### RDA: THE COMING CATALOGUING DEBACLE

*T*here is an old story of an international committee watching a demonstration of a new invention. Everyone was impressed by its speed and efficiency, everyone that is but the French delegate. He leaned back in his chair and said: "It obviously works in practice … but does it work in theory?"

*F*ollowers of that man's school of thought have hijacked the Anglo-American cataloguing code revision process and the practical result of their theoretical approach promises to be the biggest disaster to hit descriptive cataloguing since the draft rules of 1941 (the latter consigned justly to the mists of history, but an instructive example of how badly wrong groups of well-intentioned people can be).

*T*here has been a steady progression in the formulation of cataloguing rules since the one-person codes of the 19th century created by the giants Panizzi and Cutter, though the subsequent committee codes and the seminal work of the 20th century giant Lubetzky, the *Paris principles*, the first abortive attempt at a post-Lubetzky *Anglo-American cataloguing rules* of 1968 (another endeavor scuppered by well-intentioned people in LC and ARL), the formulation of the ideal of Universal Bibliographic Control (UBC)—the founding concept of international cataloguing cooperation—the formulation and adoption of the MARC format, the creation of the *International standard*

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*bibliographic description* (ISBD)—the most successful international cataloguing standard ever—and the creation of the *Anglo-American cataloguing rules, Second edition* (AACR2)—a flawed but fundamentally sound expression of Lubetzkyan principles.

*A*ll these forces were progressive in that they contributed to an unprecedented level of international standardization and resulting cooperation based on MARC and ISBD being adopted worldwide, AACR2 being translated into many languages and adopted or used as the basis for national codes outside the Anglo-American community of nations, and steady progress toward the ideal of Universal Bibliographic Control. So, it has all worked very well in practice but not, apparently, in theory—at least as far as the Joint Steering Committee (the body into whose hands the responsibility for the maintenance of this progress has been entrusted).

*T*here are a number of reasons why this calamity is looming. One is the drive to resolve the problem of cataloguing and giving access to electronic records through the use of "metadata" applied by non-cataloguers. The simplistic idea is that vast numbers of electronic documents can be catalogued effectively by having their creators apply uncontrolled terms in a few simple categories. In other words, that the results achieved by cataloguing using controlled vocabularies and the bibliographic structures of catalogues—

complex, labor-intensive, skilled activities—can be achieved on the cheap and without the use of those essential structures.  It is as though a school of cuisine —let us call it *cuisine dégoûtante*—arose that prescribed only seventeen ingredients used randomly in random proportions mixed by people with no knowledge of cooking using random temperatures.  It is hard to believe the world's libraries have taken metadata seriously.  Then there is the even more simplistic approach of those who think that the free-text searching used by search engines can substitute for cataloguing.  Welcome to the wonderful world of 1,321,957 "hits" in random order—those "hits" having abysmally low recall and relevance ratios (the standard measures of information retrieval systems)— good night and good luck!  Lastly, there is the attachment on the part of the theoreticians to the document *Functional requirements for bibliographic records* (acronymized to FRBR).  FRBR may have some merit as a way of looking at the theory of cataloguing—it has little as a foundational document for creating a cataloguing code. Never mind that the structure of bibliographic records set out in AACR2/ISBD is well established, accepted by scholars and other catalogue users for decades, and with minor flaws in concept and expression that could easily be corrected—it works in practice, but does it work in theory?

>     *T*his is the witches' brew of ignorance, neophilia, and the exaltation of theory over practice that given birth to the draft *Resource description and access*

(RDA), a work on which the Joint Steering Committee has labored for a number of years. Did anyone ask why the JSC did not work on updating and revising AACR2? If they did, they were given the usual nonsense about having to reach out to the metadata "community," the supposed need to allow the cataloguing of electronic resources (as if AACR2/ISBD were not perfectly and demonstrably capable of accommodating all formats, including electronic documents), and the general Rovian blather that always accompanies excuses for failed policy decisions in this as in wider spheres.

*I* have studied the drafts of RDA that have been made available and I am horrified by them, for the following reasons.

*F*irst, Part I of AACR2 was organized in the following manner. A general chapter, following the order of the universally accepted ISBD preceded chapters giving details, amplifications, and exceptions for particular kinds of material (books, cartographic materials, music, etc.) and publication patterns (serials) in the same order—an arrangement that had several advantages. There is no good practical reason relating to ease of use by cataloguers or practicality as an instruction tool why this structure has been abandoned in favor of an incoherent hodge-podge of general and special rules on all formats as found in the new draft. Just one example from many: in Chapter 2 "Identification of the resource," before there is a single rule on recording the simplest descriptive

data, there are nine pages of detailed, complex, and often redundant introductory instructions.   In another example, a basic rule (2.2 "Sources of information") contains no general rule and is made up of three specific rules (on resources comprising pages or page images, graphic materials, moving image materials) with a fourth rule on "other resources."

*S*econd, the ISBD is used as the basis for description in almost all modern cataloguing codes and its order and punctuation (mirroring as they do the MARC format) are accepted throughout the world.  It is, therefore astounding to read that "RDA is not structured around the areas and elements specified in ISBD (G)" in the draft RDA.  (ISBD(G)—the basic ISBD—was drawn up in concert with the creation of AACR2 and subsequently adopted internationally.)  Another RDA statement—that their rules do not "represent a prescribed order for purposes of presentation of the data"—is a definitive rejection of the ISBD standard. One important consequence of this disastrous decision is that instead of presenting general rules first and then special rules and instead of following the universally accepted order of the ISBD, Part I of the RDA is divided into six chapters, each of which mixes up general and specific instructions.  The first is "General instructions" (many of which are highly specific) and the subsequent chapters are grouped around the supposed functions of data elements as determined by the Laputan FRBR.

*T*hird, RDA gives its examples without ISBD punctuation and with only the element that is subject to the rule—that is completely out of context. This makes them virtually incomprehensible to cataloguing students and, in some cases, to any reader of the RDA. Earth to RDA: examples are supposed to illuminate rules, not confuse the reader.

*F*ourth, the draft RDA is an editorial disaster. Many of its "guidelines" (rules are passé to these people) are incomprehensible, internally inconsistent, and belied by their examples. I read more than 60 pages very carefully and came up with 15 pages of editorial errors.

*L*ast, the foregoing applies to the first part of RDA—the most developed thus far. The following parts—on assignment of name/title access points—are only partial as I write but already display a massive confusion. The drafts I have seen consist of undigested gobbets of rules taken from AACR2 in an incomprehensible order. The basic step in assigning access points is the determination of authorship (who is the creator responsible for the intellectual or artistic content of the work?). This is *not* to determine the "main entry" (an irrelevant idea in modern catalogues) but to start a logical process leading to coherent catalogues. The drafts of RDA do not include rules on this first step, but do include rules (oops, guidelines) on making subsidiary access points—an approach so absurd that it almost defies description.

*T*he RDA seeks to find a third way between standard cataloguing (abandoning a slew of international agreements and understandings) on the one hand and the metadata crowd and boogie-woogie Google boys on the other. The sad thing is that betraying the former has not managed to appease the latter. Articles stating that RDA will be dead on arrival have already appeared, not because it is a mess and a giant leap backwards for cataloguing but because the neophiliacs think it is not a radical enough break with the past.

*T*his is a sad time for cataloguing and the millions of users of library catalogues—not only do we have the appalling RDA but also the Library of Congress is talking openly of abandoning important elements of it national bibliographic service (including the LC *List of subject headings*), thereby letting down both the libraries in this country that depend on them and their international partners; and many LIS schools have all but abandoned the teaching of cataloguing. Where's the outrage? Maybe it is Big Yellow Taxi time for cataloguing—and we won't know what we've got 'til it's gone.

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