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Authority Control is Alive and ... Well?

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Reports of the demise of authority control have been greatly exaggerated. Although such features as keyword searching, truncation, and Boolean coordination have greatly enhanced the possibilities for retrieval, they have not eliminated the need for authority control. In fact, as our databases have grown, merged in consortia, and expanded their scope, the need for authority control has never been greater.

The primary functions of authority control are well known: it assures that all access points are consistent, and it helps guide searchers to the correct heading by means of references from other terms one might search under (Taylor, 1984). An additional function has become more prominent in recent years: that of facilitating the automatic clean up and maintenance of headings in a database. It is this function that concerns us here.

Arguments against authority control are often based not so much on its inefficacy, but on its infeasibility, that is, that the costs of authority control outweigh its potential benefits. Thus it is encouraging that computer technology, while not eliminating the

need for authority control, has begun to do much both to improve its benefits and to reduce its costs. In more and more catalogs, the benefits of authority control are being extended to users—not only the “invisible” benefit of having consistent headings, but also the very visible use of references, complex reference notes, and scope notes to aid and enhance the searching process. At the same time, more sophisticated automated authority control systems, and better services from authority control vendors, are bringing the costs of authority control down to within the reach of even small libraries.

In the past, a cataloger who encountered a newly authorized heading that differed from the library’s existing headings may have been reluctant to adopt the established form, because the time and resources needed to update the existing records were not available. Likewise, when an authorized heading was updated, older records might be left unchanged, resulting in a split catalog and confusion for users.

This need no longer be the case. Authority control systems, using the same syndetic structure that guides searchers to valid headings, can also automatically map headings from invalid or earlier forms to the correct ones. For example, recently some 600 subject headings beginning with “Afro-American” were changed to forms beginning “African American.” At the time, my library had just implemented an in-house automated authority control module, and what would have been a tedious and time-consuming project was performed correctly and almost effortlessly overnight.

The use of authority records to correct and maintain headings is not a new idea—Michael Gorman spoke of it in 1979 at institutes held by the Library and Information Technology Association (Gorman, 1982)—but in recent years it has grown into a widely used and indeed essential part of database maintenance. Automated



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authority control systems can be used to clean up an existing database, provide ongoing authority control for current cataloging, and keep the entire database synchronized with changes in headings.

Very often, this involves the use of outside vendors. At first, it might seem surprising that such a specialized area as authority control would be amenable to outsourcing. However, one must distinguish here between authority work and authority control. The former involves determining the forms of new headings and establishing them according to the rules. The latter refers to maintaining bibliographic headings in accordance with established forms (Taylor, 1984). Authority work is an intellectual endeavor requiring research and a high level of expertise; authority control can often be achieved through automated means.

Vendors who provide authority control services (Library Technologies, Inc., Blackwell North America, and OCLC to name a few) can perform quickly and relatively inexpensively work that many libraries would be unable to do at all in house. This is particularly true for libraries that have not practiced authority control in the past, have not retrospectively maintained headings, or have outsourced a large retrospective conversion project. Local systems are not designed to authorize en masse the headings in a large bibliographic file; authority records must still be individually identified and loaded into the local system. Authority control vendors, however, can run vast numbers of bibliographic records against the entire national authority file, linking headings and flipping those that match “see” references to the authorized form. They may employ special matching algorithms to link headings that would otherwise be missed because of minor errors or differences. The corrected bibliographic records can be returned to the library in a short time (minutes to weeks, depending on the number of records) for reloading,

along with a file of all the authority records to which bibliographic headings were linked. Vendors can also keep track of which authority records a library already has, so that future work will result in only new authorities being sent. The entire process can be made routine, and is quick and inexpensive enough that many libraries have eliminated authority checking during cataloging. It would seem that outsourcing authority control is an ideal solution to an otherwise expensive and time-consuming procedure.

Or is it? How effective is the service provided by vendors? The surprising answer is that it seems no one really knows. Certainly, there have been many reports of experiences with vendor-provided authority control, and generally these have indicated a successful and satisfying result. (See for example Lam, 2001; Tsui and Hinders, 1998; Johns, 1997; Bailey and Deemer, 1997.) Vendors are sometimes reported as having been able to link over 95 percent of the headings in a database to an authority record. However, I was unable to find a single report indicating how many of the headings were *correctly* authorized. The assumption seems to be that once a bibliographic heading is either matched to an authorized heading, or flipped to one via a “see” reference, it is considered to be correct.

My own experience leads me to believe this is often not the case. I recall being surprised to see the heading *Kool G Rap (Musician)* as a main entry for a legal report from 1903. The name in the title statement was Nathaniel Wilson, which, it turned out, is the singer’s real name, and naturally appears as a “see” reference in his authority record. Without dates to differentiate the headings, and without a human checker to spot the error, our authority control vendor had automatically flipped the heading. I changed it back to *Wilson, Nathaniel*. However, after I had loaded the authority records provided to us by the vendor, our own in-house



authority control system performed the same procedure, and the rap singer was back. At this point, our principal rare book cataloger did the necessary research and established *Wilson, Nathaniel, 1836 to 1922* through NACO.

Stories like this have been around. The most famous example is the mapping of *Madonna* (the singer) to *Mary, Blessed Virgin, Saint* (DeCandido, 1990). Unfortunately, most such errors are not nearly so egregious and easy to spot, but if you search through OCLC or RLIN long enough, you will find some very interesting things. For example, Edgar Powell, an English historian born in 1853, also apparently performed in *The King and I* in the 1960s. *Cartwright, David W., 1939-* somehow managed to write *Natural history of western wild animals ...* in 1875.

Subject headings are not immune. *Under China* painters you will find, as expected, works on the painting of porcelain plates. However, you will also find works on painters who live in China. (Automated systems have apparently confused the perfectly valid heading *Painters-China* with the “see” reference *Painters, China*, and flipped the heading inappropriately.) Oddly, *New York (Colony)* appears in many subject headings, although it is only valid as a name; many of these are followed by corporate bodies (e.g., *New York (Colony) Public Library*) that did not exist until after New York became a state. Errors like this are explainable as a by-product of automated authority control; it is unlikely that a human cataloger would have made such mistakes.

How many headings are linked in error by automated systems? That is difficult to say. Much certainly depends on the sophistication of the system or vendor used, the nature of the collection, and the library’s past cataloging practices. Clearly the vast majority of headings are being correctly authorized. But it is also clear that some damage is being done to the integrity of our bibliographic files.

Does this really matter? Does the occasional wrong heading make that much difference? I strongly believe that it does. First, even if the percentage of errors is tiny, when there are millions of headings, that is still a lot of errors. Furthermore, these are errors that directly affect a record’s retrievability, without which nothing else matters. Second, there is no systematic way to find these errors. Most can be found only by chance, and few are as obvious as Kool G Rap. Third, a record with an incorrect heading may be uploaded to a bibliographic utility, where other libraries may copy catalog from it until the error begins to acquire a kind of truth.

Vendors certainly do not carry all the blame. Automated authority control in local systems operates on the same principles and will create the same errors if not carefully monitored. Authority control is subtle and complex, and unso-

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phisticated matching algorithms have certainly caused many errors. But the real problem lies in the assumption that any bibliographic heading that matches a “see” reference can be positively identified with the heading pointed to by that reference. This assumption is often incorrect, particularly with common names that are undifferentiated by dates.

Most libraries that contract with a vendor for authority control want to see as many of their headings authorized as possible. As long as quantity instead of quality remains the more important criterion by which vendors are evaluated, and as long as no one is really checking on the results, competitive pressures will lead vendors to try to link as many headings as possible, increasing the likelihood of inaccurate matching. There are still many names for which no authority records exist, and these will sometimes be linked to someone else who happens to have a similar name.

Many libraries opt for vendor-supplied authority control because the cost can be considerably less than that of doing it locally, although many administrators fail to consider the additional costs of maintaining the system, and monitoring and cleaning up the results. Unfortunately, the inadequacies of local systems also leave many libraries with no choice but to outsource authority control or do without. Better systems would allow more libraries to perform authority control in house.

Authority control remains essential in meeting the objectives of a catalog. It is what sets our catalogs apart from almost every other kind of information retrieval system (need I mention the Web?), and as such we should embrace it. The more than 6 million authority records created by the Library of Congress and the cooperative programs represent an immense intellectual achievement and a treasure in which we all have a share. Full authority control is at last becoming achievable. Automated systems are a necessary part of this, but we

must own the process and demand more of both our systems and our vendors. 

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