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# CATALOGUERS: THE NEW ENDANGERED SPECIES

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## ABSTRACT

While cataloguing has always been a traditional librarian specialisation it has been questioned whether librarians and their professional skills are still needed to perform such tasks. This paper revisits the question of the future evolution and/or possible extinction of cataloguing and cataloguers and asks is there a role for cataloguers' skills in the future? What will those roles look like? How do we prepare future librarians for these roles? These questions will be explored by sharing Lesa Maclean's personal transformation from cataloguer to metadata specialist, a common transformation today; examination of a selection of literature from the last decade; as well as results of original research into the perceptions of the future role of cataloguers, based on a survey. Results support the view that cataloguers are ensuring their own survival in the future by taking on a proactive role in today's information society.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cataloguers as a species they are undoubtedly under threat. The Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999 (EPBC Act) classifies threatened species into six main categories; extinct, extinct in the wild, critically endangered, endangered, vulnerable and conservation dependent (Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, 2011). While it is debatable which of these categories cataloguers fit into, their demise has long been prophesied. The expansion of copy cataloguing and record retrieval; growth of electronic resources; stretched budgets; changing user needs; downsizing/restructuring/outourcing; as well as the negative perceptions and near total abandonment of the specialisation by library schools, are just some aspects of a changed environment where professional cataloguers appear less necessary and their future more uncertain. Although the declaration of 2010 as the year of cataloguing research raises hopes of a new future, it is a clear indication that not enough is known regarding the future of cataloguers. Recent scholarly literature discussing the future of the knowledge environment proposes a future for cataloguers, though mainly through metamorphosis into metadata specialists. However how do library professionals themselves perceive the future of cataloguing?

To investigate current perceptions of library students and employees regarding the future of cataloguers, the authors recently designed a survey using SurveyMonkey. Through emails targeted at several listservs, circulated to relevant professional groups and through social media, respondents were asked a number of questions regarding the employment of cataloguers, attrition of cataloguing staff, the role education is playing in this area and where the future of cataloguers lies. The intense interest generated was reflected in the 300 responses received within the first twenty-four hours. Although at the time of writing this paper the survey had not closed, analysis of the over 500 responses received so far indicates that overwhelmingly people involved in libraries believe there is a future for cataloguers, if not necessarily under its current moniker. The personal experience of one of the authors, Lesa Maclean, is a real world example of a dedicated cataloguer's most common transformation, into a metadata specialist.

## 2. THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE CATALOGUER?

Traditionally cataloguing is understood to be the practice of compiling, organising, and managing bibliographic records for information resources in order to assist patrons in their information discovery. It is this bibliographic architecture that allows the human record to be organised, accessible and preserved. This meticulous role of identifying bits of data and appropriate subject headings for access points was considered to be central to the effective functioning of a library service. Historically this has been carried out by professional cataloguing librarians, dubbed "cataloguers". The library catalogue is the product of

the cataloguer's work, although in today's world many of the records are imported from centralised bibliographic utilities such as OCLC or Libraries Australia. Cataloguers are generally expert in the use of cataloguing tools, international standards and rules such as ISBD, MARC, and AACR2 (soon to be RDA). To use these tools cataloguers require attention to detail, analytical ability to interpret a rule, the ability to understand a bibliographic record and the information it holds, as well as interpreting what data a user finds useful. However cataloguing is more than using tools, it is about understanding the philosophy behind the rules, structure of data and the role it plays in information systems.

The common impression from the literature is that cataloguing has been losing its central place within libraries and is being de-professionalised as work is outsourced and increasingly records are acquired from centralised bibliographic utilities. In 2007 Warren surveyed 68 directors of information resources departments in Australian and New Zealand libraries to see how they perceive cataloguing's role in the future. Warren found that the professional specialisation of cataloguer was on its way to extinction. Many of the respondents to her survey articulated that they did not have specific cataloguers anymore and that it was now a task carried out by paraprofessionals. The survey also indicated that less than five per cent of materials added to a library's collection require original cataloguing and that improved access to Libraries Australia and OCLC records makes cataloguers less necessary to libraries. Warren suggested that as a result that a cataloguer will become a rare breed of librarian. However the future is not necessarily bleak. Warren's views are not always supported by scholarly papers. Others argue that cataloguers will continue to survive in numbers for some time. According to Glasser (2007) cataloguing students need not be worried about the future of cataloguers, as they can expect a rewarding career with challenges, development, and few uninteresting moments (p.40). Glasser states cataloguers are now spending less time cataloguing, and more time supervising, managing, and learning new skills such as applying Dublin Core. Whilst the traditional skills of a cataloguer are still sought after, other skills are now required, including computer skills, management skills, and a willingness to change (pp.39-40).

What is the current view of those working in libraries? Preliminary data from the survey suggests that many believe cataloguing is under threat. To the question 'There is a perceived trend of not replacing cataloguing staff when existing staff leave, or of replacing them with non-professional staff. Do you believe this trend exists?' – Over 75% of survey respondents answered yes, supporting Warren's (2007) view on the extinction of cataloguers, and leading one respondent to clearly state 'This is not a perception, it is a reality.' This finding is supported by the follow up question which asked 'Has this happened at your institution or an institution you know of?'. While results to this question were not as overwhelming, with 57.7% answering yes; it is interesting to note that 42.3% had yet to witness this trend. Respondents were further asked to consider if they believed 'the traditional skills of cataloguers are transferable to other roles, for example metadata creation and analysis, search interface development, and reference services?' This received an overwhelmingly positive response, with 96% believing their skills are transferable. It was interesting to note however, that most respondents did not mention anything beyond the roles mentioned, except for a few individual responses of 'systems work' and 'supervisory roles'. Most respondents made reference to metadata, with most conveying that it was either the area cataloguers should pursue to transition into; that it would be easier for them to transition into; or that metadata is nothing new, it's what cataloguers have been doing all along, e.g. 'Metadata is nothing more than cataloguing using different schemas, it baffles me that so many think it is something new and amazing.'

### **3. THE DISAPPEARING NICHE: THE CATALOGUE**

The demise of cataloguers is paralleled by growing questions regarding the future of the traditional showpiece of their work, the catalogue. There is a perception that cataloguers have failed to provide libraries with a product that is sufficiently user-friendly and sophisticated enough to compete with the internet and search engines such as Google. In a highly significant report, Calhoun (2006) professed that students and researchers are bypassing the library catalogue in their search for information. Users have become accustomed to the straightforwardness and instant results from search engines. The present library catalogue is inadequately designed for these features. A term mentioned numerous times in responses to the survey was 'Google'. This is not surprising as the catalogues and discovery tools libraries promote as the point of access to the information they hold have failed to live up to the ease of

use of Google. Respondents mentioned that 'I get the feeling that the trend is for everybody to think that everything's online, therefore you only need to google to find things, therefore why catalogue?' and 'unfortunately people now don't think to go to the library catalogue from home - they think Google.' As Moncrieff, Macauley and Epps (2007) state 'One of the ironies is that Google's mission, 'to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful', as well as reflecting the ultimate collecting philosophy of libraries, directly challenges it.' (p.81). The cause of this failure is not cataloguers; it is the result of library systems not sophisticated enough to fully utilise the data included within bibliographic records. Calhoun (2006) highlights that a way to direct information seekers back to the catalogue in the pursuit of information is to redesign that catalogue to meet current user needs. With the recent emergence of new "discovery interfaces" to the library catalogue, which mimic search engines the traditional cataloguer's role is definitely in transition.

Gardner (2008) agrees that the changing nature of information seeking behaviour, the use of search engines and patron's preference towards keyword searching is forcing the role of the cataloguer to be reconsidered. She asserts that cataloguers will have a future in the new digital age in order to provide sufficient access to users by grouping like resources together, and providing appropriate access points to be used with search engines. In agreement with Gardner, it is Danskin's (2006) contention that because of the digital world cataloguing and therefore cataloguers are even more important than they previously were; the web has no clear organisation or connections amongst resources, as is present within a library catalogue. It is here that cataloguers will play an important role by creating a context for each information resource. Whilst Danskin doesn't make it obvious, he is hinting that the future for cataloguers lies in their choice and ambitions to take on the resources of the web environment and begin to catalogue them for their libraries users. Survey respondents also appear to agree, as one survey respondent stated, 'Contrary to popular belief, keyword searching sucks. Structured metadata will give better and faster search results no matter what the search engine or data set.'

#### **4. METADATA LIBRARIANS – THE NEW CATALOGUERS?**

Is the transformation to metadata specialist the future for cataloguers? Metadata underpins the organisation of the web and digital libraries. It is metadata that makes search engines work. The use of metadata allows searches that trawl through an immense amount of data to find relevant results. Metadata, essentially data about data, it is a critical means of locating information. Most libraries currently do this by utilising detailed MARC standards to create complex records. Boydston and Leysen (2006) investigated the issue of cataloguers' participation in the creation of descriptive metadata and concluded that metadata creation is an extension of the cataloguers existing skills, abilities and knowledge. As such metadata is seen by many to be the evolution of the cataloguer not the end. These findings are hardly surprising. The Dublin Core Metadata Initiative (DCMI), was conceived in an OCLC sponsored workshop in 1995 and its development was widely supported by libraries the world over (Rubin, 2004, p. 253). However it is only recently that the trend of re-branding of cataloguers into 'metadata specialists' has occurred. Banush (2008, p. 86) outlines that this has occurred due to the growth of digital content which has resulted in a greater need for metadata specialists who work outside the traditional cataloguing environment, to provide metadata for digital objects and to ensure electronic resources are easier to navigate and discover. Similarly, Han and Hswe profess that 'metadata librarian positions have been increasing in academic and research libraries in the last decade, paralleling the expanded provision of, and thus description of and access to, digital resources' (2010, p. 129) whilst positions for cataloguers have been decreasing.

Metadata has evidently become a fresh consideration for many cataloguers judging by the responses to our survey. The vast majority of respondents when asked 'Do you believe the traditional skills of cataloguers are transferable to other roles, for example metadata creation and analysis, search interface development, and reference services?' over 95% said yes. Almost half of that figure (235 respondents) left further comments reiterating that cataloguing skills will greatly assist any transition within the library, 'To me it is self evident that cataloguing skills, bibliographic analysis and description, apply in the area of metadata creation. The user interface is directly [sic] impacted by the quality of the cataloguing/metadata. A user interface cannot exist without its corresponding metadata. Librarians with a strong background in

cataloguing make excellent reference/resder [sic] services librarians. Often they are the staff who 'know' what they are looking at when using the search interface and analysing its results'.

To highlight the relationship between the traditional skills of a cataloguer and those required by metadata, we can draw on the experience of one of the authors, Lesa Maclean. Lesa actively chose to undertake her transformation from a cataloguer into a metadata specialist in order to ensure her continued relevance to the profession. Lesa found that some similarities existed between the roles. Essentially there were still international standards and codes to follow to create accurate data that could be shared, and information resources to describe consistently in order to allow users to discover them. On the outside the key objective had not changed from that of traditional cataloguing, but the focus was now on digital collections. However when metadata has new terms, standards and acronyms in abundance, it creates a significant challenge for those in transition. As a cataloguer, Lesa learned how to use the single designated cataloguing tools and standards adhered to by cataloguers universally, such as MARC and AACR2. Lesa knew how to apply them or where to go to find the answer if she didn't. The new metadata world has a multiplicity of choices including MODS, METS, TEI, VRA, DC, EAD, RIF-CS, ONIX, RDF, and MARCXML, with new ones continually emerging. Which was the best in each situation and how would these be applied? In order to be able to answer these questions, the metadata specialist must become familiar with them. Lesa had entered an environment where this specialised knowledge of metadata was essential to decode, translate and negotiate the requirements of differing stakeholder projects. Indeed this transition has offered Lesa something she was searching for; the opportunity to carry out research, continue learning and be involved in the greater picture of not only the library, but the university as a whole. Typically speaking, Lesa has found her new role to be more than describing resources. It involves moving information from the silos of the catalogue to the openness of the web. Additionally, the incorporation of the unknown with the known, has allowed her to see some areas where workflows could be improved and operations streamlined. Whilst daunting, Lesa admits that it is a worthwhile transformation, which requires ongoing commitment to professional development. The amalgamation of this new role with Lesa's traditional role assisted her with this transformation, however the presence of a mentor and introduction to the key concepts of metadata at library school would have been beneficial.

## **5. EDUCATION FOR THE FUTURE**

Are we educating today's library students in the knowledge and skills for both cataloguers and metadata specialists of the future? The literature indicates that there is a surprising lack of cataloguing units being offered in library science courses (Danskin, 2006). Currently library students are not being taught the fundamental art of cataloguing and its principles (Elrod, 2008). This is an important issue to consider because as Elrod points out it has led to a decline in the quality of records being contributed to bibliographic databases. Elrod contends that the significant decline in cataloguing education is contributing considerably to the death of cataloguers. He argues that when information science students are not exposed to the fundamentals of cataloguing it results in a profession that does not understand cataloguing and its importance within information organisation and access. This will lead to a profession whose leaders have no understanding of the need for human intervention in information organisation, and thus no understanding of the need for cataloguers (Elrod, 2008). She highlights that unless cataloguing units are made core units with in-depth teaching and offered more regularly, then the cataloguing specialisation will eventually cease to exist. This was certainly the viewpoint expressed in our survey results.

The survey asked respondents if they believed that today's library and information students are being taught appropriate cataloguing skills. The answer was a resounding no. Just 18% believed the answer was yes, while the rest of the respondents were equally split between the 'no' and 'unsure' options. When asked if they believe that library courses need to change their curriculum to become more relevant to employers of cataloguers, the figures again backed up the findings with 50.9% saying yes and only 9.1% saying that no changes were needed. Again 40% were unsure. These findings indicate that those who are or have recently studied feel they could learn more about cataloguing. One respondent highlighted that 'absolutely' cataloguers skills are transferable but 'The challenge is that I don't think training/education (that is, library schools) are preparing people for these roles yet - they seem to still be focusing a lot on traditional cataloguing.' Several respondents also signified the need for them to 'be more

relevant to the evolving role of the Cataloguer', by keeping 'up to date with the latest development in cataloguing, e.g. RDA' and to address and teach new and emerging standards, such as 'Semantic web concepts (e.g. RDF, OWL, SKOS, etc.) must be taught, because that is a huge growth area in information management everywhere on the web!'. Of the minority who did not care for cataloguing education, one commented, 'I think the curriculum reflects student's interests. Cataloguing skills are not as Popular'. Whether this is a perception, fact or a self-fulfilling prophecy is debatable.

Interestingly the fact that 40% of respondents were unaware of what was taught or if it needed to change, indicates that there is a disconnection between training providers and the industry. This was specifically commented on by one respondent who stated 'With reference to skills of incoming staff, we either take on graduates & (assuming they have very limited library knowledge) train them from scratch, or take on experienced staff & consolidate their knowledge with further training. Newly educated library graduates seeking experience seem thin on the ground. Survey has been completed from the perspective of an individual middle level manager, deeply involved in internal skills training, not from the perspective of senior managers or recruiters.' Several respondents suggested the simplest way to improve teaching in this area would be to arrange practical placements in cataloguing areas, meaning both students and trainers could gain more current and meaningful exposure.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

What does the future hold for cataloguers? Will they all morph into metadata specialists? Our findings certainly suggest so. Long the bastions of information access, traditional cataloguers and the data they create is often lost in the digital environment. Metadata specialists however are guiding information seekers in the digital environment forward and connecting people to the resources and information they seek. Traditional cataloguers as a species could perhaps be classified as vulnerable; as such it would appear that word of their demise has been premature. As Beck (2004) states 'Any transition serious enough to alter your definition of self will require not just small adjustments in your way of living and thinking but a full-on metamorphosis'. While not having undergone a full-on metamorphosis yet, cataloguers are undoubtedly in a period of transition. To fully complete this transition and continue to play an important role in the profession, cataloguers need relevant education that reflects this. They also require the personal desire to seek out new opportunities and consciously choose evolution. While this evolution may appear drastic to some, it ensures that libraries continue to play a vital role in connecting information seekers with the vast array of knowledge to be discovered in the digital world. While a wealth of literature has been written on the role of cataloguers, more original research is required to add value to the debate. Research will assist and enlighten decision making processes we need to make to move forward into this brave new world.

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