The Best Cataloger is a Frustrated Library User: Cataloging Failure and the Underutilization of Library Resources

Abstract

This essay points out that inconsistencies in the assignment of subject headings and call number can lead to failure to retrieve relevant materials from our libraries. Today it is frequently asserted that bibliographic records cataloged by the Library of Congress or other approved libraries will not require review or editing in our local libraries. This paper provides clear but by no means unique examples of "cataloging failure" and explains the implications of a policy to add unedited bibliographic records (from vendors such as OCLC) to our library catalogs. The result is the omission of otherwise relevant titles from fairly routine searches.

Introduction

Like many readers of *Theological Librarianship*, I have had the privilege of working with theological literature for several decades as a cataloger, a book selector, and a reader. I would like to present here a few thoughts for our profession.

The Problem Identified

As we are all aware, there are multiple routes that one can follow in pursuit of a particular topic or piece of information — many more now than when I began my career. The more the merrier, I say. I, too, have reaped the benefits of Google, Wikipedia, and the wonders that Amazon's "Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought. . ." bring a patron. (Is there anyone who wishes we were back in the days of searching the National Union Catalog?)[1] I'm pretty good at searching EBSCOhost, and I can manipulate ebrary and, of course, our own library catalog, the contents of which I am partially responsible for. And as I catalog books, I will often identify another title or two for our collection from footnotes, bibliographies, and acknowledgements in books that I have a particular interest in. I am hardly unique in these abilities.

And so I find myself with a clear idea of what we have in our collection, and what could be helpful to a student who might look for information on a particular topic, let us say, *ministry to people with disabilities.* From my unique vantage point as a cataloger, I am aware of particular titles, authors, and subject headings in our collection and — in the databases that we have access to — that might lead a student to resources on this topic. Books by and about Jean Vanier come to mind, of course, and "Church work with people with disabilities" seems like a good subject heading. A keyword search should lead to one or more titles on the subject, which should lead — through the linked subject headings or call numbers — to a browsable list of more titles, if the subject headings have been assigned with any consistency.

To put it briefly, my task as a cataloger is to review the "copy," that is, the bibliographic records that are associated with the titles that we purchase. I make sure that the information in the record matches the material itself, assign a call number for the title's location (usually already supplied in the bibliographic record), and verify that the subject headings and consistent forms of names will enable the title to be retrieved reliably in our online catalog.

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Union_Catalog

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The Scope of the Problem

For illustration purposes, let us imagine a patron looking for information on such a topic in a library's database, starting with a keyword search. I would like to look at this from the perspective of a cataloger or reference librarian who knows what this patron does *not* know: that there are dozens of books or articles (hereafter, "titles") that are relevant to the patron's query. Here, then, is the first question I raise: What are the chances that a relatively uninformed keyword search will retrieve one or more of the titles that has subject headings and/or call numbers that will lead in turn to other useful titles?

The second question is this: Having identified one or more appropriate titles, what are the chances that other highly relevant titles in the collection have been assigned *the same or similar subject headings and/or call numbers*?

In this essay I would like to address the second question especially. Approaching this optimistically, I assume that with persistence, the patron will likely identify one or more relevant titles. The problem is that *the subject headings and call numbers in LC/OCLC/other vendor records often have not been assigned with any consistency.*[2] If we were to examine, let us say, the bibliographic records for the writings of Jean Vanier[3] in these databases, we would find little consistency in the assignment of subject headings, even though the *subjects* covered in his books are quite similar. As a result, if a searcher were fortunate enough to identify the heading "Church work with people with disabilities," he or she would perhaps only see one or two titles by Jean Vanier on this subject.

This, you might say, is the cataloger's dirty little secret. Because I am a cataloger, I happen to be aware not only of the titles on a particular subject that are in our collection, but I am also aware of the difficulty that our users will have in finding them *because of inconsistency in the assignment of subject headings and call numbers*. To put it another way, I am aware of the titles that no user is likely ever to find unless they are searching for it as a "known item." This is a subject that has perplexed me ever since library school, and led me to adopt as my personal motto "The best librarian is a frustrated library user."[4]

This is far more than an annoyance; it amounts to a serious problem. We invest our institutions' good money in the purchase, cataloging, and processing of books — print or electronic — but *a large percentage of them may never be found, even by a keyword search, because of the inadequacy of the headings and call numbers in the bibliographic records that we receive from our vendors*. And in the name of economy more and more libraries are abandoning copy cataloging altogether: "The bibliographic records," we are told, "are good enough." In the name of cost-saving and efficiency the effort to integrate newly added titles with titles on similar topics already in the collection has been abandoned. By "integration" here I refer to the task — infinitely easier in the age of the online catalog — of identifying the call numbers and subject headings of titles already in the collection and assigning these, as appropriate, to newly added titles.

How serious is this problem? I don't have any quantifiable data, but as I have begun to save copies of titles with what I consider inadequate subject headings or Dewey call numbers, I have been surprised at how numerous these are: titles issued by major publishers, titles cataloged by the Library of Congress, and so on.

Of course, it is this very lack of data that makes it so easy for administrators to conclude that conscientious copy cataloging is no longer necessary. After all, there's no easy way to report on titles that *aren't* found by a library user, is there? No one, except perhaps a subject specialist, or a bibliographer, will know.

This phenomenon has troubled me for some time, so I have started keeping track of some egregious errors in the assignment of subject headings and Dewey call numbers. Some of these would be considered "errors of omission,"

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[2] I'm only commenting on book cataloging here; I am hopeful that the terms in ATLA's own *Religion Index* are assigned with more consistency.

[3] Founder of the network of L'Arche communities for the mentally and physically disabled.

[4] I pursued this issue in my University of Chicago Graduate Library School MA thesis, "The Indexing of Books on Christian Missions" (1982), where I examined the different sets of books that were identified, depending on whether one was searching in the *Books in Print: Subject Guide* (remember it?), the Library of Congress Subject Headings, or the annual subject bibliographies in the field of missions. The lack of overlap between these three sources was quite disappointing.

where the proper subject heading has been omitted. Others are "errors of commission", where technically correct subject headings have been assigned, but they are so broad as to be misleading or unhelpful. I would like to make it clear that in almost all cases, the records that I am examining here have been cataloged "correctly." They have been formatted properly, and all of the subject headings and subdivisions are consistent with the Library of Congress subject authorities. I have not noted the cataloging sources, but in my experience no one source — whether Library of Congress or other libraries — is free of these flaws.

Some Illustrative Examples:

What follows here are five examples, pasted in from our cataloging software. (I am omitting or abbreviating some fields.) I have indicated by ~~strike-through~~ or **bold** what I have ~~deleted~~ or **added** to the records. I understand that non-catalogers' eyes tend to glaze over at the sight of MARC format records, but try, please. Remember, if the language in a subject heading isn't intelligible to a non-cataloger librarian, who can we expect to understand it?

Please understand that these records are neither uniquely bad, nor are they typical of the cataloging copy that is available. And I do not suggest that my choice of headings is the best or only choice, only that it is distinctly better. But problems such as these occur often enough — say one in five or at least one in ten records — that it is a cause for concern.

Example 1:

Call no.: 263.0425695 M135p 2010

Author: MacDonald, Burton, 1939-

Title: Pilgrimage in early Christian Jordan: a literary and archaeological guide / Burton MacDonald.

Publication info: Oxford, UK: Oxbow Books ; Oakville, CT : David Brown, 2010.

Contents: Introduction to the sites -- Early Christian pilgrimage in Jordan -- Casting out demons : Gadara (Umm Qays) and Gerasa (Jerash) -- Elijah the Tishbite : Listib/Al-Istib, Wadi Cherith and Tall Mar Elyas -- The site of the baptism and Elijah's ascension : Bethany beyond the Jordan . . .

Subject: Jordan--Antiquities.

~~Subject: Excavations (Archaeology)--Jordan.~~

Subject: Bible--Antiquities.

Subject: **Christian pilgrims and pilgrimages--Jordan.**

Subject: **Christian pilgrims and pilgrimages--Palestine.**

Subject: **Palestine--In Christianity.**

Subject: **Christian shrines--Jordan.**

Comment: The call number in this record is on target. The bolded subject headings provide access to the theologically oriented content of this book. Since this title is not primarily about archaeological processes, I would omit the "Excavations" subject heading, and perhaps the other two as well.

Example 2:

Call no.: 233.5 D283w 2014

Author: Deane-Drummond, Celia.

Title: The wisdom of the liminal : evolution and

other animals in human becoming / Celia Deane-Drummond.

Publication info: Grand Rapids, Michigan : William B. Eeerdmans Publishing Company, 2014.

Contents: Human becoming and being: theological starting points -- Human reason and animal cognition -- Human freedom and animal agency -- Human morality and animal virtue -- Human language and animal communication -- Evolving social worlds: theo-drama and niche construction -- Human justice and animal fairness -- Tracing common ground: the drama of kinship.

Subject: Theological anthropology--Christianity.

Subject: Animals--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Subject: **Human-animal relationships--Religious aspects--Christianity.**

Subject: **Human evolution--Religious aspects.**

Subject: **Human evolution--Religious aspects--Christianity.**

Comment: Having looked through the contents of this title, it is apparent that the bolded subject headings figure prominently. More and more titles on these topics are being published and they should be accessible.

Example 3:

LC call no.: BR1640 .S88 2014

Call no.: 277.3082 S967a 2014

Author: Sutton, Matthew Avery, 1975-

Title: American apocalypse: a history of modern evangelicalism / Matthew Avery Sutton.

Publication info.: 264 1 Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014.

Contents: Jesus is coming -- Global war and Christian nationalism -- The birth of fundamentalism -- The culture wars begin -- American education on trial -- Seeking salvation with the GOP -- The rise of the tyrants -- Christ's deal versus the New Deal -- Reviving American exceptionalism -- Becoming cold warriors for Christ -- Apocalypse now.

Subject: Evangelicalism--History.

Subject: United States--Church history--20th century.

Subject: **Fundamentalism--History--20th century.**

Subject: **Millennium (Eschatology)**

Subject: **Millennialism.**

The two subject headings assigned by the cataloger provide general access to the book, as might be suitable in a general collection. But as the contents note indicates, this work is about the role of eschatology in fundamentalist churches in the middle of the 20th century, not (as the title incorrectly suggests) about evangelicalism more broadly.

Example 4:

~~Call no.: 236.2~~

Call no.: 234 M159L 2013

Author: McKnight, Scot

Title: A long faithfulness : the case for Christian perseverance / by Scot McKnight

Publication info.: Colorado Springs, CO: Patheos Press , c2013.

Subject: Bible--Evidences, authority, etc.

Subject: Future life--Christianity.

Subject: **Calvinism.**

Subject: **Perseverance (Theology)**

Subject: **Free will and determinism.**

Subject: **Reformed Church--Doctrines.**

This is a classic case of misidentification. This title is actually on the Calvinist doctrine of "perseverance." It is not primarily about the "future life," and to assign "Bible—Evidences, authority, etc." to it is seriously misleading.

Example 5:

LC call no.:   BV4529.2 .K5475 2015

Call No.:   248.834 K618 2015

Title: Kissing in the chapel, praying in the frat house : wrestling with faith and college / edited by Adam J. Copeland.

Publication info.:   Lanham ; Boulder ; New York ; London : Rowman & Littlefield, [2015]

Subject: Young adults--Religious life.

Subject: Christian life.

Subject: Conduct of life.

Subject: Christianity and culture.

Subject: **College Students --Religious life.**

Here is one of the many cases where assignment of a too-general subject heading actually inhibits access. Assigning "Christianity and culture" to this title simply clogs up the list of titles that theologically address the relation between Christianity and culture, something that this title does not do. And the same for "Christian life" and "Conduct of life." Far better simply to retain only the more specific heading, since it reflects adequately the contents of the book.

Conclusions

To return to our imaginary patron, I would like to propose that a library administrator's decision not to have the library's bibliographic records examined for the accuracy and utility of their subject headings and call numbers — what is traditionally called "copy cataloging"— has a direct impact on what this imaginary patron is likely to retrieve. In other words, *a substantial number of titles that the library has purchased and maintained may seldom be retrieved because the bibliographic records do not contain the same access points as other records on the same topic*. In my opinion the notion of "shelf-ready copy," that is, without cataloger review, represents a false economy.

This is a quandary that every cataloger is probably aware of, but that few are willing to address. The emphasis today seems to be on quantity, not quality. The quality of metadata associated with bibliographic records for electronic books, for example, is notoriously low, even lower than for print titles. Clearly our library users are still able to conduct research and write papers, even with so many under-cataloged records in our databases. No one complains because *our patrons are not aware of the relevant titles that they failed to identify due to inadequate cataloging*.

For OCLC cataloging members, there is a way to resolve the type of inadequacies noted in the examples. A cataloger can edit the OCLC master record, and thereby make better subject headings and perhaps call numbers available to other OCLC users. There is a tremendous irony here, however. If our libraries are expected to expend the effort to improve the master records, then we are admitting that the notion of (already purchased) "shelf-ready cataloging" (that is, without cataloger intervention) is not adequate for many of our titles. And if a library commits itself to upgrading bibliographic records for the benefit of *other* libraries, it will involve *more,* not less expense than copy cataloging.

The impetus for these reflections is my concerns about the direction that this aspect of our profession is taking. Like other catalogers, I have developed the skill, over many years, of reviewing and, when necessary, improving the headings assigned to my library's titles to make them accessible to potential users. Developing these headings will always require a person's, not a computer's, familiarity with the contents of these titles. It is my hope that this article may provoke a constructive discussion of the implications of administrative decisions that affect the accessibility of our bibliographic resources to our patrons. Perhaps it may also open the door to a discussion about the type and quality of "metadata" needed in our new library world.