



The catalogue (and the cataloguer): a defenseless entity?

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The scholars who study cataloguing rules tend, duly I would say, to apply them inflexibly in order to create a precise information tool, coherent in its structure, unchanged over time, at least for a given span of time, except for later additions. A tool designed to meet all requirements in any environment and at any time. On the contrary, the people who start from the needs of would be users, will admit that the rules are not the pre-eminent motivation behind the catalogue; rather, this rises from the need to meet those needs, therefore the cataloguing praxis will assume an adaptable mode, open to doubts, starting from the choice of the material as well as from the identification of index accesses. The real need to solve the conflict between the convenience of a coherent tool not inconsistent in its nature, and one that may meet requests obviously inconsistent with one another, is a proof confirming the conflict inherent in human events; the library is an integral part of it since it mirrors the changing aspects and needs of its environment. The library, we may note, shows a series of doubts, the need to harmonize different requirements and requests, all, or almost all, legitimate ones. The issues concerning cataloguing reflect this conflict and are one instance of it. First of all we have requirements that change over time, due to social changes, the development of knowledge and technology



innovations. Even if today the prevailing role of new technologies almost obliterates all other existing reasons, the changes have always been with us, and have required new criteria both for gathering information and for making it available. We owe to Osborn the 70 year old claim that the future has in store for each generation of librarians the task of doing anew the work done by its predecessors (Osborn).

The contrast is between the strictness of the rules, crucial to the very existence of the catalogue, as well as to its structure, and the flexibility crucial for a varied spectrum of searches. In this contrast, not to be easily reconciled, it is the librarian's task to supply a working tool designed to overcome it. The needs of single persons cannot call for an exhaustive treatment in the catalogue which speaks with a language for all people. The conflict between rigidly enforced rules and the grounds of research must be solved: not even homogeneous groups of readers, like the ones in specific institutions, i.e. special libraries, can obliterate individual needs. We find the same conflict in all social situations, I would say in all human relationships. The conflict is worse nowadays, just when the global village tends to merge and assimilate different types of resources; yet, it is in the system itself that the specific needs of a single library as well as of the single person, become prominent. In a different field, Carlo Ginzburg reminds us the far from recent trend to "conform to a standard, to a loss of diversity, a uniformity that weakened all individual and national traditions" (Ginzburg, p. 126). Raffaele La Capria claims: "We usually prefer drowning all differences into the slow, lazy stream that standardizes, receives and drags everything" while "our time favours only small differences" (La Capria, p. 1328-1330). We cannot but cite here the philosopher from Senegal Alassane Ndaw: "The basic issue is to live and to make contradictions real" (Ndaw). Is there real contradiction in today's situation witnessing

on one side an ever increasing amount of un-organized information accessible by keywords, on the other side the rigid organization of bibliographic systems? Yet people need to make “informed choices” rather than being left “in a state of darkness” as advocated by Vanda Broughton who teaches Classification and Indexing at the University College in London interviewed for *CILIP Update* (Broughton, p. 21-23). She claims the need for this work in the library, a work wrongfully judged no more needed thanks to technology. Other scholars, like Stalberg e Cronin (Stalberg and Cronin, p. 124-137), admit that assessing the cost/value ratio of Bibliographic Control is not easy because the value of results must be accounted for. Roberto Ventura (p. 152) speaks about a “reconciliation between the theoretical and the pragmatic level”; he examines two separate but equally necessary perspectives, of which I would consider prominent the purpose, the motivation of the catalogue, that is pragmatic, while its theoretical aspects are a consequence. I do not plan starting a talk about the often reiterated question whether or not librarianship is a science since we should first define the term *science*. The conflict between the strictness of theory and use may be solved applying rules in a flexible way, although it might imply lack of uniformity, a consequence to be avoided because of the growing bulk of our information systems. This is a conflict to be found in every field as proved by presence of difficulties in determining the priorities between local on one side and national/international standards on the other side. We can see it in a search for information about art objects in the wide area of libraries, archives and museums and art galleries (Lim and Li Liew, p. 484-498). The rights of users, that can lead to different access points by form or by subject will give see references in the former case and alternative subject headings in the latter case. Further access points will be added to the one created by the application of rules. This solution mitigates the criterion of

uncritical treatment which Francesco Barberi talked of and I find it satisfactory. The point is not about changing the rules, rather, it is about assessing the level of exhaustiveness in the analysis of documents (let's call them resources, if you like) and in the number of access points, in alternative offers. Examples of alternative headings are not lacking – even if heretical ones – for access to names of persons (the prefix *de* for French family names and for some Italian ones for aristocracy titles or Icelandic names) and there are repeated uncertainties most of all for semantic access. The same is true in the case of classification, with its doubts related to interdisciplinary resources. These, although not a novelty, are definitely growing in number presently. An example: subjects for fiction works, useful for young readers and a particular section of users, but not so in the academic field. The presence of the item – copy, exemplar – is confirmed by the latest rules; it is the fourth entity in FRBR Group 1, it is widely dealt with in AACR2 and in REICAT. A library that is part of an information system can not only add access points useful for it, it can also underline particular features, either positive or negative ones, in the copy it owns.

Let's limit our talk to the relationship between the subject catalogue, both card and electronic, and the catalogue of which it is an integral part. Today the unity of the catalogue is more manifest because the basic "entry" is a common element to be retrieved through its diverse sets of access points but also in the past the unavoidable physical separation did not rule out conceiving the catalogue as a unitary body. Thus, I do not advocate a reversion to Cutter and his Dictionary Catalogue with its sequence for author, subject, title and form entries – later blown up into separate sequences – rather, a prosecution in conformity with a different praxis in its historical stages. Today the unity of the catalogue is proved by FRBR and RDA, though they have not faced the semantic aspect yet, and a full

and definitive application of them is still far away.

The cultural evolution due to changes in society, which also affects language mutability, adds to the identification and evaluation of a subject or subjects which may be conditioned by the type of collection, the functions of the library or its users, the cultural level and individual needs of the people searching the catalogue. The catalogue is a fixed entity, in it the need for consistency granting that procedures can be repeated, may show in comparison vague areas which expose points that do not meet the needs recently transpired, which will be revised in the future, make obvious a certain delay. It is also at odds with a series of differences which add to today's multifarious needs, for instance of diachronic variations. Entries created for a past culture are added to the need for the catalogue to try and offer retrieval tools satisfying varied requirements. Again, we find the juxtaposition of the ideal of a global consideration to a set of searches related to a well-defined body – one or more collections – and a change in requirements linked both to the present and to different times in the past. This concerns the relationships with the past but must not make us neglect the future. Antonio Scurati wondered: "How can one tell the present when there is only the present?" (Scurati, p. 295). Talking of retrieving the past with our present day vision Ventura wonders: "What about rediscovering the past apparently buried in the past authors when we find in them elements useful in facing issues hotly debated and make them the object of renewed interest?" (Ventura, p. 126). This retrieval of the past for the benefit of present knowledge is quite true but how will documents reflecting learning at different times relate with each other when they have access under one and the same word? Sure a filter by date usually, not always, may be of help. What is modified is the connotation of a term. The cultural changes from one generation to the next one or within a generation, are attested in an article by

Matt Johnson on the deletion of references to *Sexual perversion* from the terms *Homosexuality* and *Lesbianism*; it anticipating by two years the depathologizing of homosexuality by the American Psychological Association in 1974 (Johnson). Something like that took place in Italy in the same period: the librarian to whom was addressed a complaint about a reference from *Omosessualità* to *Perversione sessuale*, could show to that user the list of corrections that were being done in the subject catalogue, among them there was the deletion of that reference.

In the online catalogue, when we state the order of terms in a string we add to the pre-coordinated research the advantages of the post-coordinated one. The latter is the only one available when we are given isolated terms. When there are various subjects in a document these may muddle the Boolean search – not a favourite one for patrons, as proved by inquiries carried out in several countries. The number of terms forming a subject string depends on the number of concepts making up a subject. The card catalogue and the subject indexes were characterized by a limitation in the number of terms, rather random, but this no longer has a motivation. It is confirmed by Joseph Miller, editor of the largely used *Sears List*, now in its 21st edition, interviewed for *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*. Miller perceives it as a “good example of the change in thinking” (Rofofsky Marcus). Then we have the ever present issue of language: the choice and organization of terms is an element that is necessary but not sufficient, since availability of access for users implies the use of the same language. What I talk of is not only the language and terminology used in catalogues but the sum of information embedded in them in order to make searching easier. Therefore, we need the catalogue to be so organized as to allow the uncontrolled language of readers to communicate with the controlled language of the catalogue. This guidance to the use of the catalogue must

be part of its structure as we cannot expect our patrons to study cataloguing rules. This is one of the points behind the limited use of the card subject catalogues when there was no guide in them, no definitions, no linking devices, which were to be found only in the subject indexes used by indexers.

A series of doubts that make one wonder whether cataloguing rules are still needed, whether we must acquire materials when we can retrieve information about them otherwise, or recognize the individual peculiarities of a single library, whether to disown the need for a librarian who chooses, organizes and makes available the library documents, who is willing to give advice to a public that no longer asks for it. Some people see in the virtual library the opposite of the physical one, as if physicality were not a prerequisite for a library. Doubts about the profession, its qualifications and staff training, too. These have always been with us accompanying the evolution of human endeavours, today more than in the past for the lapse of time given to a cultural formation is shorter and shorter; this is particularly true for activities in the field of communication and information. As it is often the case, retrieval of what pertains to the past and may be useful to better understand the present follows the excitement of novelty united to a refusal of past experience. If we restrict our talk to the issues on semantic cataloguing, we acknowledge the need to give information in the form of bibliographic access or direct help to users, and this implies admitting that there is still a need for a linking tool not to retrieve a past culture but to conveniently adjust to a new situation. On the point of rigid opinions we may listen to Alberto Salarelli who talks about the “false myth” of disintermediation” (Salarelli).

We get to one of the most controversial issues: the usefulness of the librarian, even of the catalogue, as tools to link users and information. In his guide to RDA, in a way similar to Broughton’s

thesis, Chris Oliver claims “though we should be wise to think deeply about how to adapt to changing social needs” (Oliver). This confirms that evolution does not obliterate the past but it modifies it transforming it. The first chapters are intended to overcome the fear of novelty, as it is proved by a review of Oliver’s work (Rev. of *Introducing RDA: a guide to the basics*).

Joseph Miller, too, comforts us, near the end of the above mentioned interview, that “there is an amount of good libraries, good cataloguing and good serious cataloguers. We must not give up what we all know is of great worth: cataloguing information”. Patrick Bazin, former head of the Municipal Library in Lyons, now head of the Bibliothèque Publique d’Information in Paris, and Ulrich Johannes Schneider, head of the University Library in Leipzig, in a very interesting conversation agreed that the library – as well as the book – will survive, even in the presence of a plurality of information sources, although losing its *Besonderheit*, with the task of classifying and informing only about its own resources “but the cognitive aspect of this is still to be understood” (Bazin and Schneider), as pointed out by Bazin himself. We can see in this case, as in other ones, that the existence of the printed book, of the library, of the catalogue, of the librarian – questioned or declared close to extinction, is valued by the most qualified experts who do not reckon it a surviving entity or a preservation of the past, but a progress that implies and demands full upgrading. There is no doubt that the reiterated reference to the values of the library and the librarian might seem a worrying sign, a sort of lamentation for a set of activities whose need is fading. An American librarian, answering to the economic grounds voiced by those who would reroute the scanty financial investment wondering if there is still a need for the library catalogue, senses “a dramatic change in the profession”. A change with positive results since the new rules in RDA allow us to get over the

“digital tsunami” thanks to a unitary vision of the catalogue and of the resources, with a flexibility apt to treat its “changing landscape”. Authority control and data recording at a lower level would instead depreciate the information service. A greater workload with fewer resources, just when “the need for cataloguers is growing, now more than ever”, because they “are the link in the chain that helps get information where it needs to be” (Cerbo II). On the issue of survival we may recall Robert Darnton’s words about the future of the book.¹ The tasks of the library are still with us, certainly with a less passive attitude than in the past. Its direct action on its patrons renews and elates its functions, in the academic library for its relationship with the teaching activities, as confirmed by the growing popularity of the *Learning Centres*, in the public library for the services offered to a more and more varied public of users who have in common their appreciation of the library as a reference frame for all the citizens.

¹Darnton is well known in Italy and *Il futuro del libro* is the title of the Italian translation, published by Adelphi in 2011 (*The case for books. Past, present, and future*).

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ABSTRACT: The author reflects upon the work of cataloguing in present times. He wonders how to harmonize the precision and universality of cataloguing rules and the growing of different cultural needs and information behaviours. Against the widespread ideas on "disintermediation" allowed by information and communication technologies, the author reaffirms the crucial role, although with a quite new background, of librarians and cataloguers as intermediaries between users and documents, between citizens and the information world.

KEYWORDS: Bibliographic universe; Cataloging; Intermediation; Librarians; Library theory

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