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Editor
card catalogs over 20 years ago. Consequently, today’s OPAC displays in many ways represent little more than automated card catalogs. This represents a complete lack of initiative and creativity on the part of IMLS vendors and systems designers. That libraries allow vendors to provide such poor performance and remain in business is just as objectionable. For instance, the MulVer problem has been widely recognized and lamented for decades. Given today’s technological environment, advances with the MARC 21 formats for storing and exchanging bibliographic and holdings data, and a savvy systems designer willing to reprogram an OPAC display, the multiple versions issue appears to be a very solvable problem.

Our MARC records and cataloging codes are filled with the necessary data elements and instructions to conflate numerous equivalent manifestation-level records into a single comprehensive yet understandable OPAC record display. The time has come for librarians to push IMLS vendors and systems designers to acknowledge that data storage and exchange is very different from data display. The manner in which data is stored in an IMLS system does not (and in fact probably should not) correspond to the manner in which that data is displayed. Why can’t IMLS systems store multiple records representing multiple manifestations of the same work or expression for staff use, and display them as a single, coherent record for patrons, with clear access points to all available content?

Similarly, I believe both IMLS vendors and librarians also share the blame for the somewhat cobbled-together approach to Electronic Resource Management systems. That acquisitions librarians have not developed standards and demanded that IMLS vendors follow them within such a standards-conscious field is difficult to understand. Libraries across the country and around the world are obviously keying identical or at least very similar data points into IMLS acquisitions modules. Why not develop standards to facilitate and streamline the process? The DLF Electronic Resource Management Initiative described above is a good start, but it is still not established as a formal standard (http://www.dlib.org/standards/dlf-erm02.htm).

I can think of another compelling reason for acquisitions librarians to develop and adhere to standards. NYU is currently in the midst of an IMLS migration and expects to go live with VTLS during the summer of 2006. Formulating and following standards allows for much smoother data migrations. During the migration at NYU, acquisitions personnel will be forced to basically rebuild and re-key a great deal of acquisitions data into the new system. If there were standards in place allowing for smooth data exchanges between systems, acquisitions personnel would instead be ready to begin Ordering and Receiving in the new system almost immediately. Imagine if Catalog Librarians had to re-key every bibliographic, holdings and authority record following each IMLS migration? When one considers that the acquisitions module represents the point-of-entry in the information life cycle of most library resources, it makes little sense to require library personnel to re-key much of this data each time a library migrates to a new IMLS system. To say nothing of the audit trails and expenditure records today’s Acquisitions Departments routinely maintain.

All of this is certainly not to say that IMLS vendors should be considered blameless in being so late to see the necessity for ERM systems. As stated earlier, many libraries began collecting electronic resources over ten years ago. That IMLS vendors and systems designers did not foresee the need for enhanced acquisitions functionality in order to fully manage the behavior of electronic resources again demonstrates a profound lack of initiative and creativity. Furthermore as there are so few acquisitions standards defining and coordinating metadata within IMLS acquisitions modules, I for one do not fully understand the need for an entire new ERM module? Continuing Resources Librarians have been complaining about backscatter acquisitions and serials modules for years. So it is not as though IMLS vendors would therefore have been risking an existing satisfied customer base. Why didn’t they take this opportunity to improve the design and performance of their existing acquisitions modules, and simultaneously enhance the acquisitions module capabilities to manage electronic resources?

Conclusion

So where does all of this leave us? Have we clearly established the true role of electronic resources within library collections? Are they friend or foe? Personally I feel libraries have reached the tipping point. Electronic resources today are as much a part of library collections as any of the other storage media libraries have seen fit to collect during the last 5,000 years. Pragmatically, I believe this article demonstrates some of the understandable concerns librarians face when integrating electronic resources into our collections. But grappling with and overcoming such concerns is part of our job, and it is also a challenge librarians have faced before when incorporating other new materials into our collections. Some of the specific challenges associated with electronic resources, from access to cataloging to preservation, are what make them so vibrant and exciting. The dy...