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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — 400 Catalogers

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If you're going to go out and get yourself misquoted you might as well do it in a big way. Which is what I did this week in Washington, DC when I spoke before the "**Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control**," a body called together last year after LC's decision to abandon series authority work raised the wrath of cataloging departments everywhere.

As all *Against the Grain* readers know, trying to explain what librarians do to non-librarians is just about always a hopeless effort. So, imagine trying to explain "bibliographic control," let alone "the future of bibliographic control" to friends, family, and acquaintances. Of course, this is trouble you get yourself into, since why would you ever need to? "Oh, I'm going to Washington next week to testify at the **Library of Congress**." Next time LC invites you to testify, just try to resist letting that one drop into conversation now and then. Naturally, people will ask, "What about?" Then you are stuck.

It's a hard question, since these days even the experts have trouble saying what the whole thing means. The **Working Group**, whose charge is to deliver a report to LC in November, held its first public meeting in March, in Mountain View, California at the headquarters of **Google**, the people who of course have had a lot to do with upsetting the bibliographic control appletart in the first place. A second public meeting took place in June at the Chicago offices of the **American Library Association**.

"Sweltering" is a word that doesn't do a lot of justice to summer days in Washington, where the local combination of treeless pavement and endless monument intensifies heat in ways that are special. That's true doubly for men dressed in jacket and tie, as I was while walking east from my hotel in the direction of Capitol Hill and the third and final public meeting of the **Working Group**. It was before 9 o'clock and hot already this July day. The sun hung in haze directly above the dome of the **Library of Congress**, which sits behind the Capitol building.

In case any of us invited to speak at LC needed it, there were plenty of reminders around the Capitol that bibliographic control was not the only pressing issue at hand in Washington. The Capitol Police were everywhere, some in armed patrol on bicycle, dangling holsters above their short pants. At the driveway gatehouse to the Capitol, police popped trunks and slid mirrors underneath each car and truck coming in. One policeman stood guard to the side with an automatic rifle.

Security was a lot looser at the drive-

way to the **Library of Congress**, whose ornate main building, completed in 1897, is one of the splendid landmarks of our nation's capital. Holding the third **Working Group** meeting here was of course part of the symbolism begun at **Google** and **ALA**. Would we meet in some dignified chamber off the famous colonnaded Main Reading Room? No, since the meeting turned out not to be here at all. LC has three buildings on Capitol Hill. My notes said I needed the Madison Building, but signs by the driveway entrance told me that LC's landmark is the Jefferson Building. The lone guard, occupying a little wooden booth, unarmed and bored and eating a bag of potato chips, pointed me across the street.

Among those things you don't learn in library school are the small protocols for speaking at the **Library of Congress**. The night before at dinner, an LC staff member reminded us to allow time in the morning to go through security at the library entrance. I asked if they'd allow a Swiss Army Knife through. "No," she said. "People hide them in the bushes and the street people find them."

So, unarmed myself, Swiss Army Knife back at the hotel, I walked across Independence Avenue. The Madison Building, opened in 1981, is among the largest structures in Washington, one of those monumental federal offices that do so well in throwing heat back down onto the street. Once through the metal detector, I was looking for the elevators and our sixth-floor meeting room.

So much for a dignified chamber. It was a plain, square, windowless space that could have been a room anywhere. Banks of lights cast a sharp glare. Ten rows of chairs had been set out with an aisle down the middle, some 120 seats in all. Coffee and pastries were laid out in the back. Space was tight. People chatted and milled about closely until we started, on the dot at nine.

We were there all day, with a break for lunch at noon. The theme was "Economics and Organization of Bibliographic Data."

Deanna Marcum, LC's Associate Librarian for Library Services, led off.

She was followed by a couple of members of the **Working Group** and then by a series of invited speakers, each with a constituency: consortium, special library, public library, research library, abstracting and indexing service, **Program for Co-**

operative Cataloging (PCC), **OCLC**, and **LC** itself.

Most of the people in the room were strangers to me, but not **Rick Lugg**, a friend of long standing from years of working together at **YBP**. "Setting the Stage" was **Rick's** assigned role, but his talk might have been called "The Underside of Bibliographic Control."

"Our firm," said **Rick**, speaking of **R2 Consulting**, "does analysis and redesign of library workflows. We are seldom called in to admire how well things are going. Instead, we are escorted around the library as if it were an

accident scene: we view backlogs, frontlogs, and working queues. We are shown, with barely suppressed horror and survivors' glee, the unfinished retrospective conversions, the **Dewey Collection** that can't be moved to storage because it's not barcoded, the aftermath of ILS migrations, failed match points, the massive East Asian gift collection accepted by the Director, and the unacceptable records created by "other" libraries. Some of these scenes are spectacular: cataloging backlogs with their own inventory systems and warehouses; rooms bursting with sagging boxes of

gifts, many obviously inappropriate; Special Collections offices that would make **OSHA** shudder."

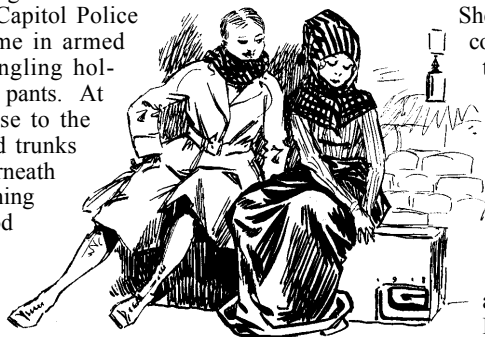
That gruesome tour of library backrooms "set the stage" exceedingly well. How to justify, and pay for, today's practices when such out-of-control scenes of bibliographic mayhem are so often close to hand? Not to mention, as **Rick** pointed out, all the "invisible" digital backlogs.

"I don't know about the world in which you live," **Marcum** had said in her opening remarks, referring to comments from an earlier meeting that cataloging should be a "public good" and so in a realm beyond economics, but that wasn't possible at **LC**. **Congress** was subjecting the library to more scrutiny than ever. **LC** spends some \$44 million each year on cataloging and does not even have a budget line for the very thing libraries everywhere depend upon **LC** for, the sharing of it.

Mary Catherine Little, of **Queens Borough Public Library**, talked about cataloging in 33 different languages, trying to obtain metadata from vendors everywhere, the thrill of capturing it for Chinese romance novels in series, and an invitation to users to "Tag me in Hindi, Please." **Susan Fifer Canby** of the **National Geographic Society** reported that photographers will provide decent metadata when they're told it boosts the chance of somebody finding their work and their getting paid. **Michael Charbonneau** of **Indiana University** and the **PCC** referred to "**LCRDD**," or

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"If you're going to go out and get yourself misquoted you might as well do it in a big way."



“Library of Congress Record Dependency Disorder.” (This despite **Rick Lugg**’s observation that “Every day, in libraries all over the country, perfectly good LC records are subjected to all manner of scrutiny and revision.”) **OCLC**’s **Karen Calhoun** forecast a “retirement wave for a generation of bibliographic control experts” after 2010. **Beacher Wiggins** of **LC** reported that librarians sent letters to **Congress** over the library’s decision last year to delay redistribution of Italian cataloging records obtained from **Casalini Libri**.

Oh yes, the misquote. On the agenda posted on the Web, I was listed as “**Bob Nardini** — The Vendor,” meaning, I’d been invited to speak on behalf of book vendors, all of them. That was an honor and also a weighty assignment, to speak for such a farflung, varied constituency which on a personal level included a good many friends, colleagues, and former colleagues; but on a less personal level, a whole lot of competitors. Still, there is a sense of community among vendors, and everyone I spoke to beforehand wished me well and offered their best advice.

Book vendors, I tried to say, are already substantial, if not always acknowledged, contributors to the enterprise of bibliographic control. We send original and upgraded **Cataloging in Publication (CIP)** records to **OCLC**. Libraries everywhere obtain records of all conceivable levels from us. Our **MARC** records, before any user tries to find one of our books in the **OPAC**, provide a platform for libraries

to find out about the book at all; to select and order the book; to receive the book and pay the invoice; and, if we vendors have not been asked to do it for them, to print a spine label so that someone on staff can put the book on the shelf in case a user comes looking for it.

Maybe vendors could take on the straightforward work for **LC**, so that **LC** would be in better shape to take on more of the not straightforward work that’s out there today in such abundance. Some things would need to change, though. **LC** estimates its costs to produce a **CIP** record, for example, at \$130. Yet anyone with around \$10,000 can subscribe for a year to the **LC** “Books English” file, and buy 175,000 new records for something like six cents apiece. The day’s theme, after all, was the “economics of bibliographic control” and so it seemed fair to point out that to book vendors, those economics didn’t look too appealing. It’s as if **LC** were a large developing country from which every day container ships sail to American ports to offload cataloging records assembled in workshops that might bear a little investigative reporting.

I tried hard to get my facts straight and to stick to what I knew. One point I wanted to make was that vendors hire a lot of degreed catalogers. I thought about saying that **Coutts Information Services**, my employer, has more catalogers than any library in the United States and Canada. But in the interest of truth-in-vending I pulled back, figuring that certainly **LC** and maybe a few others hire more. So instead I said that **Coutts** employs more degreed catalogers than “all but a handful” of libraries in the U.S. and Canada.

Of course today the last word on everything belongs to the bloggers. It was no different for this third meeting of the **Working Group**. They were all over it within a day or two, producing some nice accounts and some decent criticisms of the whole affair. I have learned, though, that it’s with some anxiousness that you approach the exercise of searching your own name in **Technorati** after a bloggable event. This time I called up a posting that reported me as saying book vendors “may employ as many catalogers as the **Library of Congress** does.”

Well, I could just let that go. Except, **Beacher Wiggins** in his talk said that **LC** has on staff about 400 catalogers today (down from 750 fifteen years ago), and I am probably not the only person around able to estimate that there are entire regions of North America where you couldn’t find 400 catalogers. So, I will correct the public record right now, and say that while **Coutts** does hire a lot of catalogers — probably many more than your library has on board — we don’t have 400 people altogether, let alone anything like 400 catalogers.

Maybe the day will come — who knows? — when most catalogers will work for vendors. That could be the future of bibliographic control, or one part of it. But today they do not, no matter what you find I said out there on the Web.

The Working Groups’ Website, with links to all of the papers delivered at the three public meetings is: <http://www.loc.gov/bibliographic-future/>. 🌸



Adventures in Librarianship — Greetings

by **Ned Kraft** (Ralph J. Bunche Library, U.S. Department of State)
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ATG will be offering a line of greeting cards designed for libraries

trying to retrieve overdue books. If your standard notices have been ignored, try these beautifully illustrated cards to nudge those scofflaw customers.

Happy (belated) Birthday!
Though I’m the one who’s late,
you owe the fine.

When you’re away
the days don’t seem as good.
Come back soon, okay?
And bring those overdue books!

‘Tis another Christmas season...
A time for giving
and a time for giving back.
You know what I’m talking about.

On this your special bar mitzvah day
you take on adult responsibilities

and leave behind childish things
like those Hardy Boy books.

We love the way you walk.
We love the way you talk.
And we know you’ll do the right thing... eventually.
Happy Valentine’s Day!

The Dictionary of National Holidays
reminds us that the first Monday in June is,
for Native Americans, “Returning Overdue Books Day.”
Did you know that?
Have a Happy!

Our sincerest condolences
for your recent loss.
We know how it feels
to lose something dear to you.

We’ll begin taking orders for the cards in October. In 2008 we’ll be coming out with a line of “Please Join My Roundtable” greeting cards, and a special limited-edition fund-raising post card with an engraving from **Dante’s Inferno**. 🌸