

A Crisis in Cataloging: The Impact and Implications of the Library of Congress' Series
Authority Decision on Cooperative Cataloging

A presentation delivered at UISK on March 5, 2007
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The Library of Congress (LC) serves as the official library of the United States Congress. Technically, it is not a national library since it has no formal relationship with other U.S. libraries. Functionally, however, it is a leader for U.S. and world libraries, including the creation of catalog records and the promulgation of cataloging standards.

In this role, the library has been involved in developing many different products and activities that have been adopted for use by libraries in the U.S. and abroad. These have included catalog cards, the U.S. Cataloging-in-Publication (CIP) program, the Library of Congress Classification System, Library of Congress Subject Headings, and the development of metadata communication standards such as MARC, METS, MODS, and EAD.

In its role insuring quality control of bibliographic data, the Library of Congress maintains the National Authority File (NAF), including name, series, and subject authority records. Since the 1990's, other libraries have contributed authority records to this database, although LC retains control of the NAF through approval of authority record proposals and coordinating the training of authority record contributors. Some of the latter role has been shifted in recent years to the Program for Cooperative Cataloging.

On April 21, 2006, an announcement from LC described the decision to suspend the creation of series authority records on May 1. Nearly all series were to be described as "untraced." Nevertheless, LC would continue to provide training in the creation of series authority records. Members of the library community expressed concern about this decision, pointing out that there had been no consultation or discussion with librarians outside of LC. No studies were cited that evaluated the potential impact of the decision. Some integrated library systems will search untraced series, others will not

The reaction in the library community to these developments was swift and furious. A petition circulated on the web that was signed by many notable librarians. The Library of Congress Professional Guild, the union local representing LC's workers, passed a resolution asking the library's administration to reconsider the decision. Thomas Mann, LC reference librarian and noted speaker on library research methodology, also added his voice to the criticism over the series decision. The American Library Association division's Association for Library Collections and Technical Services criticized the decision as well. Only the Program for Cooperative Cataloging response was less critical, asserting that LC had the right to make such decisions independent of the library community.

LC's response to the criticism was to repeat its reasons for making the decision in the first place. Claiming that these were primarily economic and that there were insufficient funds to continue the same level of services as in the past, it pointed out the need to redirect funds to digital projects. Refusing to reverse its decision, it did delay implementation of the changes until June 1, 2006.

OCLC's response was to no longer treat LC's records as uneditable by member libraries. All libraries can now edit series fields for quality control. The untraced series field in LC records will not overlay series tracings in OCLC records when LC does copy cataloging.

At Oregon State University, we wanted to see what the impact of the series decision was on our own catalog. Since August, 2006, OSU has been trying to answer the following questions:

- How many untraced series are being added to the OSU catalog?
- What is the source of cataloging of these untraced series?
- Is the form of the series title in 490 0b different from the form in the series authority record?
- Do series authority records exist for these untraced series?

I have been running reports monthly from our Innovative Interfaces integrated library system, which allows queries by MARC field. I search for all records entered within the past month which have an untraced series field (MARC 490 with first indicator 0). All such series titles are then searched in the NAF.

For June to August, 2006, I had the system review 10,940 records. Of these, 179 had at least one untraced series heading. Twenty-one percent of the 179 (i.e., 37 records) required the addition of a traced series that differed from the untraced form. I found similarly small numbers of records in subsequent months that required the addition of authorized series tracings. It takes one person approximately one to one-and-a-half hours to complete analysis and revision of records each month.

Interestingly, most of the records needing revision are from either government documents or retrospective conversion of serials! Very few are records from the Library of Congress.

One reason for the small numbers may be that other libraries are editing LC records in OCLC to provide traced series and adding series authority records to the NAF before OSU catalogs current titles. We could expect more untraced series in the future if other libraries are not able to keep up with revisions and series authority record creation.

In sum, the impact on our library has been small so far with few new series being acquired and relatively few records requiring revision of series headings. Over time, one would expect the numbers to increase. Counteracting this trend is that many libraries are changing CIP and other records as they become available in OCLC, performing the cataloging tasks that LC had done in the past.

Perhaps more significant of this entire story is the change in LC's role in the U.S. and international library community. LC continues to be a significant player but a shift has occurred in responsibility from LC to other US and international libraries. There is concern over whether other libraries will follow LC's path or if they will work to counteract the impact of its decisions. It would appear the LC is reducing its role as metadata creator while continuing to encourage cooperative efforts of others in the library community. LC will continue also to channel funds and effort into digital projects.

One can discern two opposing forces in the future of cooperative cataloging. On the one hand there is the cataloging community which is seeking to continue the traditional role of catalogs and cataloging. It is making an effort to incorporate new modes of metadata creation and management in the digital world. On the other hand there are library administrators who seek cost savings as the digital world escalates. They tend to view traditional – and possibly all – metadata creation as a too-costly activity and look to business models such as Google and Amazon for answers.

Non-U.S. libraries are affected by LC's decisions as well since LC records are used around the world. For example, the National Library of the Czech Republic uses OCLC and collects U.S. imprints and likely uses LC cataloging records. It then makes LC cataloging available to Czech libraries for their own catalogs. The future National Technical Library will also use LC records. The impact of LC's series decision will be felt around the world and only time will tell how significant that will be.