You may wonder how 2010 came to be the Year of Cataloging Research. What does it mean? What did it accomplish?

Almost three years ago Allyson Carlyle and I, as part of the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS) Implementation Task Group for the LC (Library of Congress) Working Group Report on the Future of Bibliographic Control, began work as a subgroup focused on research. Two of the mandates issued by that weighty report on bibliographic control were concerned with research:

1. Through library and information science and continuing education, foster a greater understanding of the need for research, both quantitative and qualitative, into issues of bibliographic control.

2. Work to develop a stronger, more rigorous culture of formal evaluation, critique and validation and build a cumulative research agenda and evidence base. Encourage, highlight, reward and share best research practice and results. [1, pp. 37-38]

In December of 2008 as we were making a list of ways we could help ALCTS advance the above cataloging research objectives, we wondered if one way to foster a greater understanding of the need for research might be to declare a Year of Cataloging Research. With support from the rest of the task group, and especially our chair Kate Harcourt, the idea came to fruition. Responding to our proposals, the following year ALCTS and the American Library Association (ALA) indeed declared 2010 to be the Year of Cataloging Research. [2]

Fostering a Greater Understanding of the Need for Research

With the stage thus set, programs and publications celebrating cataloging research came rolling out. Carlyle, as a library educator and an active member...
of both ALISE (Association for Library and Information Science Education) and ALCTS, was circus ringleader and very effectively sought to promote research activities in both groups. She started things off in fall of 2009 with an invited editorial, “Announcing 2010, Year of Cataloging Research.” In this vibrant call to action readers were told that “[w]e desperately need more research on bibliographic control and specifically on cataloging, catalogs and catalog use.” [3]

The Cataloging & Classification Section (CSS) Forum at ALA’s Midwinter Meeting 2010 in Boston began the year with a program on cataloging research. It featured the following presentations [4]:

- Michele Cloonan, dean of the Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science, spoke on up-and-coming Ph.D. students and research at Simmons and how important the program is to fostering an understanding of the need for cataloging research.
- Sandy Roe, Cataloging and Classification Quarterly (CCQ) editor, spoke on the importance of cataloging research and how CCQ supports cataloging research.
- Martha Yee of the UCLA Film & Television Archive spoke on the RDF model – on how to build in ways for encoding the relationships between topics and their subdivisions that convey more information than the MARC subfield codes v, x, y & z.
- Daniel Joudrey, Arlene Taylor & Tina Gross contributed a talk on “The Effect of Controlled Vocabulary on Keyword Searching.”

The following summer at the ALA Annual Meeting, ALCTS CSS, the ALA Library Research Round Table, LITA (Library Information Technology Association) Next Generation Catalog Interest Group, and RUSA RSS (Reference & User Services Association, Reference Services Section) Catalog Use Committee together sponsored a panel presentation entitled, “Beyond Cataloging: The Year of Cataloging Research.” It was organized and moderated by Allyson Carlyle. Tina Gross later reported some key ideas from this event as follows [5]:

- Sara Shatford Layne spoke about “Research in Cataloging and Classification.” Among things important for catalogers to learn from research are how useful practices are and what should be done differently. What we need to learn should drive research more than what we can readily measure. Would that be like looking for lost keys under a streetlamp?
- Lynn Connaway spoke about “Make It as Easy as Google Book Search: Learning How to Make the Catalog Usable.” This talk focused less on cataloging itself and more on how systems might be improved through user studies as it reported highlights from the “Digital Information Seeker.” Of the common findings identified most concern behavior and perceptions of users, and only one mentions cataloging, “Quality metadata is essential for discovery; many resources are under-used because of inadequate cataloging.”
- Jane Greenberg spoke on “Celebration and Opportunity: The Year of Cataloging Research – 2010.” She called for three areas of research: automatic metadata generation, creator/author generated metadata and metadata theory.
- Amy Eklund spoke on “Research on the Next Generation Catalog.” Her remarks addressed characteristics such as faceted browsing, ability to handle multiple metadata schemata and Web 2.0 features seen in next generation catalogs. She would target for future research functionality and features, cost-benefit and system design. Her list of questions, if answered, could lead to the design of better catalogs and discovery systems, perhaps even some level of standardization for their features.

The ALA Cataloging & Classification Research Interest Group, which treats every year as though it is the Year of Cataloging Research, also did an excellent job of calling attention to this project through announcements at both their meetings in 2010 and also with focused talks at the Midwinter Meeting in January of 2011.

Overall, these efforts and those of many other groups to foster greater understanding of the need for cataloging research were very productive and worthwhile.
Building a Cumulative Research Agenda and Evidence Base

What do we need to know about catalogs, cataloging and catalog use? What do we already know? How do we know what we know? Defining a research agenda was addressed in some of the talks listed above and also by authors of several articles.

The editorial staff of CCQ systematically weighed in on the matters they felt should be included in an agenda for cataloging research, as reported by Richard P. Smiraglia [6]. Among the many ideas put forth, the following very interesting consensus topics for future research emerged:

1. A survey of the content of a randomized set of MARC records from WorldCat
2. A study of the practical effects of outsourcing cataloging to a vendor or other off-site agency
3. Survey-based studies of users’ perceptions and search habits
4. Studies of information retrieval using online catalogs
5. Sociological studies of the work of cataloging
6. Longitudinal studies of which groups create and use cataloging
7. Development of a test bed of queries compared with bibliographic records
8. A study to determine the information needed to support rights management and preservation.

Randy Roeder wrote an editorial entitled “A Year of Cataloging Research” in January 2010 for Library Resources &Technical Services [7]. He began by stating about existing research publications that “a general dissatisfaction with our efforts to date is palpable.” [7, p.2] As a veteran cataloger of science resources, it seems to me that this might be said not just of cataloging but of librarianship in general – that we are considered at best a second-class science disdained even more than psychology. Realistically, most of us who are not library and information science educators or students are practitioners doing a little research on the side to earn tenure in an academic institution. However, although we are typically underfunded and poorly trained as researchers and have often written about improving systems that have quickly become outdated and useless, we must never give up. Many published reports on methodologies that are now irrelevant were useful to practitioners when they first came out. The very projects that you, dear reader, may be engaged in could advance the efforts of others if you publish what you learn.

Automation in libraries continues to evolve rapidly, but it is not automatic. Decisions are made. New systems are designed, purchased and implemented. Catalogs, OPACs (online public access catalogs), next generation catalogs, discovery systems – such systems are fed by cataloging, but catalogers often have little influence on their development.

One of the particular challenges both to practical progress and to building a comprehensive body of knowledge is the severe splintering of specialized experts involved in catalogs. We range from administrators to catalogers to systems librarians to digital program designers to public interface developers and beyond. Until recently in my library we had a homegrown expert who had worked in public services, then become associated with acquisitions and cataloging, only to find himself in information technology. The wonders he could accomplish using technology guided by a strong grasp of what was needed cannot be replicated by anyone without both. Two major examples are collaborative development of automation for statistics and of donor bookplates in the catalog [8]. But returning to the evils of specialization, I would say that if cataloging research were the legendary elephant then we may all be blind men touching tails, trunks and legs, each wrongly convinced we know the animal. Could we all step back for a moment and admit that we don’t? We might all do better work if we take time to ask more questions. Indeed, finding a partner with a different specialty can often broaden our understanding. Isn’t the honest asking and answering of questions what research is all about?

Laura Kane McElfresh addressed the topic of research in her article, “Good Things Come in Small Libraries: 2010: The Year of Cataloging Research.” [9] The differences in perspective between Carlyle and Roeder were examined in this article. McElfresh stated in conclusion, “Even if those of us from small libraries are not driving this change or even taking much of an active role in it, the Year of Cataloging Research presents an opportunity for each of us to help make a world in which librarians, particularly catalogers, can become part of the metadata and information community beyond the library walls.” [9, p. 7]
Carlen Ruschoff in “New Areas for Cataloging Research,” offered this wise perception:

We need to conduct research that helps us better comprehend the information environment of today to build a greater understanding of how we can integrate our library skills into the discovery and learning milieu. We have a great deal to learn about how traditional cataloging principles fit (or do not fit) with the architecture of the current search engines, the language of searching, tagging and the organization of search results.” [10, p.63]

Another facet of the mandate for cataloging research has been the building of a solid evidence base to support future decisions. How can a strong foundation not only be constructed but also become known and trusted so that systems designers and administrative decision makers will build upon it as solid ground rather than the often crumbly foundations of speculation and assumption? Part of the answer must lie in the preparation of major surveys of cataloging research such as the one currently underway by Sue Ann Gardner covering research that appeared in 2009 and 2010 and is expected to be published later this year [11].

Go Forth and Find

And so with the special year for cataloging research having come and gone with much fanfare we look to the future. Please take a moment to reflect on cataloging research from two different perspectives, producer and consumer. Each reader of this article may be in a position to perform and publish research on catalogs, cataloging and/or catalog use and to make use of existing research. It becomes critical to choose questions that are worth asking and for which useful answers can be found. While making decisions based on assumptions can be risky, it is necessary to develop hypotheses and find valid ways to test them. While it is essential to make use of the findings already available from previous research, care must be taken in generalizing from results. Unlike in the field of pharmaceuticals and testing of safety and effectiveness of new drugs, in our field we do not have the ability to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars testing each new catalog feature on each distinct user group. In our case perhaps perfect is the enemy of the good. Our inability to perform perfectly thorough research must not prevent us from doing the best we can with what we have. Please, go forth in research and find the best answers that you can. Both our users and we need them!

Resources Mentioned in the Article


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Resources Mentioned in the Article, cont.


