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T. Gross. Invited Paper: Eliminate, Abandon, Dismantle: Cataloging in Library Consultant Reports

Invited Paper:
Eliminate, Abandon, Dismantle:
Cataloging in Library Consultant Reports

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Extended Abstract

If you worked in an academic library in 2012, you probably read the report *Redefining the Academic Library: Managing the Migration to Digital Information Services* (UAL 2011). There's a good chance that you were asked to participate in discussions organized around it. It was circulated widely and hailed as a seminal report, with very little criticism or disagreement expressed in public venues.

The report has strengths, such as its overview of the problems impeding the provision of access to ebooks and its advocacy of embedding librarians in courses and departments. Its discussion of scholarly communication models presents open access as a positive and necessary development.

From an information organization perspective, however, it is abysmal. It says nothing about the future or "redefining" of cataloging and metadata in academic libraries, other than advocating that they outsource cataloging entirely.

Overall, the report is characterized by the exultation of leanness and austerity, encouraging libraries to accommodate themselves to greatly reduced budgets and to view this as visionary and innovative. The library services that the report presents as relevant to meeting the needs of current and future users are ones already welcomed by most librarians, but it sharply counterposes the implementation of these services with the continuation of those it designates as "low-impact" activities, such as cataloging. It makes sweeping recommendations that, if implemented, could mean the demise not just of cataloging and metadata creation in academic libraries, but also of collection building and traditional reference services provided by librarians based at the user's own institution.

Despite the fact that the cataloging and library metadata community is bustling with discussion and debate about its future, it has made little response to this report. Whatever the reasons for this, the community needs to be ready to take advantage of any opportunity to engage colleagues about the role of information organization in libraries and the ways in which it ought to evolve, and to address misconceptions and false assumptions that have the potential to influence administrators.

In the spirit of developing a consistent framework, what follows is a proposed series of questions (perhaps the beginnings of a checklist) that catalogers should attempt to answer when analyzing and responding to consultant's reports. They are posed here to *Redefining the Academic Library*.

What does this report say about innovation and advances in cataloging?

One might expect some reference to linked data, RDA, and FRBR, or to the replacement of MARC format, but none of these are even mentioned. The only "innovation" or "advance" discussed is for libraries to stop doing it.

What role does this report maintain or assume that libraries should have in producing the metadata they use?

The report urges academic libraries to approach cataloging as something we pay others to do, not as something we do. It says (UAL 2011, xii),

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As one contact put it, "We don't need a thousand different descriptions of the same book." The ability to standardize and share basic catalog entries for almost all holdings eliminates much of the need for dedicated catalogers in academic libraries. Books can now be purchased "shelf-ready" from vendors, arriving fully processed and ready to lend to patrons.

By "a thousand different descriptions," are they referring to copy cataloging with time-consuming local modifications, or do they think that every library creates its own description of each book? Do they think the ability to standardize and share basic catalog entries is a recent development, or that it has no connection to the existence of dedicated catalogers in academic libraries? Do they believe that vendor prices will stay the same if they have to create all of the records themselves?

How does this report address the impact of the quality of cataloging/metadata on users?

In reference to the limitations of the Espresso Book Machine, it says "Poor metadata in existing catalog makes discovery difficult" (UAL 2011, 32).

There's no recognition that this is often a problem with catalog records provided by vendors.

Does this report present the discontinuation of activities or cutting of services as innovation?

Yes, particularly in presenting the new library at UC Merced as having been able to "jump directly into the lean, flexible end state" that it advocates. The overview provided of this desirable end state emphasizes reduced or discontinued services, including "Minimal physical collection," "No subject librarians on staff," "Outsourced technical services," "No reference desk," and "Outsourced reference service through phone, e-mail, chat and workshops" (UAL 2011, 18).

Does this report propose a model that's sustainable if adopted by all/most libraries?

Despite indicating the UC Merced is dependent on resources and services provided by other libraries (it is able to have a minimal physical collection because its users have access to massive collections at other UC institutions; outsourcing reference and technical services is possible because other libraries contribute to the staffing of services like QuestionPoint and create many of the catalog records that are sold by vendors), the report asserts that "UC Merced symbolizes a fundamentally different future for libraries at all levels, and provides proof that such a future is indeed viable even at research institutions" (UAL 2011, 18).

This report recommends a parasitical relationship to the rest of library community, but says nothing about how this model could be sustained if all academic libraries adopted it.

Does this report present austerity as immutable?

Budget cuts, lack of resources, and more and more austerity with no end in sight are assumed. Taking austerity for granted and embracing it eagerly is presented as, in itself, progressive and bold. There is no inkling that challenging, resisting, or even questioning budget cuts might be possible. The reasons for which austerity is being imposed on academic libraries (and universities) are assumed to be legitimate and indisputable.

Reference

University Leadership Council. 2011. *Redefining the academic library: managing the migration to digital information services.* Available http://www.educationadvisoryboard.com/pdf/23634-EAB-Redefining-the-Academic-Library.pdf.

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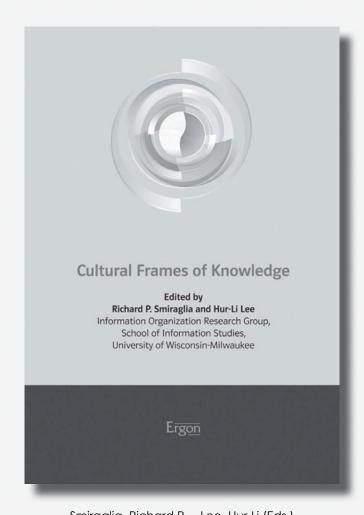
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