis. It involves more than just worrying about whether our largest investment thus far (the library OPAC) is worth saving. It includes forecasting locally what part of the information pie is important to our users and allocating resources to that area or areas; it includes marketing and competing against the other information players vying for the attention and money of users who once came to us exclusively; it includes planning strategy and justifying the need for continuing and new monies to our bosses, who have many other crises and political issues and pots of interest to juggle, many of which provide much more return on investment and community support than the library and are better equipped politically and organizationally to compete for those funds. It is this larger picture that is missed by those who continue to decry the loss of the "good old days" of data

perfection (which never really existed in the first place). For those who are leading and administering libraries, we are in a battle for survival, and we are losing.

Looking at the future of information organization related to libraries, this report will not only focus on current initiatives around "reinventing" the OPAC and all of its attendant possibilities (provided in the context of economic realities), but it will also look at opportunities to get away from the OPAC and focus resources on new areas, such as 3D information visualization, mass digitization, Library 2.0, and metadata related to digital resources. It will also point to essential readings in this area, some of which are library-related and others non-library-related. All URL links were active and working as of September 1, 2007.