

Universal Bibliographic Control today: preliminary remarks

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ABSTRACT

Universal Bibliographic Control was formulated in the 1960s and 1970s, and was at the core of international bibliographic productions and exchange in the subsequent decades. However, in a digital ecosystem that is very different from the context in which it was born and thrived, it is important to examine what Universal Bibliographic Control means to the international bibliographic community, that is, the producers and managers of bibliographic – and authority – metadata, today. This paper is meant to invite discussion and reflections and to resonate with the various papers from the International conference on Bibliographic control in the digital ecosystem, organised by the University of Florence in February 2021. It focuses on the future of interoperability and the role of UBC in a democratic society, in the context of mass digital information, and its companion technologies.

KEYWORDS

Universal Bibliographic Control; Metadata; Interoperability; AI.

The International conference on Bibliographic control in the digital ecosystem, organised by the University of Florence in February 2021, was a rare opportunity to examine in depth the idea of Universal Bibliographic Control (UBC), its relevance, the challenges it faces, in an information ecosystem that is so very different from what it was when the concept of UBC was first formulated and formalised in the 1960s and 1970s (Illien and Bourdon 2014, Guerrini 2021).

The scope and magnitude of the conference was of the kind that is seen maybe once a decade, and the last time the topic of Universal Bibliographic Control was examined by an international group of specialists and practitioners of comparable status was, to the best of our knowledge, at the joint open session of the Cataloguing, Bibliography and Classification & Indexing Sections and UNIMARC Strategic Programme of IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, in Lyon, France, in 2014¹.

In 2021, of course, the topic, scope and international make-up of the conference was made all the more timely and relevant by the pandemic and its subsequent cancellation of international meetings. The international bibliographic community had been unable to meet in person to hold its usual discussions at the World Library and Information Congress (WLIC), IFLA's yearly international conference, in 2020. Meanwhile, the information landscape continued its fast-paced evolution, made, if possible, even faster by the increased importance of online communications during the pandemic.

The organisers built a very strong programme in the form of a dialogue between the Italian and international experiences, not confining it to the library world, either. Over the five half-days of the conference, going from the Italian point of view to the international and back gave participants a sounding board and a common thread in the dialectics of global and local, which was conducive to productive discussions.

This article is a formalised version of the opening remarks we were invited to give as Chair of IFLA's Bibliography section. It will examine what Universal Bibliographic Control means to the international bibliographic community, that is, the producers and managers of bibliographic – and authority – metadata, today. Like the speech it derives from, it is meant to invite discussion and reflections and to resonate with the various papers from the conference.

What is Universal Bibliographic Control to us?

During the aforementioned session on Universal Bibliographic Control in the Digital Age: Golden Opportunity or Paradise Lost? in 2014, the question was asked, “Did the digital tide knock UBC out?”. Authors Françoise Bourdon and Gildas Illien noted the widely different ecosystem and the disparition of a formal governing body. But they also concluded that news opportunities had emerged which could form “the nodal point from which UBC's ideals may be invented once again”. So, while Universal Bibliographic Control is admittedly almost 50 years old, has seen a deep evolution since its principles were first formally written down (Anderson 1974), and is now

¹ World Library and Information Congress: 80th IFLA General Conference and Assembly 16-22 August, Lyon, France. Session 86 - *Universal Bibliographic Control in the Digital Age: Golden Opportunity or Paradise Lost?* - Cataloguing with Bibliography, Classification & Indexing and UNIMARC Strategic Programme. <http://library.ifla.org/view/conferences/2014/2014-08-18/315.html>

without a formal governing scheme, we think it is fair to say it still is the framework for our activity. In a way, the principles that presided over its conception and development have become such a fundamental part of bibliographic activities in libraries as to become perhaps largely implicit to librarians. Still, the activity of national bibliographic services contributes to Universal Bibliographic Control. Even if it changed, maybe beyond recognition, it hasn't disappeared but adapted. It shifted as our understanding of the underlying principles changed (be it the basing it on nations, the question of language, the objects of Universal Bibliographic Control themselves, not confined to just books anymore, or the focus on metadata rather than records). But we have noticed, in discussions with colleagues at home and internationally, that it still is the frame of reference for the production and distribution of bibliographic data, even when not explicitly invoked. The proceedings of the International conference on Bibliographic control in the digital ecosystem certainly confirm that observation.

If we examine some of the ways in which Universal Bibliographic Control and the ecosystem in which it exists have evolved, a few questions immediately arise, amongst which we will focus on the future of interoperability and the role of UBC in a democratic society, in the context of mass digital information, and its companion technologies.

Interoperability

The first question that comes to mind is that of interoperability. One of the founding principles of Universal Bibliographic Control is the sharing of bibliographic data. To that purpose, the tools of bibliographic exchange: standards (ISBD) and formats (MARC) were developed. Today's interoperability derives in part from these, but adapted to a completely renewed ecosystem of data exchange, relying on the internet and reaching far outside of the library world. An important change from the initial concept of Universal Bibliographic Control was the recognition of local needs, especially the need to access bibliographic information in one's own language. It modified the original concept, which was more concentrated. This is not just about the question of language, but in a broader sense, the taking into account of specific information needs and local cataloguing practices. Today, the international cataloguing code Resource Description and Access (RDA), which, interestingly, was not created under the auspices of IFLA, but gradually evolved into its current international scope and is now widely accepted as a major instrument for achieving the integration of bibliographic metadata in the semantic web, provides for the local, giving many options to cataloguing agencies on how to record and display information. Will this prove to be a problem on the global scale? Might these local rules become so fragmented as to constitute a challenge to interoperability? The reconciliation of local and global needs has been pointed out (Dunsire 2021²) as one of the main opportunities for the future of library metadata in the digital ecosystem. And indeed, if handled well, this challenge carries the seeds of opportunity. During the conference, one example of this came from the German-speaking countries' experience with the implementation of RDA, and the concept of a "Common core" (Behrens 2021).

² "The challenge for bibliographic control is the reconciliation of globalization and personalization via localization".

Democratic role of UBC

Another important question revolves around knowledge and access to information, and their role in a democratic society³.

Access to the entirety of the intellectual output of a society is an important condition of the democratic debate and a citizen's informed decision-making. This access is, of course, not possible if said output is not described with the appropriate metadata. Universal Bibliographic Control carries the promise to register, organise, and, ultimately, give access to everything. And while the promise is of course never entirely fulfilled, this objective has kept its relevance. Universal Bibliographic Control and the mass information era may have been said to be incompatible, but mass information (and its too painfully obvious pitfalls) underscores the need for the compilation and organisation of information that UBC strives for. That we are in an age of mass information doesn't mean that this work, this ideal, of Universal Bibliographic Control is useless, because it's hopeless, it means that, properly done, it is needed as much as it ever was, as long as we make it fit the new context. What librarians have to bring to the table is decades of reflection and practical experience of this encyclopaedic, universal idea (or ideal), and a framework and practices that have been in place for more than half a century. Whether we call it Universal Bibliographic Control or something else, the underlying principles of bibliographic information produced in accordance with international standards, in a way that is interoperable, accessible, and so on, are still there. We in the library world need to be careful not to let them cut us off from the world outside of libraries, but keep them more open than they have been in the past. With relevant and continuing adaptations, Universal Bibliographic Control remains a useful framework in today's digital ecosystem.

Shifting tides

We are shifting from distributed bibliographic control to shared entity management. This conceptual evolution comes with a reevaluation of libraries' scope of action. In the moving from bibliographic and authority records to entities, librarians have to ask themselves which entities libraries should take responsibility for, what level of quality is promised to users for each entity, and, crucially, how to work with other metadata producers, especially for what libraries can't take complete responsibility for (Leresche 2021, Boulet 2021).

In this new ecosystem, another protagonist has appeared: the machine, in the form of artificial intelligence, whose possibilities libraries and the metadata world is only starting to explore. Experiments around the world, such as Annif and Finto AI (Mödden 2021, Suominen 2021), show both the great potential of these technologies and the great investments (of skill, time, energy and money) they require. Ethical questions will also have to be addressed. Like all technological advances (for example the computerisation of libraries), it will turn out to be useful in its place, not so much reducing the human workload as shifting it. We learned from previous instances that it's important not to embark on technological choices that are specific to libraries, cutting our metadata off from the wider world. This is a *pas de trois*, involving libraries, the wider metadata and information communities, and the machine, not a *pas de deux*.

³ Schreur 2021; Guatelli 2021; Bourke 2021.

Most of us feel that we are living in very chaotic times, professionally speaking. At the French National Library, for instance, we are working at the same time on a new cataloguing code (RDA-FR, a French version of RDA), its application profiles, a new format⁴, and a new cataloguing application, to say nothing of training, etc. This is actually a global issue, as this is happening all over our institutions right now, France being no exception. It is quite challenging, but also potentially very fruitful. As the various projects' progress is parallel in terms of temporality, each one informs the others, in a dialogue, in terms of method. Chaotic it may feel, but from chaos springs creation, as the initiatives and experiments presented at this conference abundantly proved.

⁴ INTERMARC Next Generation, see Peyrard and Roche 2018.

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