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## **‘Main Entry’ into the future?**

### *The context: an International Cataloguing Code*

Next to AACR part I dealing with the description (ISBD), the circuit of the Joint Steering Committee for the Revision of AACR (JSC) is increasingly paying attention to part II, dealing with the choice of access points and authority control. Whether the new AACR edition will (in)formally acquire the status of ‘the’ international cataloguing code (ICC) or not, it is clear that its revision process will at least be an important source of ideas and concepts.

Also the impact of the ‘Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records’ (FRBR) on AACR is being studied, which reminds me of the 1995 IFLA Conference in Istanbul, where Olivia Madison and I talked about the need for a contemporary ICC, not only for National Bibliographic Agencies (NBAs). I remember having emphasized that FRBR, next to being a rational model for the electronic environment, should also be a strategic document; a weapon in the hands of librarians to explain minimum quality to administrators and managers, an aid to persuade them to refrain from too drastic cuts in the cataloguing budgets. By now it’s 2003. What we still need is an authoritative document, a new cataloguer’s Bible, a successor to the 1961 Paris Principles, with basic rules and clear general statements about (minimum) requirements as to choice, number and status of access points, as to authority control, and as to their interconnections. As everlasting maintenance of general conformity with the Paris Principles is no longer self-evident, any multinational or international code should indicate the practical consequences of the choices that can be made.

### *An example: authority control*

Which are, for instance, the benefits and the consequences of the use of controlled headings? Should this facility be offered to the user? During the 80s library administrators in my country meant that creating authority records for names of foreigners (= at other levels than the NBA) was too time-consuming, too expensive. Therefore they decided to abolish mandatory name authority control in the biggest shared cataloguing project; an unwise decision, I think. One may hope that soon cataloguers will be able to convince and comfort financiers that this kind of work will become easier and cheaper than in the past, as NBAs will be ‘allowed’ to stick to the name forms that best meet the country’s needs, while a form from the country of origin, if needed, will easily be online available from a virtual international authority file (VIAF).

Authority file sharing is still being studied by FRANAR, the Working Group on Functional Requirements and Numbering for Authority Records, and has been one of the topics of a special conference in February in Florence! What is, from a practical point of view, the state of the art? In how far is for example NACO (the ‘Name Authority’ component of the American Program for Cooperative Cataloging) a substantial leg up to the international AF that we have been talking about since 1998? But whatever the answers, the use of authority control (ACL) is not self-evident. Computer search techniques have been claimed to be the instrument that renders ACL superfluous. Information specialists show great differences of opinion. If we (IFLA, JSC) still think that ACL is worthwhile [and I do], then this has to be explained. Isn’t it one of the functions of an international cataloguing code to (at least try to) create clarity in this respect?!

## *AACR and the Main Entry*

The reason for this short reflection is not authority control, but the ‘Main Entry’ concept. It is amazing that there seems to be no longer a serious dispute about the main entry principle, no public discussion within IFLA, in the United States or Europe, unless I am ill-informed. What I do know is that within the AACR revision circuit the definition of main entry (ME) is being discussed. It suggests that its application is a basic assumption to all parties involved, which is however not self-evident. It has been articulated, I think also by the JSC, that we should ‘move away from a code written for the card environment’. Rules must indeed - as much as possible - be independent of the format used for storage and communication of records. While the ME in card catalogues built according to the Paris Principles was considered an essential search-/retrieval-/citation element, the question now is whether the good old ME is also a suitable facility to serve modern users primarily searching in an electronic environment!?

There’s nothing new under the sun. More than 20 years ago, when looking at decision-factors for choosing a cataloguing system, I myself tried to analyse purpose, scope and efficacy of the ‘main entry’ system compared to alternative ones. I then concluded the ME still to be a useful concept [cf. ‘Faciliteiten en technieken van de alfabetische catalogus. - The Hague, NBLC: 1982. - 99 p.’]. The Dutch cataloguing rules present the ME system as the preferred one, but also give a rough sketch of some alternative systems.

In one of the reviews of my 1982 study it was stated that all of us would soon find out that the idea of a ME in an online environment is an anachronism! The reviewer wrote “that the traditional practice” - i.e. of ‘intellectual’ bibliographic control, of which he considered the ME a typical example - would soon be found “unaffordable and of insufficient value in light of what the new technologies can offer”. It struck me that this type of argumentation, whether right or wrong, is still topical as the words by Clifford Lynch in his dinner speech at the Bicentennial Conference on Bibliographic Control for the New Millennium in November 2000 (cf. Conf. Proc., p. xxxv) almost literally correspond with the 1982 review text! I won’t comment on the three approaches Clifford mentions (content-based and social information finding systems, next to the traditional system), but his urgent recommendation to explore possibilities for a ‘shared infrastructure’ seems to me more than useful.

## *Inevitability of the Main Entry concept?*

The ME concept is no longer self-evident; it was and is being criticized. Crucial therefore is the preliminary question about the necessity of the ME as such. Arguments will have to be provided to justify why or under which conditions it would be better to maintain the ME.

There is of course the distinction between the principle and the techniques to put the ME into practice. Realising the required recognizability/visibility and searchability (of the name of the primarily responsible person or corporate body c.q. of the title of the work/publication) can be done in different ways, dependent of the format used for information storage. The online environment offers other possibilities than the old card catalogue with its physical limitations. Though some sort of technique [e.g. supraposition of the ME heading (fixed place above the ISBD block), addition of ‘relators’, use of a marked tracing, etc.] is indispensable, it’s no more than just a means to be able to perform the ME. Objections against a particular technique are not necessarily objections against the ME as such.

Required is a clear idea of what the ME stands for, which functions are being performed by the ME, which facilities can or could be offered to the user. Not an easy question.

Though, as card catalogues are concerned it's rather easy to get a quick idea of the benefits of the ME; simply imagine a card catalogue without the ME, e.g. one with '*alternative headings*' (headings of equal value/position). In such a catalogue *a number of facilities cannot be realised*:

1. standard identification of the publication or the work, comprising sub-functions like:
  - a. immediate information on either: 1. authorship (primary responsibility) or 2. the most prominent rôle, i.e. in the view/presentation of the publisher or producer of the object (document); cf. a performing musician versus the composer of a piece of classical music;
  - b. uniform citation (which can be helpful for retrieval purposes);
  - c. pointer to other editions of the same work
2. collocation of an "author's works".

Those in favour of the ME will find this an awkward variant, probably unacceptable. On the other hand, opponents of the ME concept will argue that collocation of at least a "person's works"- i.e. also in a different rôle than author – is still possible and more than satisfactory. And ..., it can be done without choosing a ME, though not without authority control!

As to the online environment extra aspects must of course be taken into account. An international code would be the place for a more complete survey of pros and cons.

### *IFLA as discussion platform*

Has the necessity of the ME as such been discussed during the AACR revision process? Has perhaps a paper been produced? If so, does IFLA's Section on Cataloguing (S.C.) support the conclusions? However, if an 'in depth analysis' has not yet been undertaken or published, will this be done as yet? And where IFLA has qualitate qua a responsibility of its own the next question is:

*Will the maintenance or abolition of the Main Entry (or concurrence with other systems) be discussed by the S.C.?*

As to an international cataloguing code, the ME is only one of the issues that ask for a fundamental discussion. What we need is a 'broad' approach, even though the complex situation in the information area (metadata and perhaps even factual data included) won't make it easy to reach consensus on principles and methods of 'formal accessibility' (cf. the the issues now treated in Part II of AACR).

The Glasgow 2002 S.C. minutes confirm that also within IFLA the line of a broad approach is being chosen. Alas, IFLA processes are slow, perhaps too slow compared with some steps of the AACR revision process, which as such isn't speedy either! Anyway, it's very fortunate that at last there will be a an 'IFLA Meeting of experts on an international cataloguing code' (Frankfurt, July 2003). Will its result be a review of the Paris Principles!?

It suggests that from the 'Meeting' a kind of standing group will emerge. If so, then it's reasonable to assume that this group will naturally take care of the ME issue. If not, I would strongly recommend the S.C. to approach or create a working group with the assignment to monitor and protect the cohesion of all measures and guidelines in the field of formal accessibility. This working group or subcommittee, kind of counterpart to the ISBD Review Group, should advise the S.C. when asked for, but also take action of its own accord when deemed necessary. [In my opinion the ME issue might be considered a good example.]

Finally, whatever the future status of AACR, and whatever initiatives the S.C. will or will not take, close cooperation between IFLA and the JSC will in all cases be desirable.