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## OP Ed -- IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) -- The Catalog: What Is It Good For?

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## Op Ed — IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

## The Catalog: What Is It Good For?

by **Rick Anderson** (Associate Director for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Phone: 801-587-9989) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

The title of this column is intentionally provocative, but the question is meant sincerely rather than cynically — clearly, the library catalog is good for something. But is it good for what it's traditionally been used for? If not, is it better for some other purpose?

I suggest that one good way of thinking about this issue is to back up and ask ourselves what we have traditionally expected the library catalog (whether in print or online format) to do for us. I think we have generally expected the catalog to do two things, and that those two things are not only different, but also to some degree opposed.

First of all, we've expected the catalog to serve as a **description of the collection**. You look up a book, and what you retrieve is a record that tells you lots of potentially useful stuff both about the intellectual content of the book (title, subject[s], table of contents) and about its physical characteristics (standing height, presence of illustrations, number of pages). In the past, when using the library meant walking around picking up objects, this kind of careful description allowed you to get a pretty good sense of whether the book being described was one that might be worth the significant effort required to go and get it. (And the effort *was* significant — think of all the times you walked back and forth between stacks and catalog during any single research project back in the days of card catalogs. Not to mention the times you drove or took the bus across town to get there to begin with.)

Second, we've expected the catalog to serve as a **finding tool**. The catalog was the nexus between patron and book — the place where a first connection was made between the intellectual content of the collection and the brain of the patron. For the purposes of this connection, description is a secondary concern — it's not the point of the exercise, but is rather

the technique you use to get the book and the patron together.

It may seem silly and hair-splitting to separate these two functions. Obviously, there's a deep connection between them — to be a good finding aid, the catalog has to have a pretty good level of descriptive completeness and accuracy. But the fact that these two functions

*“...we've expected the catalog to serve as a description of the collection.”*

work together does not mean that they're the same thing. Nor does it erase the fact that they can actually work against each other if we let the descriptive aspect crowd out the finding-tool aspect.

I think, in fact, that over the course of decades we've made just that mistake: we've come to put too much emphasis on description and allowed the find-

ing-tool function to atrophy. For example: look up (or try to look up) the journal *Nature* in any library catalog. If you can actually figure out which entry is the right one — which is the first hurdle, and a major one — then click on

that entry and try to divine any useful information from the resulting screen. The problem you will find in most library catalogs is that the record is so complete and so accurate that its utility as a finding tool is seriously compromised. The publication is well *described* but the descriptive record is so extensive and so complex that the description itself makes it harder for a researcher to connect with the publication's content.

So what's the solution to this problem? Is it to “dumb down” the catalog record? (I'll have more to say about the general idea of “dumbing down” in a later column.) Well,

it depends on what your ultimate goal is. If the goal is to have a good catalog record — “good” meaning as complete and as accurate as possible — then you don't want to change the record at all. You might tweak the way it's presented in the OPAC, or you might find ways to consolidate a couple of headings, but you certainly won't decrease the amount of intellectual content in the record itself.

If, however, your ultimate goal is to connect patrons with documents, then your idea of what constitutes a “good” record might change. Maybe a simplified record will work better — and instead of thinking of it as “dumbed down,” you might think of it as “smartened up.” Is it smart to include more subject headings than are needed? Is it smart to include the standing height of the book in centimeters, or the number of pages in the introduction, if those pieces of information are unlikely to help patrons find what they need? Is it smart to include a note like “for holdings beginning in 1851 with the exception of the current three years, please use the database entitled: Acme Newspaper Backfiles?” All of these notes and data elements contribute to completeness and accuracy, but they may not always contribute to the effectiveness of the record, if we measure effectiveness by the record's ability to connect patrons with what they need.

I'm not saying that simplification is always the best approach. But I do think we need to put descriptive completeness in its place, and we need to recognize that it involves costs that go beyond the cost of paying catalogers to do the work. Part of the cost of completeness is a cost in intelligibility, a cost that mounts with every additional piece of data we add to a patron display. We need to think of

*...we've expected the catalog to serve as a finding tool.”*

completeness and accuracy of description as means to an end, not as ends in themselves. 🐻

