

# The need of better cataloging in our technical processes

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With the availability of automation, the results of catalogers' work have reached a wider audience than the local users; it has become more visible and more complex, diverting from traditional library work which produced information for direct users only.

Inside or outside the automated environment that Argentine libraries want to establish, bibliographic access, description and retrieval systems receive less attention than they deserve. Two library catalogs chosen at random would suffice to confirm the existence of remarkable disparities in cataloging. Similarly, we would find the same disparities, disorder and lack of standardization — besides big backlogs— in every library around the country.

This situation is disorienting for users, who don't find the same access and retrieval devices in the different libraries they patronize, unless pure chance leads them to those libraries that have luckily adopted identical criteria.

Generally speaking, disparities are evident, and mean a substantial lag in a world globalized beyond our capability to bear it, and where cooperation in cataloging must be concrete and permanent.

Argentine librarianship is paradoxical: while ninety per cent of libraries use the same automation software, there has not been an agreement about the use of a standardized format for bibliographic records, both in manual and automated catalogs. Incompatibility means a delay of more than twenty years! Meanwhile, around the world

there are talks about bringing up to date catalogers' work<sup>1</sup>, universally accepted standards are being revised<sup>2</sup>, and there's much reflection on the future of cataloging<sup>3</sup>. In Argentina, efforts towards integration into these global trends and towards correction of wrong practices are scarce.

Isn't it that we all use the same cataloging code? Isn't there a consensus on cataloging criteria? Is there some sort of anarchical tendency among librarians that prevents them from embracing standardization? Do library schools teach different cataloging codes? Is it so difficult to adhere to standards in order to facilitate exchange and cooperation? Does every library really need so many "local variations"? To sum up: is cataloging in crisis?

It is my opinion, and I've repeatedly stated it, that cataloging is indeed in crisis.

I believe there are four main factors contributing to this desolate scene:

1. *The irresponsibility of certain librarians who don't respect and apply the cataloging code adopted by general consensus.*

It makes no sense not to adopt international standards. Many librarians pay no attention to existing codes and formats, attributing them great complexity and a certain mystic character —specially regarding the punctuation system— to justify their own personal simplifications, often supported by the closing remark "This is my policy". Simplicity is not the problem —minimal description levels take care of that— but the simplistic and often incomplete manner of

performing the task, even at minimal description levels.

*2. The insufficient teaching of cataloging in many of the lesser library schools.*

Judging from results, teaching is inadequate, inconvenient, and weak. Detailed explanation of the concept and function of cataloging, together with a thorough application of the code, must be accompanied by a qualified experience on the side of the teacher. The scarce time allotted to cataloging courses in the curricula of lesser schools is not enough to guarantee the proper preparation of professionals.

*3. The ceaseless incorporation of non professional personnel in libraries.*

This is a long standing administrative problem for Argentine libraries, for which there's no solution in the near future. If even professional librarians don't pay due attention to technical processes, it is not possible to expect that people without any library education do.

We professionals must act professionally to distinguish our work from the work of those who can't claim any skill. This will give us a true identity, and will help us to be more effective in our just claim to put an end to arbitrary hirings. Let's not forget that anarchy within the profession allows for others to take our place.

*4. The lack of a national cataloging agency that creates complete and uniform records for the country's bibliographic production.*

Worldwide, each national library—or the institution vested with such function—is in charge of producing bibliographic records for national materials. There's no need to explain the resource savings this scheme would mean, and the easiness it would bring to our work, besides giving the user exhaustive and reliable information.

From a positive perspective, the delay and disorganization in our cataloging could be overcome by applying strategies already pro-

ven successful in other countries, allowing us to profit from their experience by avoiding the pitfalls they had to go through to reach standardization.

In view of this situation, the executive board of the Sociedad Argentina de Información decided to organize its first electronic symposium, called "Cataloging in Argentina". Taking advantage of electronic communication as a new channel for sharing opinions and interests on important topics for Argentine librarianship, the Program on Library Science Studies proposed:

a) to examine the relationship between cataloging theory and practice,

b) to understand the permanence of the cataloging process and unify criteria, and

c) to set in motion mechanisms to help solve cataloging problems in Argentina.

Three professors of cataloging from around the country were asked to share their experience in the official papers of the Symposium. They were Lydia Revello (Buenos Aires), Norma Mangiaterra (La Plata), and María Esther Rodríguez (San Juan). The expression of ideas from all over the country was thus incentivated, far from any biased interest, but with a true federalist spirit, which could be seen in the papers presented.

The event had a national impact: besides the more than three hundred participants registered, organizers estimate that a similar number of people who didn't have access to email received from colleagues printouts of the papers presented to the Symposium.

Of all messages, comments, questions and opinions presented, only *official* papers and messages, statistics of the event, a special survey conducted during the Symposium and the conclusions are published here. Conclusions were also posted in the UNIREL list-serv.

The questions raised at the beginning of this article were dealt with during the Symposium, and its conclusions clarify confusions and point out the paths to be followed.

Although at the time I write this piece there's much international debate on the subject, I hope the Symposium papers presented

here will help us to better understand the present situation of cataloging in Argentina, will make us aware of the requirements needed to put our catalogs in the same level with the most important catalogs in the world, and be ready for the coming changes that technological advance will undoubtedly bring.

The topic is not closed, there's still much to be discussed and debated, but this has been at least a first attempt to modify the present situation.

I would like to close with the words of Michael Gorman: "for cataloguers particularly, the future is challenging and bright. We must maintain the bibliographic structures that we have built and expand and develop them in two ways. First, by ensuring that worthwhile electronic documents are organized and preserved so that they can be made available to future generations. Second, by improving bibliographic standards worldwi-

de and ensuring that they reach a level of standardization that makes possible a new level of global cooperation"<sup>4</sup>.

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## Referencias

<sup>1</sup>Steinhagen, Elizabeth; Moynahan, Sharon. "Catalogers must change!: surviving between the rock and the hard place". En: *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, v. 26, n° 3 (1998), p. 3-20.

<sup>2</sup>Ortiz-Repiso Jiménez, Virginia. "Nuevas perspectivas para la catalogación: metadatos versus MARC". *Revista Española de Documentación Científica*, v. 22 (1999), p. 198-219.

<sup>3</sup>Gorman, Michael. "The future of cataloguing and cataloguers". En: *International Cataloguing and Bibliographic Control*, v. 27 (Oct.-Dec. 1998), p. 68-71.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 71.