Find, Identify, Select…Socialize?: Alternative Objectives of Library Catalogs

Rachel Ivy Clarke
University of Washington Information School
Box 352840, Seattle, Washington 98195
raclarke@uw.edu

ABSTRACT
Throughout history, library catalogs have served various purposes, yet most formal statements of catalog objectives focus on inventory and holdings. As contemporary libraries face questions about the continued relevance of the library catalog, these purposes inspire reexamination. This poster presents a historical review of library catalogs with emphasis on purposes, as well as a review of proposals for alternatives to these extant objectives in order to inform future catalog design and library advocacy.

Keywords
library catalogs, cataloging, history

INTRODUCTION
Library catalogs have served for centuries as indispensable information tools. Contemporary library catalogs are “organized set[s] of bibliographic records that represent the holdings of a particular collection and/or resources accessible in a particular location” (Taylor 2006), built with the purpose of enabling users to find, select, identify and obtain these holdings (Tillett & Cristan 2009). Yet these objectives have not always been the fundamental purpose behind library catalogs.

Throughout history, library catalogs and the bibliographic data contained therein have served a variety of purposes. From inventory lists of valuable property to marketing tools designed to solicit donations, the library catalog has played a varied role in serving both the library and its users. As contemporary libraries face resource reductions, competition from other information services and providers, and choices regarding emerging technologies, questions emerge about the relevance of the library catalog. What purposes does the 21st century library catalog currently serve, and what, if any, additional or alternative purposes might catalogs offer?

To explore these questions, this poster will present a historical review of the purposes, objectives, and goals of library catalogs from ancient libraries to the present. Illustrative examples will be presented with emphasis on the purposes they were designed to fulfill. Examples of proposals for alternative objectives of library catalogs from the literature will be discussed. Identifying possibilities for potential roles the library catalog might play may inform future catalog design and development as well as offer potential ways in which to market and advocate for libraries in the Internet age.

EXTANT PURPOSES OF LIBRARY CATALOGS
The purpose of something indicates what that something is supposed to accomplish or achieve. Goals and objectives of library catalogs, whether implicit or explicitly articulated, state what ends such tools are attempting to meet; they do not indicate or suggest ways in which those ends are to be achieved (Verona 1961), or offer commentary on whether or not such ends were successfully met. In this poster, purpose, goals, and objectives will be used interchangeably to mean the ends that library catalogs were or should be designed to meet, either implicitly or explicitly.

Inventory Lists
Most historians agree that the earliest library catalogs were little more than inventory lists. Valentine (2012) cites the earliest known library catalog as that of the Sumerian city of Nippur, circa 2000 BCE. The list contained approximately 60 titles, and was not organized in any fashion. Users of the infamous library at Alexandria consulted the catalog to determine which works and versions of works were owned by the library so as to confirm the provenance—and therefore the authority—of those works (Lerner 2009). The purpose of the first catalog of the Chinese Imperial library collection, commissioned in 26 BCE (Wang & Dunn, 1989) was specifically to present an inventory of major works to the emperor (Wu 1937).

With the rise of Christianity in the Western world, libraries became the domain of the monasteries. Early catalogs varied by monastic order, but most were simple lists specifically intended to inventory valuable property. Books represented wealth, and so complete and accurate accounts of holdings were necessary to monitor and control this wealth (Lerner 2009). Catalog entries that emphasized physical description data, such as those in the catalog of the
Benedictine Library at Christchurch (ca. 1170) and the catalog of the Glastonbury Abbey library (1247), imply that books were valued as objects rather than for intellectual content (Norris 1939). Throughout the next centuries, bibliographic data in library catalogs continued to emphasize books as objects, leaving the catalog to function as a property register enabling the “safe custody” of the collection (Norris 1939, 89)

Finding Aids
Most early library collections were so small that catalogs were not necessary for locating materials—the librarian’s memory and knowledge of the collection was sufficient for retrieval. The catalog as a location tool did not gain traction until the 13th century CE, when increasing sizes of libraries shifted the main purpose of catalogs from inventory lists to finding aids (Lerner 2009). Catalogs began to list bibliographic entries in correspondence to shelf order of the items being described although specific retrieval information (such as pressmarks or call numbers) was not yet commonplace (Norris 1939). This era also saw the shift from physical to content description, indicating a shift to intellectual access.

In subsequent centuries, catalogs were recognized as more than inventories. In the 17th and 18th centuries CE, catalogs as finding aids were the norm, and many debated the best methods for catalog formation and compilation to as to enable this purpose. In the 19th century, formerly ad hoc objectives of inventory and findability began to be formally articulated. In 1826, the American Philosophical Society offered one of the first specific and explicit articulations. The purpose of the library catalog was to show whether a given book was in the library, what books on a subject were held by the library, and what editions, specimens of early typography and/or works from celebrated presses were held by the library (Ranz 1964). Later that century, Cutter published his now-famous Rules for a Dictionary Catalog. He states that the purpose of the library catalog is to enable users to find books by title, author or subject; to show that the library holds by author, subject, or type of literature; and to assist users in the choice of book based on edition or character (Cutter 1876). Subsequent formalized objectives, such as the user tasks find, identify, select, and obtain, in IFLA’s (1997) Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records build directly on these ideas.

Marketing
In addition to inventory and user assistance, many historical library catalogs were created for the purpose of marketing library collections. As early as 1575, Leiden University in the Netherlands is credited with creating the first printed (as opposed to manuscript) catalog (Valentine 2012). Print technology enabled many duplicate copies of the catalog to be produced and distributed, allowing the catalog to advertise the library’s holdings to a worldwide audience.

Early American colonial catalogs were designed specifically as marketing tools to acknowledge donations, publicize collections, and solicit new patrons and further contributions (Ranz 1964). By the 1700s, many British library catalogues were printed solely for the purpose of soliciting donations. Examples include the 1707 catalog of the Norwich City library, for which the sole purpose was to induce donations from the public (Norris 1939). This catalogue included an alphabetical list of donors’ names for recognition and retrieval purposes, and actually succeeded for several years at its objective. The 1724 catalog of the Sion College library was even more blunt: indications in the catalog identifying vacant space on shelves in specific subject areas let users know that there was room for more books “if anyone would be kind enough to present them to the library” (Norris 1939, 188-189).

POSSIBILITIES FOR ALTERNATIVE PURPOSES
The historical evolution of library catalogs up until now demonstrates their objectives as inventory lists, finding aids, and marketing tools. However, it is possible that library catalogs might serve other purposes, either in addition to or distinct from these historically-established goals. While the number of potential alternative objectives may be numerous, for the sake of space concerns, this poster will highlight four notable proposed alternatives.

Navigation and Discovery
Perhaps the most obvious additional purpose of the library catalog is to assist users in navigating a library’s collection. Svenonius (2000) may have been the first to formally articulate the navigation objective, but implicit evidence occurs in earlier cataloging endeavors. Although cross-references in library catalogs appear as early as the 17th century CE, with the use of “Q” (for “See”) in the 1620 edition of the Bodleian library catalog (Norris 1939), their importance was not emphasized until Panizzi’s infamous letter. He wrote: “It is self-evident that the more numerous these cross-references are the more useful a catalogue must be” (Panizzi 1848). While he goes on to describe the useful functions cross-references perform, he does not specifically express their end goals in any other terms but assisting users with finding works.

In 1969, Lubetzky asserted that one purpose of the catalog should be to “call [a reader’s] attention to related materials in the library which might be pertinent to his interest and thus help him to utilize more fully and adequately the library’s resources” (Lubetzky 1969, 105), thus to help a user navigate among resources and potentially discover new ones. Svenonius (2000) agrees, arguing that navigation should be added to IFLA’s objectives as stated at that time. She states that the purpose of navigation is warranted by two factors: 1) users’ information-seeking behaviors, which demonstrate patterns of and desire for navigation; and 2) stipulation by cataloging rules for the inclusion of relationships in bibliographic data, as these relationships facilitate navigation. The more relationships (such as cross-references) included in library catalogs, the more navigation is possible, thus bringing formal purpose to Panizzi’s earlier emphasis. Navigation is actually included in IFLA’s most recent Statement of Cataloguing Principles (Tillett &
Crissan 2009), although it is not included in the FRBR user tasks of “find, identify, select, obtain” (ILFA 1998, p.8)

Lubetzky’s idea of calling attention to related materials also implies an objective of discovery. The recent emergence of “discovery services” for libraries emphasizes the interest in supporting this objective. The market for these vendor-provided services has seen vigorous development in the last 5 years (Breeding 2014). These systems vary in function and capabilities, but most provide an alternative interface for searching, navigating and retrieving bibliographic data and resources from catalogs and other sources (such as journal databases). The major purpose of the discovery layer is to facilitate the discovery of library resources. Perhaps the discovery layer—along with its additional financial and maintenance costs and its ties to software vendors—would not be necessary if discovery was a formal, actionable goal of library catalogs.

**Education**

As early as the 17th century BCE, catalogs came with instructions for use. The catalog at Akkad contained instructions for readers to obtain the books they needed (Norris 1939). Including instructions as front matter was popular in printed catalogs, especially those in the 19th century CE. These catalogs included instructions on how to use the catalog itself, and also rules about the library such as opening hours and circulation restrictions.

In addition to direct information, a catalog might also educate users through methods of data display. Bates (1986) encourages designing catalog interactions to educate users on search term selections, strategies, and techniques. By making use of powerful vocabularies, she suggests that presenting a variety of terms to users rather than just their single selected keyword can expose them to additional search term possibilities and train them regarding the use of alternate queries.

Catalogs also support education through their creation. Hjørland (2002) posits that the creations of tools such as literature guides, classification schemes, indexes, thesauri, etc., can educate users about topical domains. While librarians are generally the users in these situations, this concept could potentially be refined and extended as an exercise for library users, especially if it was framed in an engaging way, such as part of a game.

**Social Connection and Interaction**

Recently, scholars have argued that library catalogs need to move beyond the traditional inventory function to an interactive function that, in addition to connecting them with library resources, connects users to other people, like library staff and other patrons. Like the physical library, Tarulli (2012) argues, the online library—epitomized by the library catalog—is a community gathering place, and should therefore support the same kinds of social interactions as the physical library supports. Spiteri, Tarulli and Graybeal (2010) posit that the contemporary online library catalog can serve as a social space and community through the inclusion of elements and features that are typically found in other library interactions. For instance, allowing users to describe, label, review and recommend bibliographic resources enables a form of communication among users about those resources. Benefits of social catalogs include the following:

- Provision and support for a safe and trustworthy space where patrons can discuss common interests;
- The ability to offer more traditional forms of in-person social connection to patrons unable to visit the physical library; and
- Allowance for more democratic descriptions and recommendations of library resources. (Spiteri, Tarulli & Graybeal 2010).

As libraries evolve from a focus on collections to a focus on community (Lankes 2012), shouldn’t the objectives for tools of the library—including library catalogs—evolve in this direction as well?

**Expression**

Regardless of intended purpose, a library catalog in any format is an information system, and any information system can be viewed as a means of creative expression (Andersen, 2008). Examples of catalogs as forms of expression appear as early as the 8th century CE, with the catalog of books given by Gregory the Great to the church of St. Clement at Rome. This list of books was engraved on a marble slab and written in the form of a prayer (Norris 1939). In 1821, John Cole wrote An Aenigmatical Catalogue of Books of Merit on an entirely new plan in which all the entries are formulated as riddles. Originally intended as advertising (C.B. 1906), Cole’s work also represents catalog-making as a hobby (Norris 1939) and therefore personal expression.

Feinberg (2010) has shown that library information systems, such as classification schemes, thesauri, and collections, express persuasive rhetorical arguments that reflect various points of view. Because these systems express arguments regardless of their intention to do so, the purpose of expression is implicit in every system—and therefore every catalog—ever created. Therefore, it is not a question of whether or not expression should be a purpose of library catalogs, but rather a question of what should be expressed. Perhaps the library catalog should express a statement about the reliability and authority of libraries as compared to other currently popular sources, like Wikipedia. Or perhaps the catalog should express the core values of libraries (American Library Association 2004)? The possibilities are endless.

**CONCLUSION**

The generally acknowledged and formally articulated purpose of the library catalog is to provide users assistance in finding, selecting, identifying, and obtaining library materials. These objectives are often taken as the only purpose, with no inquiry into alternative possibilities. The document articulating these principles states that they “build on the cataloging traditions of the world” (Tillett &
Cristan 2009, 1), yet the sole reference is to a single set of objectives articulated in the 19th century CE based on one context and demographic. This poster demonstrates that there is more beyond this single tradition on which to formulate purposes of library catalogs.

Some argue that frequent reliance on Cutter’s objectives “testifies to their stability and to the endurance of their intellectual foundations” (Svenonius 2000, 201). Yet today’s information seekers bypass the library catalog. Contemporary research shows that “today’s library catalogs are long on problems and short on unique benefits for users” (Calhoun 2006). If the library catalog is not fulfilling its intended purposes for users, perhaps it is time to consider what other purposes it might be designed to fulfill. For example, research from OCLC (2009) shows that users expect and rely on “enhanced content” to assist with decision-making. Such content is assumed to be objective abstracts, summaries, and tables of contents, but perhaps users might be interested in and assisted by content that expresses a point of view, or user-generated content that connects them socially to others. This poster has presented but a few examples of other purposes for library catalogs, but they should not be considered all-inclusive. There are potentially unlimited roles the catalog might play, if we are interested and invested enough to look for them.

REFERENCES


