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The Italian National Bibliography today

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ABSTRACT

The statistics on the records produced for the Italian National Bibliography (BNI) in the last decade evidence a stable development with a growing trend. In the face of that, there has been a decrease of human resources never seen before in the history of the National Central Library of Florence (BNCF), that has drastically reduced the editorial staff of BNI to few units. The institutional tasks of BNCF, provided by law, have not changed though. Among these is the archival function for the Italian bibliographic production and its representation through adequate cataloguing and bibliographic instruments.

Therefore, in order to either maintain constant or increase BNI from a quantity point of view, by preserving its quality, some variations of a technical and organizational-managerial nature have been recently implemented, pursuing the following:

1. Rapidity of cataloguing; 2. Full implementation of the recommendations of the Central Institute for the General Catalogue of the Italian Libraries and for the Bibliographic Information (ICCU) as regards, for instance, cataloguing regulations, use of the codes of bibliographic qualification, creation and management of the authority files regarding personal names and uniform title; 3. Constant attention to the role of BNCF in the cooperation within the National Library Service (SBN).

There are plans to intervene in some critical difficulties that still remain. The emergency due to Covid-19 pandemic has imposed a de facto meaningful and unpredictable reorganization of the work management (from the legal deposit to BNI and to the BNCF catalogue) through methods that could certainly be maintained even in future.

KEYWORDS

National bibliographies; Italy; National Central Library of Florence.

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1. Introduction and context

Due to an unprecedented reduction in resources, for years, Italian State libraries have been affected by a deep crisis. This also applies to the National Central Library of Florence in its many branches, including of course the sector where the Italian National Bibliography (BNI) is developed. The group of cataloguers that process BNI is by now reduced to a few staff units. These people, while being indeed few, are very competent and skilled, thanks to a very long professional traineeship carried out in close cooperation with those who made the history of the library science in our Country, such as famous librarians, who, even if retired, often continue to offer, either directly or indirectly, their collaboration. The knowledge of this little group of highly motivated persons draws, day after day, a new vital sap from the job itself, by comparing them in a challenging way with living and always changing reality of the publishing production that these people are called to represent so as to benefit the national and international community of the users.

Indeed, despite the undoubtedly dramatic and even incredible staffing situation the institutional tasks of BNCF, determined by law, have not changed. Such are the tasks that characterize the national libraries and, among them, is thus the establishment and the maintenance of the national bibliographic production's archive. An additional task is also the representation of the national bibliographic production through appropriate cataloguing and bibliographic tools, something which no country wants to renounce or to independently administer through its own national bibliographic agency, that is supported everywhere with adequate human and financial resources.

2. Timeliness

The aspect to which we pay more attention is the timeliness of the cataloguing of the books that the publishers send to the legal deposit office and that are selected, in order to be included into BNI. The promptness of the cataloguing plays a decisive role on the users' fulfilment (whichever group they belong to). This is why it has an absolute priority; yet, among the reasons why it is object of particular interest, is also the need not to create too many bottlenecks and, above all, arrears, within the circulation of the books processed in the library.

Cataloguing at BNCF, and, therefore, also at BNI, is directly implemented through the net of the National Library Service (SBN) by using the software SBNweb (https://opac.sbn.it/opacsbn/opac/iccu/free.jsp). BNCF is one of the 6590 libraries that participate in the SBN net, and so the records processed for the catalogue of both BNCF and BNI also feed the catalogue of SBN and are immediately visible to other libraries of the net as well as, after a short time, in the OPAC of SBN. The records processed for BNI are visible within 24 hours even on OPAC of BNCF, which, in its new version, has been issued only a few months ago (http://opac.bncf.firenze.sbn.it/bncf-prod/).

The selection of the books for BNI in the premises of the legal deposit is carried out once or twice a week. After the selection, the volumes are moved from the legal deposit to the offices of BNI in order for them to be catalogued; normally this happens in a very short time. The availability on the online catalogue of the selected items for BNI is therefore almost immediate. It's worth noting that the bibliographic items created *ex-novo* by BNCF within the net SBN are numerous, which witnesses how quick the book cataloguing on behalf of BNCF is. Just to give an idea, consider that the records of new creation on behalf of BNCF are currently about 784,000 out of 18,320,000

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present in SBN. These items are not represented by the bibliographic records of the documents stored in both SBN and BNCF's libraries, which are obviously many more (since BNCF receives everything that is published), but only by the items that BNCF has created first, compared to other libraries of the net.

The important thing is that within about ten days the books selected for BNI are catalogued and available on OPAC BNCF and on OPAC SBN. There are no arrears.

Yet, in order that the books described by BNI, already visible on OPAC, may show even the semantic contents they were assigned by using the Decimal Dewey Classification and the *Nuovo soggettario*, more time is needed. Indeed, as is well known, the subject indexing is a particularly onerous activity, even if no international bibliographic agency renounces it.

The delay, with which the information of semantic genre of the books catalogued in BNI is shown, is currently equal to a few months, but it is planned to eliminate it shortly with a specific project.

3. Coverage

The other aspect that has a huge importance for every national bibliography and, of course, for the users is thoroughness, that is to say, the quantity of books included every year in the bibliography in relation to the publishing production of the Country.

Books published in the current year and those published up to two years earlier are catalogued within BNI, so in the BNI year 2020 books published in 2020, 2019 and 2018 are included.

Books, which, due to their characteristics, should be indicated in BNI but are not sent by publishers to the legal deposit within said terms, are catalogued by the cataloguing office of BNCF. That means that a special series of BNI files for the related publications does not exist.

In the last five years the number of bibliographic items issued for BNI, referring only to monographs, has been in average about 12.000 per year. This do not include dissertations, periodicals, printed music and other material.

The basic question is how to assess the production of BNI in terms of completeness with respect to the Italian book production. In other words, how representative BNI is as for that. Yet, the concept of bibliographic coverage is therefore not so strict and has to be carefully assessed, in relation to the different typologies of publishing production.

A way to assess these data is to compare them with the statistical data on the Italian publishing production. According to the ISTAT data on the book works published in Italy, in 2018 the Italian publishing houses have published 75,758 titles (https://www.istat.it/it/dati-analisi-e-prodotti/banche-dati/statbase).

This is the number of books to refer to, but, actually, the publications excluded from BNI have always been numerous. In fact, BNI is a selective bibliography. There are several kinds of publications that normally are not reported in BNI. Such publications are of course catalogued by BNCF but only in the catalogue of BNCF (and they are therefore present even on SBN) or they are handled by sets.

The complete list of such publications, not included in BNI, is the following:

1. Official publications of public administrations and international organizations, unless they have an autonomous monographic character.

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2. Non-official publications of laws, decrees, regulations, work contracts, etc., without any comment or addressed to particular categories of readers. The sole exceptions are certain collections of specialized publishers.

3. Publications of parties, unions, chambers of commerce, cultural and religious associations, etc. not of general interest;

4. Pastoral letters and other official documents of religious authorities;

5. Minor religious publications;

6. Consumer literature and reissues of romance novels;

7. Publications not addressed to commerce, but disseminated outside the normal channels of sale, in the form of subscriptions, enrolments, etc.

8. Reissues (unless the publication of reference has never been described), pre-prints, *specimina* and the likes.

9. Complimentary books or gifts, if reissues of previous publications, even if presented in different packages;

10. Manuals and texts for nursery schools, primary schools of first and second level;

11. Biographical scripts for limited use, of either occasional or godly character;

12. Almanacs and the likes of limited interest;

13. Patents;

14. Excerptions, even if presented in only one series;

15. Catalogues of trade fairs and shows prevailingly of commercial interest, catalogues of private galleries, house programs, tourist material;

16. Editorial catalogues and antique catalogues for non-historical or scientific purposes;

17. Publications of promotional and commercial nature, unless they represent the sole or main source of information in special fields, such as complete catalogues of stamps, coins, art objects;

18. Printed music, described in the two half-yearly dedicated files;

19. Texts of lessons and similar materials, in case it clearly appears that they are not addressed to the external dissemination;

20. Speeches and interventions connected to particular events, separately published;

21. Cartographical material.

The material not included in BNI due to choices of publishing policies is thus a lot.

Still in relation to 2018, it is possible to select some typologies of publications, and, by referring to the ISTAT data, it is also possible to verify the relevant quantity, just to give a concrete idea of the numbers we are talking about, without going into the details, which, in this case would be too many.

Schoolbooks, for instance, are 9,786 and children's books are 6,440. Thus, the remaining 59,332 publications, which, aside from reissues and reprints (that are however almost always included in the BNI), decrease to 46,718 publications.

In addition, there are multiple publications, like for instance, text books for primary schools (243), cookery books and recipes (396), books classified as 'entertainment', games and sport (1,004), tourist guides (422), adventure books and detective stories (4,328), comics (713) and others of non-specified genre (1,672) for a total of 8,778 publications. We fall to 37,940, a number still much higher than what remains once selected the afore-said listed items.

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Such list is useful only to give an idea of what numbers we are talking about, but many books belonging to such ISTAT categories are actually included in the BNI (for instance, but not *in toto*, cookery books, tourist guides, detective stories, adventure books and many others).

All this to say that, once eliminated all these typologies of materials, both, in part, reissues and reprints, the remaining books still to be catalogued for BNI are actually those that are catalogued, and that the coverage of BNI is good and representative. Of course, according to the historically adopted criteria, which, although selective, are also fully similar to those adopted by the operators of the same sector, working for both national and foreign libraries. Said operators, while making selections of qualitative type on the material to be reported, do not catalogue at the same level than BNI and are not part of the SBN net. They often resort, in a large percentage of cases, to editorial announcements, which is fine, though for different purposes. In any case, it must be declared and quantified otherwise we shall not supply the users with a quality service.

To end up with this important matter, it must be noticed that many other typologies of books, like all those excluded according to the above-mentioned criteria, not recorded within BNI, are catalogued in BNCF. Just to provide an example, in 2019 the office for the cataloguing at BNCF has catalogued about 24,500 monographs that, summed up to almost 13,000 of BNI, bring the total number of catalogued monographs in 2019 to 37,500, which is a number of all respect if compared to the data provided by ISTAT on the annual publishing production in Italy.

4. The human resources

In order to face the more and more serious and chronic lack of staff, some measures have been taken in these last years:

a) Procurement contracts for the cataloguing to external bodies.
    The procurement contracts for the cataloguing to external bodies is a largely known and practical solution. This has both positive and negative aspects. On the one side, such solution guarantees both flexibility and the possibility to 'close up the leak' immediately. On the other side, there is the demand of the quality control that involves BNI at a higher level, even if it obviously involves all; it especially involves BNI because of its role as an Italian bibliographic agency and for the fact that all the books indicated in BNI are catalogued in the SBN net at a "super" level (i.e. level 95), including items marked by the higher authority code. Such records cannot be modified but by the central Institute for the General Catalogue (ICCU) of the Ministry of the cultural Heritage. Whereas mistakes are always possible, said records should not contain any: in other words, they have to meet the requirements of greatest authoritativeness (and here we come to the third key term that must characterize a national bibliography in addition to timeliness and thoroughness/coverage). Both enterprises and cooperatives operating in this field ensure a good level of cataloguing, yet, not always the very high level of specialization required for cataloguing in BNI and that implies heavy investment in staff training.
    This is why we must pay a special attention to the control of the correctness of the cata-

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loguing in BNI and, above all, to the alignment of the whole staff. While neglecting additional details, I would like instead to underline that it is not sufficient that the institution may control the plan and the total structure of the service if assigned to external collaborators. On such subject I would like to underline how, due to the reduced permanent staff at BNCF, the quality control subtracts resources in an unsustainable measure and poses a first insuperable limit to the quantity of work that is possible to outsource.

The other limit arises from the maximum fee to be provided for, as established by the Procurement Code.

All this basically means that each tender cannot last more than one year and that, after this term, a new procurement procedure must be performed; in addition, it means that the external staff, in part or completely, changes and that the training work for the external collaborators is each time fully frustrated.

The Covid-19 pandemic has added a further difficulty, by decreasing the number of persons who can work in co-presence in the same premises and thus obliging to temporarily suspend the external collaborations and to seek difficult management solutions.

In spite of the recent important re-adaptations of the rooms to be addressed to the storages, logistic issues that affect BNCF, as well as the scarcity of space in which catalogued books are to be stored, are a further obstacle to the research of viable organization solutions.

b) Cooperation with specialized libraries

Still to cope with the lack of personnel, another important initiative recently taken in BNI was to seek the collaboration with other libraries, somehow similar to BNCF, for the cataloguing of the books reported in BNI. At the distance of a few years, since the beginning of this collaboration, it has been possible to draw up a first balance. It is about a very positive and rewarding experience, which is fully a part of the cooperation and collaboration spirit that characterizes SBN itself. The contribution of the institutes that participate in this activity is however changeable and, in its whole, in a very low percentage. In addition, even in this case, it deals with a very demanding coordination and verification job.

To end with the topic concerning the human resources, every effort has been made to adopt measures of both procedural and organizational engineering to face the above-mentioned dramatic shortage of personnel.

5. Relationships with SBN and library cooperation

The collaboration with SBN is a fact of huge and positive importance for both BNCF itself and the other libraries of the net, because the institutions take mutually advantage on the common job by allowing a considerable saving of working time.

Since the cataloguing in BNCF occurs solely through 'books in hand' and in BNI at the highest level of authority provided by SBN, it can scarcely be said how BNCF does a considerable maintenance job for the catalogue of the National Library Service through the revision of the records processed by other libraries and through the interventions on all the components of the network that gives rise to the card itself.

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One of the decisions recently made was to progressively eliminate every discrepancy out of the application of the rules and of the cataloguers' usage between BNI and ICCU, not only to minimize the needs of intervention on the captured records but also in consideration of the positive value which the uniformity of the choices has in a shared catalogue.

The interventions that are carried out on the records 'captured' by SBN for BNI are very many and I do not fear to exaggerate by assuming that on about 80% of the capture cards it is necessary to intervene more or less significantly.

Listed below are the most frequent and meaningful interventions that are sufficient for me to mention:

- *Ex-novo* publication or updating of the authority file of the personal names with reference to all the books catalogued for BNI which are thus many more than the produced cards.

- In the authority file the codes of the Countries and languages are always enhanced (the code of languages is unfortunately absent also in great part of the cards at a level 97) and the fields "Dating", "Information note", "Sources" and "Cataloguer note" are always compiled through all the proper researches, according to what provided by ICCU guidelines, as for the drawing up of the authority files;

- All data reported in the authority files are monitored on the bibliographic directories normally in usage, such as – for instance – the national bibliographies of various Countries, the catalogues of great libraries, biographical dictionaries, encyclopedia, both national and international authority files, etc., and the connection is executed in all provided and applicable cases;

- If available, the code ISNI is added. In this regard, I remark that in ISNI numerous duplicates are present. When two ISNI numbers are attributed to the same entity, it is not simple to decide which one has to be included in the registration of the name that is being processed. Therefore, comparisons on VIAF shall be carried out, and whenever more incidences of the same name, complemented with an ISNI number, are found even in VIAF, the incidence to which more libraries are connected, and/or the most appropriate one, will be chosen;

- A very remarkable chapter is that of the link to the uniform title, which also constitutes a recent entry for BNI as well as the BNCF catalogue. Until last year, such link was created only for the translations into Italian of foreign works or for ancient works. At present, in full compliance with the FRBR scheme, we follow the SBN regulations, which include the creation of a uniform title in any case. The decision to connect a uniform title for all catalogued publications (and subsequently trans-codified into BNI), in compliance with what provided by ICCU and following the Italian Regulations on the cataloguing for authors (Reicat) for the choice, has definitely caused a remarkable burden of work and an extension of the cataloguing times. It is furthermore important to notice that the application of the rule in SBN is often carried out in a mechanical way, so that the uniform title adopted for the Italian publications, not in translations, always replicates the title itself, by often reporting even the complement of the title, something apparently not always correct. Recently, it has not been rare that uniform titles of foreign works translated into Italian were the Italian title itself. This also implies the need to intervene often in the corrections, fusions, additions of links to variable uniform titles, and so on. It would definitely be preferable that

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ICCU organized other courses especially addressed to the registrations of the authorities. Indeed, the application of the guidelines is not certainly something to be executed though automatisms. Suffice it to think of the complexity of the qualifications and other elements used to distinguish identical titles.

- As per the authority files, BNI participates in the ICCU working groups for the authority files of the names and on the uniform titles. Such interventions are executed by single users who intervene on the authority entries, not through the contextual updating of the Hub database, but rather directly operating on the collective catalogue by means of centralized working methods, that is to say within the so-called "direct interface";

- Proceeding with the reporting of the significant interventions that need be done more frequently on the records 'captured' by the SBN net, the link to an institute is created, still in case of anonymous books, or, in case the books have no main liability, if they are present in the title page, in the cover page or in another relevant position. Such is one of the most frequent interventions on the card 'captured' by SBN (because the link is almost never present), and, due to the controls they bring, said interventions are also very onerous;

- The link to an institute is created even in the case of a series with a generic title just published by that institute;

- Unfortunately, in SBN the cases of records without any element of controlled access are more and more frequent, also when created by libraries of primary importance, even when it is absolutely clear that there are either major or secondary liabilities;

- as already mentioned before, if necessary, the notes are added and, in case there are any, both their adequacy and homogeneousness are controlled;

- the codes of bibliographical qualification are indicated in all the events provided by the regulations on SBN cataloguing;

- relator codes for all the names linked to a new entry are always developed;

- as per the genre of the resource, whose indication is optional, in BNI the codes J "Biographies", S "Exhibitions" and Z "Conference proceedings" are indicated;

- The application of the code "Typology of literary text" has been included.

- The form of both the content and the kind of mediation is obviously indicated (which is indeed mandatory);

- the codes of designation of the type of support are indicated, by using the list of the codes MARC21, managed by the Library of Congress, also used in RDA;

- The link to names, even for not previously considered secondary liabilities, is carried out: such as preface authors, postface authors, and so on;

- Lastly thanks to an important innovation, the indices of the BNI subjects, starting from 2015, have been activating links to the terms of both Thesaurus and New Subject Indexing.

According to the above list, the number and quality of the interventions carried out in SBN are actually high and bring to a very meaningful increase of the granularity of the catalogue, as well as to an enhancement of research opportunities.

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6. COVID-19 emergency

The Covid-19 emergency has imposed a radical reorganization of the work. At first, without any prior experience in the sectors of both BNI and cataloguing, the method of remote working has become mandatory for everyone. The access to the necessary devices was made possible in record time by the IT staff of BNCF within 24 hours. The main problem has been the transportation of the books from BNCF to the cataloguers' homes and vice-versa. This required the willingness on behalf of both the workers and their families. Additional difficulties have been, and still are due to the inadequacy of the equipment available for the employees, as well as the inadequacy of the net, the uncomfortable spaces within their homes, the lack of ergonomic equipment and furniture at their disposal.

The lack of all the needed controlling devices (not everything is available in the web), that, at times, makes it necessary to complete the cataloguing on-site. Both bureaucracy and the restrictive interpretation of the regulation are ever enemies: perhaps, it might be unavoidable, but the adopted registration of the withdrawn and returned books takes precious time away.

Certainly, the emergency has compelled the administration to implement this new working method, something they had been talking about for years, without succeeding in going beyond the stages of the mere projects, more or less created *ad personam.* Now we are able to assess accurately its impact on the library organization and on the real lives of the employees, which has been a huge step forward in only a few months.

Among the so many considerations that can be made, I would like to point out how the Covid emergency has imposed verification processes of the very stringent workflows that makes it possible to assess usefully the daily-executed work.

7. Future perspectives and conclusions

There are also criticism and, above all, objectives that we should set, if we had the necessary human resources to reach them.

Among these, I underline the need to optimize the fruition of the BNI product, too hidden within the site of BNCF, and, therefore, complicated to consult. Yet, what is worth it for BNI is also worth it for other national libraries, that is to say the tendency to incorporate and merge with the catalogues of the national libraries that produce them. Although, this is really a primary target and something on which other national libraries work really very well.

Again, BNI has been making its own data available in PDF format since 2012 and, in XML and UNIMARC, since 2015. The availability of BNI even in RDF format is so far a goal to be reached. We should work in order to give again more space, to enhance the contents and even to change the separate series, besides those of monographs: the periodicals, the printed music and the doctoral thesis.

As already said, a goal to reach as soon as possible is to increase the timeliness with which even the information of semantic type is made available, together with the descriptive record of the books. In conclusion, I think that, from what above described, it seems clear that through the adoption of the multiple measures of organization and procedural character, a very small and more and more exiguous, yet skilled, expert and motivated group of people was able to contrast, in my opinion amazingly, a completely adverse situation.

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They made it possible to increase the grade of thoroughness, timeliness, authority of the Italian national bibliography, at the level that has always characterized it and according to absolute adequate standards, as provided by the National Library Service.

Let's not ignore that the situation is by now extremely critical and that what has been possible so far to do will however not be so for much longer.

The critical mass needed to transform the ideas and the encouragements into concrete projects is going to fail, also because the burden of the daily work has become too overwhelming and the situation is too difficult for everybody. Not only for us at BNI but also for the other sectors of BNCF, as well as for the other organizations with which we should collaborate, starting from the other libraries of the net and of the central Institute of the Ministry itself.

The risk is that a huge and unique heritage made of knowledge, experience, skills, inheritance of generations of librarians, will be lost, without the possibility that it be conveyed to those who will follow. It would be an unrecoverable damage for the world of libraries, for culture, for our Country.