

Cataloging Issues: Online Resources

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Catalogers have their own [notions] of what they consider epochal events. 1475 saw the invention of printing; 1673 saw the very first serial (proceedings of the...); 1841 saw Panizzi writing the very first rules for cataloging at the British Museum, which serve as the foundation for modern library cataloging rules; 1962 saw the development of the MARC communications format. 1967 saw the publishing of the first edition of AACR and now, 2002, is the year where a brand new form of publishing issuance, integrating resources, is codified in AACR. Discussing this new form—what they are, where they came from, how catalogers handle them, and what I expect to happen to them in the future—is what I will cover today.

Let me backtrack a bit and tell you how descriptive catalogers approach their work. Before they can transcribe one word, they need to start identifying a format and a bibliographic level/or form of issuance. Rules for the various formats are covered in the first part of AACR. This section contains 13 chapters, each one, after the first, devoted to description of the peculiarities of a particular format—such as books, maps, electronic resources, and serials.

Formats in Cataloging rules

Since 1967 the rules have been relatively calm. Sure we had to incorporate rules for what are now called electronic resources, but in general the various formats were pretty stable. Calm, that is, until the advent of the Web. Early on, librarians created static lists of Web resources, but soon the realities of scale made these lists too onerous to maintain, and the advantages of database driven lists from actual cataloging records became the norm (or should be!).

At first we were pretty much in a cataloging free-for-all as far as cataloging Web resources were concerned. Let me give you a visual demonstration of what occurred. [hand the towel with the chapters in bib block letters to Tad. All are firmly attached except SERIALS. I will shake the towel and then SERIALS will open to become “CONTINUING RESOURCES.”]

Resources, especially free resources, available on the Web have an extraordinary capacity to change and, alas, even disappear. Unfortunately, as Tad can attest, government documents exhibit both of these attributes to a high degree. There are webmasters who are bibliographically aware, and there are webmasters who are not.

New Chapter 12 for Continuing Resources

But a cataloger's natural tendency IS to organize—and organize we did. With the result that in August of this year ALA has published the completely renamed, reorganized, reconfigured, re-everything chapter 12 on serials. Actually I just learned last week that the publishing has been delayed. Some of us are fortunate to have a CD-ROM product called Cataloger's Desktop and it is available there. As a consequence of trying to figure out a way of cataloging web resources this chapter has been renamed “Continuing resources” and it has expanded to incorporate a new concept—that of the integrating resources.

Definition of integrating resource

The new accepted definition of integrating resources is that it is a bibliographic resource that is added to or changed by updates that do not remain discrete and are integrated into the whole.” In the print world, loose-leaf publications are integrating resources. Until this year, loose-leaf publications were basically outside AACR and the MARC format. Now they have been promoted to become true members of the bibliographic family.

Another term that you will hear your catalogers use often is “iteration.” This refers to a “snapshot” of an integrating resource as it stands at a particular time. These two terms—integrating resource and iteration—are now accepted as part of the standard cataloging parlance! I know it takes a while before it begins to roll off the tongue with ease. It is a direct result of the peculiarities of the Web. Cataloging records are normally stable—and this is a drawback when it comes to integrating resources as they change. Very few agencies send catalogers an email, announcing that they are going to change a title or a URL. Part of a self defense mechanism catalogers have adopted is to note the date on which their particular description is based.

Visualize a database on the Web—you have both the condition of a single bibliographic item (that’s the monograph part) AND the condition of being able to change that single item over time (thus serial-like). When changes are made to true serials, they are added to the journal in successive parts that stay as discrete parts. Contrast this to changes made to integrating resources, databases, websites. These changes can be made to the beginning, the middle, wherever they please—and then they can readily be absorbed into the whole. Thus they have BOTH monographic and serial tendencies. My former boss used to call them “bibliographic hermaphrodites.” [show the power point slide/transparency of the BH]

Catalog Dept. organization

I wanted to talk a little more about how the changes in chapter 12 have affected catalogers. Even though the cataloging of these Integrating Resources is now codified in this chapter 12, it has not been an easy fit. The past distinction between monograph and serial has been an important one because different rules are applied to the description, the entry, and how a change over time is accommodated. In all but the smallest cataloging departments, work is normally divvied up between serial cataloging and monographic cataloging. And now we have integrating resources as a third “condition of issuance.” Who catalogs THEM?

It has been my experience that catalog departments that include integrating resources on the serials side will have better luck. Unfortunately until next year, the bibliographic level (and I’ll explain that term shortly) that integrating resources is cataloged with is the monographic and thus the monographic catalogers seem to be the target catalogers. The concept of having a dynamic record because the resource is dynamic is something that a serialist takes for granted but can be somewhat foreign to a monographic cataloger.

Latest or earliest description

In setting up rules for the description of integrating resources, we had to answer the very basic question of should the description—the title, publisher, etc., of an integrating resource be based on the latest information available or the first? It so happens that Integrating Resources are described based on the latest iteration that appears whereas Serials base their description based

on the first issue available. I know some of you are thinking, why should there be a difference? The reason for this is simple—the bibliographic description of a serial continues to be accurate as the individual issues go on one by one. If the title of a serial changes, then the current record is closed off and a new bibliographic record is used for the new title. In online databases, websites, etc., the earlier bibliographic information ceases to exist thus the record is now inaccurate. We can certainly maintain a title history in a note field, but the actual bibliographic description changes to the latest existing form.

Uniform titles

Another question discussed at great length was should we use a uniform title on integrating resources? (Serials use uniform titles for the express purpose of differentiating between serial titles, whereas monographs use uniform title for the purpose of bringing like content together. At the present time we are not using uniform titles for integrating resources, as there is no point in collocating titles that don't exist anymore. The new Chapter on Continuing Resources goes painstakingly through each rule separating when necessary the rules for serial description followed directly by the treatment for materials treated as integrating resources.

Bibliographic levels

In addition, although catalogers usually catalog their work at the title level, there are also other bibliographic levels/type of issuance (or levels of “granularity”) they can use. To explain this—here's an example. [Look at Ex. 1. This is a collection level record used to catalog a group of items that were not originally published together. Usually the cataloger finds a common thread. For example, in the case of government documents, they may have been produced by a single agency. The library may decide as a cost saving measure not to catalog them on the usual one-by-one basis but to use one bibliographic record to describe them as a group. Often a contents note lists the individual titles in this made-up group, but not always.

On the opposite end, at one point I was asked to catalog everything in our then chancellor's CV right down to individual chapters in a book and articles by him in specific journal issues. These represent “component part” records, wherein the item cataloged is part of a larger physical item.

At some point next year—should be around July—the utilities and the vendors will be adding a new bibliographic level to the current mix of monographs, serials, component parts, and collection level records. When this happens, the transition and integration of “integrating resources” into the cataloging rules will be complete.

Future of integrating resources cataloging

Do I think it will work? I like all the decisions that have been made—latest description, new bibliographic level—and I don't want to sound like a Gloomy Gus, but I have a feeling that being able to make the connection between earlier and later “iterations” of a particular integrating resource will be extremely chancy. In a sense, one would really notice if a physical book turned green and sprouted 50 pages, but because a resource is on the web, changes are a lot harder to detect. Sometimes the versions will be noticed because the URL won't change, but I also think that there will be a number of “orphaned” no-longer-valid records in OCLC (and in our catalogs) as eventually URLs and iterations fall by the wayside. But the good side to all this is the fact that maintenance of URLs is becoming much more routine.

What can you as good document librarian citizens do to help? I certainly recommend that you help us out by setting up a good working relationship with your friendly catalogers so that you can notify them when online resources begin to stray from the cataloging record that describes them.

Thank you!