

LC Bib Futures—Is It Our Future, Too?

By Diane I. Hillmann

One of this fall's most interesting happenings was the release of the draft report of the Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control (since replaced by the final report). [1] The WG had been established late in 2006 to:

- *Present findings on how bibliographic control and other descriptive practices can effectively support management of and access to library materials in the evolving information and technology environment*
- *Recommend ways in which the library community can collectively move toward achieving this vision*
- *Advise the Library of Congress on its role and priorities*

Interest in the Working Group's efforts had been whetted for almost a year, as the WG held three all day "hearings" at sites across the country: Mountain View, CA (March 8, 2007), Chicago, IL (May 9, 2007) and Washington, DC (July 9, 2007). Each hearing had a focus on a different set of issues, and a variety of speakers were invited to address those issues (full disclosure: I was invited to "testify" at the second hearing in Chicago). The second and third hearings were webcast live (though some users had difficulties watching because of bandwidth issues on one end or another), as was the presentation of the draft report to the Library of Congress on November 13, 2007. To continue the use of terms from the legislative realm, the WG was attempting to do "fact-finding" or at least gathering informed opinion at that stage of their work.

The library blogosphere took up some of the ideas presented in the testimony and drove some good discussion from it but it wasn't until the draft came out that it became clear how intense the interest really was. The fact that the presentation of the draft to LC would be webcast live was well publicized, and so many signed on to watch that most potential viewers were just unable to get in. Library blogs and lists smoked with frustration, and LC managed to put up the webcast files in record time. Time for comments was an extremely compressed few weeks, because of delays in getting the draft out. But an amazing number of individuals and groups managed to digest the almost-fifty page report, come to a consensus, and provide useful comments to the Working Group by the deadline. [Those of you interested in my take on the draft report can find my comments here:

http://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=dn8z3gs_51dsqc77&hl=en

The original plan was to have the final report available for discussion by ALA Midwinter, but given that it was released on Thursday, January 9th, when most Midwinter attendees were already in transit to Philadelphia, most discussion sessions began with an update about where changes had occurred between draft and final. But even a cursory look at the meeting schedules in Philadelphia highlighted the intense interest in the conclusions of this high level group. Their interest was understandable, because in a very real way, this group was describing not just the future of bibliographic control as it applied to the Library of Congress, but by extension the library community as well.

The Big Picture and the Big Bombshell

The findings and recommendations of the WG fell into five categories:

1. Increase the Efficiency of Bibliographic Production and Maintenance
2. Enhance Access to Rare, Unique, and Other Special Hidden Materials
3. Position our Technology for the Future
4. Position our Community for the Future
5. Strengthen the Library and Information Science Profession

In general, the discussion on the details of most of the recommendations centered on whether or not work was already in progress for some of the recommendations, and whether or not the WG was looking far enough outside the experience of the library community for its solutions. I also commented a few times on the tendency of the recommendations toward more blue ribbon panels, more “research,” and more top down standards development, which seems too often to attempt to design the barn after the horse has left for Las Vegas. The WG was very clear in the Midwinter meetings attended by members (there were many) that they were not charged to get into details about how the recommendations should be realized, and although this point was cause for frustration for both those who agreed and those who didn't, it wasn't really arguable.

But the recommendation that caused the most furor, both during the comment period and during Midwinter discussions, was the following:

3.2.5 Suspend Work on RDA

3.2.5.1 JSC: Suspend further new developmental work on RDA until a) the use and business cases for moving to RDA have been satisfactorily articulated, b) the presumed benefits of RDA have been convincingly demonstrated, and c) more, large-scale, comprehensive testing of FRBR as it relates to proposed provisions of RDA has been carried out against real cataloging data, and the results of those tests have been analyzed (see 4.2.1 below)

3.2.5.2 JSC: Utilize the time afforded by the previous recommendation to revisit work already completed in light of the criticisms and concerns described above. Actions undertaken should include, but not necessarily be limited to: addressing issues of readability, including language, formatting of examples, and navigation; reconsidering variance from ISBD organization and conventions, articulating the case for variances retained; addressing issues of ease of use, including navigation;²³ and addressing concerns about usability, training, etc.

3.2.5.3 LC, JSC, and DCMI: Work jointly to specify and commission exploratory work to model and represent a Bibliographic Description Vocabulary, drawing on the work of FRBR and RDA, the Dublin Core Abstract Model, and appropriate semantic Web technologies (e.g., SKOS). Some preparation for this work has already been done in joint discussion of JSC and DCMI.

There were a number of issues that made this recommendation problematic. For one, the RDA effort is under the aegis of the Committee of Principals (CoP), consisting of representatives of the national libraries of the U.S., U.K., Canada and Australia (this the Anglo-American legacy of the last century of cataloging rule development). The Joint Steering Committee for the Development of RDA (the “JSC”

that this recommendation is aimed at) is the operational level of the effort, where working drafts are discussed and released for comment, etc. The ALA Committee on Cataloging: Description and Access (known by its acronym CC:DA) is where the U.S. review of the drafts, discussion of their implications and compilation of feedback actually happens.

What this means, of course, is that the JSC can't suspend RDA, only the CoP can do that, and they made it clear in a firm press release after the draft report was released that they will not do so. [2] Of course, the Library of Congress could conceivably withdraw from the effort and the CoP, which would effectively mean that the U.S. library community would cease to have an avenue to have any effect on RDA development. It's hard to see how that would be a good thing.

The Library of Congress has put into place some review committees that will determine which of the Working Group's recommendations they will accept and which they will not. There was some visible collapse of LC's united front on the RDA suspension issue surfacing during the course of Midwinter discussions, but now that everyone has gone back home the issue is in the hands of LC's committees and we'll probably not be able to get many glimpses behind the screen again.

Another reason that the Working Group's recommendation is problematic is that the JSC has finally come up with an organizational structure that meets its own goal to tie the RDA firmly to the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR). This is the third reorganization of RDA, but it was greeted with a many positive comments in addition to a great sigh of relief. For some of us who had been alternately criticizing the past decisions and pushing for some better ones prospectively, this seemed very much like an important turning point.

You'll note that the third recommendation under the heading "Suspend Work on RDA" talks about the work emanating from last Spring's meeting between JSC and DCMI. The months since then have been spent attempting to raise money to work on the first two tasks agreed on by the group at that meeting: building an RDA Element Vocabulary, and pulling from the drafts the RDA Value Vocabularies (those smaller sets of terms to be used in descriptions) for formal expression outside the RDA text. This work is finally beginning and by the time this column is published there should have been some formal announcements about funding and instructions for keeping up with that effort.

It's still not entirely clear to me why this particular recommendation turned up amongst the mixed bag of reasonable recommendations and stodgy calls for more "research," but one clue was dropped by Bob Wolven, one of the Working Group members, who spoke to a group of catalogers during Midwinter. He pointed out that nobody would have paid much attention to their concerns about RDA development and implementation if they had called for anything less than suspension. Good point, but it begs the question of what unintended consequences might evolve from the pressure of that recommendation. One story to illustrate this: a librarian reported to me that she'd asked her catalog system vendor what they were doing to prepare for RDA, and the response was, "But RDA is going to be suspended, right?"

In CC:DA, nobody paid much attention to the recommendation—there was work to do and the schedule was tight. I was happy to see that the discussions on open issues had ratcheted up a few levels from the overly granular to the important broader ones still on the table after the most current reorganization. There were still complaints about the style, worries about specific wording—but most of the wordsmithing had moved to the wiki, where such concerns are tracked. It will still be tight getting the RDA text to the publishers on time and the result will be far from perfect, although we have been promised that a version of the web tool will be viewable prior to Annual. It will also be a

challenge to get the formal RDA Element Vocabulary and the Value Vocabularies ready for use by those who'd rather not have to flatten their data into MARC, and those deliverables, too, will not be perfect out of the gate. But we'll be a lot closer to where we need to be, without having to stop and wait for the research nobody has started yet to tell us the obvious: that we still need experience with FRBR to figure out how to use it effectively.

There was some speculation as well that the push for this recommendation was driven less by concerns about the development process than fear about the costs of implementation, particularly the pressure for early implementation occasioned by plans announced by the Library of Congress itself. This is certainly legitimate—those of you with long memories will recall that AACR2 was published in 1978 but not implemented until 1981, after years of planning and training. It's unlikely that the implementation of RDA will happen on quite so monolithic a scale, but that said, there hasn't yet been much in the way of concrete implementation discussions that goes beyond a basic Chicken Little response. It's very likely, too, that real implementation planning can't happen without OCLC, but not much has yet been revealed from that quarter about where they stand. My recommendation? Stay tuned.

[1] Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control. Available at:
<http://www.loc.gov/bibliographic-future/>

[2] The Committee of Principals for the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR) and Resource Description and Access (RDA). Response to Library of Congress' Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control. December 2007. Available at: <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/jsc/cop-lcwgibcontrol.html>