

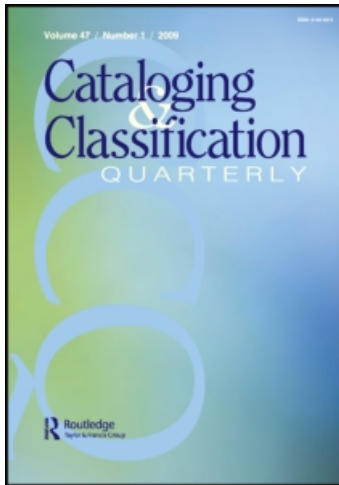
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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 783016864]

Publisher Routledge

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## Cataloging & Classification Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t792303976>

### The Perfect Bibliographic Record: Platonic Ideal, Rhetorical Strategy or Nonsense?

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Online Publication Date: 17 September 2008

**To cite this Article** Bade, David(2008)'The Perfect Bibliographic Record: Platonic Ideal, Rhetorical Strategy or Nonsense?',Cataloging & Classification Quarterly,46:1,109 — 133

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/01639370802183081

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01639370802183081>

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# The Perfect Bibliographic Record: Platonic Ideal, Rhetorical Strategy or Nonsense?

David Bade

**ABSTRACT.** Discussions of quality in library catalogs and bibliographic databases often refer to “the perfect record.” This paper examines the usage of that phrase in the library literature, finding that its predominant use is as a rhetorical strategy for reducing the complex and context-dependent issue of quality to an absurdity, thus permitting the author to ignore or dismiss all issues of quality. Five documents in which the phrase is not used in this fashion are examined and their value for understanding the inextricably intertwined values of quantity and quality are discussed. The author recommends rejecting both the rhetoric of “the perfect record” and satisfaction with “the imperfect record.”

**KEYWORDS.** Metadata quality, database quality, cataloging standards

## *THE PERFECT RECORD*

Last year Charles Blair, the co-director of the Digital Library Development Center of the University of Chicago Library, remarked to me that at an interview a cataloger had protested that he was not dedicated to the pursuit of “the perfect record.” He asked me what do catalogers mean when they speak of the “perfect record”? It was such a simple

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Cataloging & Classification Quarterly, Vol. 46(1) 2008

Available online at <http://ccq.haworthpress.com>

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doi:10.1080/01639370802183081

sounding question, but I was unable to answer. I was aware that there had been references to the “perfect record” in the library literature, but I had never seriously thought about what that might mean. More recently, in his summary of my talk at the May 9th meeting of the Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control, Clifford Lynch made remarks to the effect that we need to move away from thinking about perfect records to thinking about resource allocation (variously reported without reference to “the perfect record” in Lindner and Hillmann’s blogs).<sup>1</sup>

Where did “the perfect record” come from? When did it appear? I first encountered “the perfect record” in Intner’s (1990) essay “Copy cataloging and the perfect record mentality.”<sup>2</sup> Responding to that article in a 2002 publication, I wrote

Intner sets up the impossible goal of the “perfect catalog,” one that requires catalogers with language and subject expertise. Having asserted that this is economically impossible, she then asks: “Who cares if the perfect catalog is doomed?” Her response: “Not I.”<sup>3</sup>

adding in a footnote “Perfect is impossible because humans are imperfect; as a goal toward which we strive it is essential.”<sup>4</sup>

When the phrase “the perfect record” or a variant thereof first appeared in the library literature I do not know. Steinhagen and Moynahan claimed that “For at least one hundred years, catalogers have been committed to creating perfect bibliographic records”<sup>5</sup>, while Mason<sup>6</sup> dates the origins of the debate “between cataloguing quickly for user access, versus striving for a perfect record” in the rise of library automation and the sharing of catalog copy.

The earliest instance of the phrase which I was able to locate was in a brief note in *Library Journal* in 1978:

And Cornell gave its definition of the “perfect record”—one in which the 049 field, cutter number, and series tags are the only changes necessary.<sup>7</sup>

but the use of quotation marks in this note suggests that already the phrase raised eyebrows and therefore quotation marks.

That note from 1978 is an interesting note, not only because it is the earliest mention of the phrase that I could find and it is in scare quotes, but for several other reasons. It is one of only three matches in EBSCO’s Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Text (it

does not appear in EBSCO's Library Literature and Information Science database). It claims that Cornell offered a definition of "the perfect record" and reproduces that definition. Most of all, the published version of the presentation which this note discusses appeared the following year and in that paper there is no mention of "the perfect record." That paper deserves our full attention.

### ***THE PERFECT RECORD OR THE AUTHORITATIVE RECORD?***

"The Quality of OCLC Bibliographic Records: The Cornell Law Library Experience" by Christian M. Boussonnas was published in 1979, "an expanded version of a presentation made on 6 October 1977."<sup>8</sup> It is one of the most perceptive, theoretically sound and carefully written papers on bibliographic quality that I have ever read. The second paragraph makes it clear that the author is concerned not with some objective abstract ideal but a practical goal which is consistently achieved at Cornell.

There is not even common agreement on what quality is when applied to a bibliographic record. The purpose of this paper is to explain what it means in the Cornell Law Library and to show what it costs for this particular library to achieve the quality which it deems necessary.<sup>9</sup>

The author elaborates on general aspects of quality in bibliographic records in the next section, noting specifically issues regarding standards and the varying significance and importance of data elements across types of libraries, as well as over time:

Quality is a concept which means different things to different institutions. When applied to a bibliographic record, it means that what is of high quality for one, because each data element has been verified somewhere, is unacceptable to another because the record is not in the ISBD format or does not have all the added entries it could have. It is only by examining these records against predetermined standards that one can say that one record is of higher (or lower) quality than another. Lacking these standards, it is difficult to argue that one institution's definition of quality is better or worse than another's.

When dealing with the OCLC database, the problem of definition is compounded because not all data elements in a record are equally important to all members. Moreover, it is difficult to anticipate whether certain data elements, which are important now, will still be as important in the future.<sup>10</sup>

He closes the section with remarks on the cost of quality control:

Given the great pressure to input as quickly and therefore as cheaply as possible, there is a real tendency to follow the minimum available standards. This may have rather unfortunate consequences in the future on the ability of users of the OCLC database to retrieve bibliographic data. The current standards are loose enough to almost guarantee that, for many, the conflict between quality and quantity of input will be resolved in favor of quantity. . . . the question which each library must resolve is: "Given our resources and the current standards, how much quality can we afford to provide?" . . . As will be seen, quality control costs a great deal.<sup>11</sup>

Following these general remarks Boissonnas offers Cornell Law Library's definition of quality—not a definition of the perfect record—a definition which "as applied to the OCLC database assumes that there is something which, for lack of a better term, can be called an authoritative bibliographic record." He then defines "authoritative bibliographic record" as

any record for which no modification needs to be made except in the following:

- The 049 field
- The cutter number
- The series tags

[since] information in these fields is essentially local in character.<sup>12</sup>

What is the difference between an authoritative bibliographic record (without scare quotes and with an indefinite article) and "the perfect record" (within quotation marks and with a definite article)? According to Boissonnas, an authoritative record is a record that is acceptable to a particular institution in all of those elements that are not locally deter-

mined. This implies that what is there is correct, and that the elements required by the particular standards which the institution embraces are all present, insofar as they can be determined from the item in hand.

Without knowing whether or not Boissonnas actually used the phrase “perfect record” in the original presentation, it is impossible to do anything more than guess at the connotations which the author of the note in *Library Journal* intended to convey by means of the quotation marks, but the use of the definite article is definitely inappropriate, a twisting of the carefully stated context in which Boissonnas situated his authoritative record: the goals of one library, which will differ from the goals of other libraries. What the *Library Journal* note appears to convey, is exactly the same connotations as the phrase “the perfect record” (and its variants: perfect catalog, single most perfect record, etc.) suggests in the statements by Lynch and Intner mentioned above as well as a host of other writers using that phrase since then. “The perfect record” is introduced in order to discredit and dismiss discussions of qualitative aspects of cataloging in which originally there were no references to perfection.

### ***THE IDEOLOGY OF THE PERFECT RECORD***

Searching the literature for the “perfect record” revealed no advocates of “the perfect record” but many denouncers. If no one is advocating perfect records, why are so many people denouncing them? Here are a few of the remarks which I found, mostly from material located via Google since only four items could be located by searching “perfect record” in the EBSCO databases:

Many contributors to library literature assume as a given that catalogers are concerned with a Platonic vision of a perfect record and an almost obsessive regard for how they are ranked by their peers.<sup>13</sup>

Current trends in information service won't permit catalogers to continue keeping faith with the ideal of producing perfect catalogs made up of perfect catalog records. Remaining faithful to our ideals in the face of what is happening in the field is worse than quixotic, it spells doom to the essence of cataloging and discredits what catalogers can and should be doing instead of creating perfect records.<sup>14</sup>

Catalogers had become too focussed on creating the perfect record according to LC standards.<sup>15</sup>

Cataloging should be defined in terms of function and access rather than in terms of conformity to rules and achievement of the “perfect record.”<sup>16</sup>

[A] less than perfect record is better than no record.<sup>17</sup>

There are many options for creating or obtaining records for electronic content. With basic tools like those described in this article, even the largest of databases can be handled in some way, even if it does not mean creating the perfect record. Perhaps there is no perfect record.<sup>18</sup>

We need to go beyond the perfect record if we were [sic] to save the eminent decline of our catalogs.<sup>19</sup>

. . . I suggest that readers spread their focus more broadly and pay attention to a theme that emerges in everything else I discuss here: the idea that the single perfect record is just not enough. . . that we need to focus on discovery as a discipline. . . in the end both our users and our profession will be better served if we rethink how we are doing things and focus on providing the best aggregate user experience versus the most perfect single record.<sup>20</sup>

In these and many other texts “the perfect record” is simply a rhetorical strategy for dismissing all issues concerning quality by reducing the very complex and context dependent notion of quality to what is implied in the phrase “the perfect record.” It is a phrase used almost entirely by those who categorically reject it in the context of demands for or questions concerning quality.

One good example of this reduction can be found in Deeken’s report on the January 2005 discussion group meeting of the ALCTS Heads of Technical Services at Medium Sized Libraries.<sup>21</sup> One of the eight topics discussed at this meeting was “The myth of the perfect cataloging record”. The report of the discussion of this topic begins with the statement (in quotation marks) “There is no such thing as a perfect cataloging record and people should get over trying to create one.” Fair enough. But what followed that assertion? Another quote from the meeting: “Nobody’s willing to pay for highest level cataloging in a Google environ-

ment. Maintaining systems and technology that are now out-dated—it's like spending money on building the ideal buggy." The "perfect record" is equated with the ideal buggy; neither goal nor ideal, but a useless out of date relic from the past. The report continues:

A major shift in emphasis from catalog perfection to patron need is taking place. Suggestions for ways to approach cataloging include not spending lots of time on precise call numbers; examining the priority of assigning subject headings; investing less time during cataloging process and anticipate an acceptable error rate; weighing precision versus recall; cataloging based on access as opposed to cataloging expertise; and adding a culture of a value-added focus.<sup>22</sup>

The quality of information is deemed to have no direct relation to patron need—a curious disjunction which leads one to ask what patron needs are being discussed. Smith argued that

If excellence has any relation to customer satisfaction (and it should), then in terms of cataloging the seeming contradictions between quantity and quality, and between production and development vanish under the higher rubric of the constant purpose of service (i.e., customer satisfaction demands both a qualitative and quantitative focus).<sup>23</sup>

but he was not arguing for "the perfect record."

Perhaps because "the perfect record" is almost always used to indicate an impossibility or absurdity, among the many publications on bibliographical record, catalog and database quality there appear to be only two articles which directly address "the perfect record" in their title. The first, quoted and briefly discussed above, was Intner (1990). In her article she offered three reasons why "the perfect catalog" is a waste of our time and money:

1. the continuing information explosion;
2. computerization of bibliographic services;
3. the real cost of perfect catalogers.<sup>24</sup>

Because of the first development, collection development is hopeless, she claims, and cataloging even more so. Of the second development, she states



I believe the fullness and accuracy in records produced by machines will far outstrip those in records produced by humans in most library cataloging departments . . . If cataloging were removed from the hands of well-meaning but unschooled library staff and put into the realm of automatic computerized production, it would improve immediately. Between trusting a host of different humans with different educations, backgrounds, biases, and capabilities or a host of different computers all running the same expertly-programmed system to do the best job of cataloging, I'll bet on the computer every time.<sup>25</sup>

Her economic argument rests on the assumption that intelligent people will not work in the library for less than professors and managers, the proof against which I offer my own 30 years in libraries and the even longer careers of many of my colleagues. On all three counts, then, Intner is ill-informed, perhaps most of all in her estimation of what computers do. Since we cannot have perfect catalogers (too expensive), we cannot hope to get perfect records, and thus no perfect catalog, therefore she claims that she is and we all should be happy with faulty records.

The only other article specifically focusing on "the perfect record" that I was able to locate was an undated paper by Moya Mason available on her website.<sup>26</sup> The title suggests that Mason is indeed looking for "the perfect record," but the text informs us otherwise. She makes some rather curious claims, asserting that "Original cataloguing is seen as the ultimate in the library world, and by many, to be practically free of mistakes because librarians with their MLS degrees do the lion's share of the work." She rightly suggests that this is unrealistic and that human inequalities, the type of training and character traits such as diligence, dependability, precision and commitment are the real causes of discrepancies in the quality of records found in our databases. She states that "there has been a definite move away from the ideology of the perfect database, to an emphasis on meeting the needs of users," but when she describes "what catalogers are looking for" she does not write of "the perfect record" but "the most appropriate record." Yet she continues one sentence later with the remark "What every library wants are perfect records, but they often settle for a compromise of sorts." She sheds no light on what are the virtues, vices and differences between appropriate and perfect records, but her reference to the move away from the ideology of the perfect record to meeting the needs of users does direct us to the real source of the perfect record rhetoric.

When “the perfect record” appears in the library literature, it is most often (in fact, almost always) associated with discussions of “quality” cataloging as a retrograde insistence on the retention of arcane and expensive practices that had demonstrated insufficient benefit (e.g., Thomas<sup>27</sup> and Deeken’s report discussed previously). Harris and Marshall (1998) quoted one library director’s remarks on “the perfect record” as “I think we worry far too much about that sort of thing” following that with another quote “To build a collection for the researcher of the future? We simply cannot do that.” They described library directors’ attitudes towards catalogers thus:

Denigrating those who have applied ‘excessively high’ standards in cataloging . . . The work of cataloging is not skilled work, their comments suggest, rather an activity over-rated and over-controlled by the people who performed it. In this fashion, professional catalogers are held up to be somehow silly, small-minded or, at the very least, off base.<sup>28</sup>

The administrators surveyed by Hafter (1986) were not the same ones surveyed by Harris and Marshall, but the attitudes were the same. While I have not seen the questionnaire used by Harris and Marshall, neither of Hafter’s questionnaires—the one for catalogers and the one for administrators—mention “the perfect record” but the discussion of the findings of her survey is full of such references. (Did this come from the interviewees or from Hafter? I do not know, but Hafter did inaccurately indicate that the quest for the perfect record was part of Boissonnas’ article published in 1979.)

What are these unbeneficial overrated arcane and expensive practices pursued by silly, small-minded, retrograde, obsessive and isolated librarians called catalogers? Boissonnas (1979) spelled out exactly what these were at Cornell in 1979, and the two assumptions underlying them:

Each record used must be in the ISBD format, it must be cataloged according to the AACR code and Library of Congress practice, and it must be as complete as possible. In this framework, there is no such thing as an optional field. All fields are either mandatory or required if available. . . . The cataloger does not go to undue lengths to find this information but provides it if it is available anywhere on the item being catalogued . . .

The assumptions underlying this procedure are two. First, CLL believes that the more complete a record is at the input stage, the greater its chances of being retrieved under any number of search algorithms that will be available in the future. Second, CLL believes that it has an obligation as a member of the OCLC network to input the most complete and accurate records possible.<sup>29</sup>

Boissonnas' language is not that of "the perfect record" nor of any such ideology. It is rooted in a sound understanding of what socio-technical information systems require, and the expectation that future systems will offer more search strategies and therefore users will demand more. His assumptions are not only pragmatic and technologically sound, but ethical as well, as he recognized that in networked and shared databases no one catalogs for themselves and their institution alone, and that the product of our labours will be used by future generations of users and technical systems.

### ***RESPONSIBILITY BEYOND IDEOLOGY***

Like Boissonnas, De Gennaro never mentioned the perfect record. He understood that future users and systems will demand more, not less: more standards, more accuracy, more expense, more information, more capabilities and more benefits.<sup>30</sup> All of Intner's (1990) arguments against the perfect cataloger, the perfect record, and the perfect catalog were refuted by De Gennaro in 1981 without him mentioning "the perfect record." Why? Perhaps because he was focusing on the realities facing a research library desirous of providing excellent rather than faulty bibliographic service. "Computer-based systems" he noted, "impose much higher standards of accuracy on cataloging and catalog maintenance." The demanding scholars we serve will make us "pay dearly to input, maintain, and search the detailed records required" because "We are no longer merely automating . . . we are multiplying our capabilities and raising the level of expectations of library staff and users alike." Information, he declared, is "an increasingly valuable and expensive resource. . . . Cheap information and cheap research libraries are going the way of cheap energy."

There were only five mentions of "the perfect record" which I found to be responsible, informed and beyond ideology. Those five documents, like Boissonnas' paper, deserve attention not only for their remarks on "the perfect record" but for discussing the very real problems

of database quality in an era of shared data without transforming that into a simple problem of quantity. The first of those which I want to discuss—Campbell’s report on retrospective conversion of a map collection<sup>31</sup>—openly discusses quality as a problem rather than an (impossible) ideal, an approach I found refreshingly honest. The second—Mowat on the future of Edinburgh University Library<sup>32</sup>—sets the not-doing of perfect records in the wider context of not doing a lot of other things; again, a wonderful contrast to those who describe imperfect (faulty, below minimal level) cataloging as the answer to all our library woes. The third paper is a perfectly (if I may) frank discussion of the relationship between a library’s goals and their achievement, issued by the National Library of Australia.<sup>33</sup> The fourth contribution is also one of the most recent: a 2006 address by Martha Yee at the seminar “Beyond the OPAC.”<sup>34</sup> And finally Robertson’s short essay on what metadata quality means for the LIS community.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Campbell: Retrospective Conversion of a Special Collection***

Campbell’s article on retrospective conversion of the British Library’s map catalogs discusses a number of problems associated with catalogs as historical objects, leading this reader to think about the on-line catalog and databases as historical artefacts as well.

Treating mapping as a continuum from the earliest times to the present is logical. But it immediately brings you face to face with ‘quality,’ because the catalogue descriptions also represent a long date-span. Inevitably, this means records of different style, completeness and accuracy. . . . How could we sacrifice the quality of the current records by mixing them up with the old?<sup>36</sup>

He goes on to identify four kinds of deficiencies in the catalogs to be converted to electronic form: “omitted information, inaccuracy, data expressed in the wrong way, and structural problems.” The first of these if unaddressed will simply mean that “the converted catalogue will be no worse than its printed predecessor.” The second will be partially corrected when the geographical and authority headings are edited as a whole in the converted form. Finally, data expressed in the wrong way and structural problems (e.g., variant typography) should be dealt with in the specifications for those keyboarding the catalogs.

Campbell then insists on making a distinction between a bibliography and a library catalogue—a distinction stressed by Osborne in 1936<sup>37</sup>—and how these serve library users in different ways.

We expect from a cartobibliography to be able to distinguish similar maps, and we look for a full and clear statement of the bibliographical relationship of one variant to another. A library catalogue, on the other hand, should be judged firstly by how well it provides access to the geographical content of the listed material. . . . We see it as our task to lead the user, quickly and helpfully, to anything that might be of relevance. Thereafter, it is up to them to examine the items for themselves.

What the conversion process is focusing on is “headings and indexed elements rather than unsearchable factors.” In accepting certain compromises rather than striving for an “impossible perfection” Campbell insisted that the library was not acting irresponsibly.

It seems unarguable to me that it is more important to have some kind of record for every map than a perfect record for some of them. This does not rule out further improvement. Retroconversion should not be seen as a ‘once and for all’ operation. . . . The most serious defect of some of our own earlier records is the lack of a date. Since date will probably be used to refine most searches, this means that the records concerned would simply not appear. This is perhaps the most urgent of the future editing tasks.

Assuming at the start that the project will be ongoing and involve future editing tasks that may not even be imagined today is an attitude that bodes well for the project.

Campbell mentions yet another factor that deserves special mention. The British Library had never cataloged the contents of its pre-1800 maps bound into atlases. These are the greater part of most historical map collections, he noted, and therefore of great interest to cartographers. These would not have been part of the retrospective conversion project at all except for a blessed event:

Rodney Shirley, the well known cartobibliographer, volunteered to describe the contents of our pre-1800 atlases. These will be published in the form of collations, and the entries will also be added to a later edition of the CD-ROM. The records have not been cre-

ated by a librarian and they do not fully conform to the complex AACR2 cataloguing rules. What matters is that we shall be able, for the first time in our history, to provide a full answer to questions such as: ‘how many pre-1800 maps of Catalonia are there in the British Library?’

To my thinking, having a scholar describe material in his or her field for the use of others in that field is likely to produce a more valuable catalog than any produced by anyone else not involved in that scholarship, AACR or no. I can think of no more perfect solution to the British Library’s pre-1800 atlas problem than the solution it found.

### ***Mowat: The Future of Edinburgh University Library***

Mowat’s article includes a number of disturbing remarks about librarians, the culture of libraries, and the future of library employees of all sorts. Having noted that, I want to pass over that and look at some of his more surprising and provocative statements. After discussing financial matters and at the end of the section on the library’s response to them, Mowat states

It is accepted that the library may have attempted too much in promising to deliver services in the past. A willingness to agree to do something on paper and then not deliver has not been uncommon and the consequential discrepancy between intention and performance may be increasing as resources diminish. . . . Promising less and fulfilling more should be one of the Library’s top priorities.<sup>38</sup>

It should be understood that offering users a catalog or database which promises to be able to search by series, genre, publisher, date, language, subject and so on which is nevertheless populated with bibliographical records which lack this information (imperfect, faulty, minimal level records) is a perfect case of Mowat’s discrepancy between promise and performance.

The next section is *Priorities*, and this begins with the blunt statement “Priorities must include stopping doing things.” As part of this approach to priorities Mowat notes “the continued pursuit of the most cost-effective way of data creation. Quality in cataloguing does not mean producing the theoretically perfect record but in getting a useable record out in a time suitable for the greatest demand—usually closest to

the time of acquisition.” This is a familiar enough refrain in the American library literature, but Mowat does not stop there. External users will be charged to use the library (a change to be introduced in 1999, according to the paper). Furthermore, he argues, “the cost of holding largely unused collections is no longer acceptable and it is necessary to examine critically what is collected, why it is collected and how it is collected,” an approach quite the contrary of Intner’s claim that collection development is impossible.<sup>39</sup>

From the American perspective, that seems to be a dismal, terrible future. And I agree. But Mowat sees the problems and faces them by telling the story straight: no money, no honey. American librarians prefer to bury the truth behind false statements such as “more, cheaper, faster, better.” On this side of the Atlantic, we do exactly what Mowat refuses to do: promise more and deliver less.

### *National Library of Australia: Cataloging Workflows*<sup>40</sup>

This document addresses two concerns related to the distinction made in Campbell (1992): the difference between bibliography and library catalogs. Many Australian libraries do not only catalog for their library or a consortium, but for the Australian National Bibliographical Database (ANBD). Section 5 of the paper (Best Practice Workflows) addresses issues of library objectives, policies, priorities, conflicts among goals, types of libraries, size of staff, quality standards, contributing to the ANBD, cost and much more. It is a brief but excellent description of what needs to be taken into account in library workflows. Some of the statements most relevant to this paper are the following:

There is no single definition of best practice that would apply absolutely to every library. For example, a library that does not need to deliver material to users promptly but is subject to an imperative to catalogue to the highest standard (e.g., where data is destined for a National Bibliography), will have one definition of best practice. Another library with users waiting for ordered material to be available as soon as possible will have another definition of best practice. Each must define what its cataloguing operation should achieve and then set about developing best practice within that definition.

Therefore, best practice for most libraries can be defined as achieving the quickest flow through of material at the lowest cost without sacrificing a specified level of quality.

Models of best practice will vary in different library environments. However, the one essential starting point is that the requirements for cataloguing have to be clear and well documented.

Clarity as to what any operation should achieve is a critical factor underpinning best practice. The balance between efficiency and quality needs to be addressed and priorities clarified. Cataloguing and technical services staff must have a clear understanding of what they are expected to achieve and be committed to that outcome. Formal statements are important but the crucial factor is open and consistent communication. Without a clear, library held understanding of what is required of cataloguing; it is not possible to aspire to any notion of best practice.

If a library has not thought through exactly what it requires of its cataloguing operation, the result may be that cataloguing staff are faced with conflicting requirements. They may have to work towards specified throughput targets while also working to time-consuming quality requirements and may end up meeting neither requirement or sacrificing one for the other.

Cataloguing and technical services staff and managers need to have a clear and shared understanding of expectations. Time consuming requirements such as correcting every error in a copy record, extensive checking, local customisation, locally maintained manuals, extensive record keeping, etc., should only be undertaken if they are required to support the goals of the cataloguing operation as defined by the library.

Cataloguing best practice includes reference to quality where this is of relevance to the library's objectives. However, the pursuit of the "perfect" record can create complexities in workflow and absorb considerable resources in the process. It also begs the question of a definition of the "perfect" record.

Timeliness of contributions and maintenance of data, particularly holdings information, are important considerations for all libraries that use the ANBD. Timely data contribution, data quality and ANBD coverage directly influence the effectiveness of the ANBD as a source of copy cataloguing and enhance the efficiency of resource sharing activities between libraries.



The conclusion is spectacular, as it leaves all of these matters to be determined by what the individual institution wants to achieve:

All Australian libraries are encouraged to determine what their cataloguing operation should achieve and then set about ensuring that desired outcome.

### *Yee and the User<sup>41</sup>*

Martha Yee's remarks at the Australian Committee on Cataloging's seminar "Beyond the OPAC: future directions for Web-based catalogues" included a section entitled Current misconceptions. The first of these involves the perfect record.

Misconception 1: All users need to find a single perfect bibliographic record that fulfils their information need.

Correction to misconception 1: Most users are looking for one of the following entities: (a) a particular work of which the author and/or the title is known; (b) works on a particular subject; (c) the works of a particular author. Each of these entities will be represented in a catalog of any size by many records of many different kinds, including authority records which contain variant terms for the works, subjects and authors users seek, multiple bibliographic records for all of the expression-manifestations of a sought work, or a work on a sought subject, and holdings records. The user will not achieve optimal results unless the catalog software can deal with complex indexing and with the assemblage of all of these types of records into complex, readily scannable and well organized displays.

Like so many other discussions of "the perfect record," Yee's remarks pull us away from the catalog record to considering the user, but unlike every other discussion, rather than dismissing quality issues in the bibliographic record, she argues that patrons are not looking for any bibliographical record at all, rather they are looking for the information contained in them, including relationships among works. In her list of "what needs to change" are indexing, display, MARC21 and some items relating to cataloging practice:

Cataloguing practice: follow uniform title rules; make it mandatory, not optional, to create an authority-controlled work identifier for any work that exists in more than one manifestation or expression. This is the most neglected area in cataloguing practice, despite the fact that catalogue use studies have shown over and over again that the most common search in research libraries is for a known work of which both author and title are known. It reflects very poorly on our profession that we have neglected the infrastructure necessary to ensure that the most common search done by our users is efficient and effective.

Users of the library do not need bibliographic records at all, perfect or not. What they want is to find what they are looking for. It is necessary to add that both libraries and existing library catalogs do need bibliographic records because of the work that they do. With that (rather large) caveat, Yee's argument ought to lead to a radical revision of our OPACs, which is the point of her paper, not some "perfect record."

### ***Robertson: Metadata Quality***<sup>42</sup>

The author refers to a 2002 paper by Greenberg and Robertson in which quality metadata is understood to be accurate, consistent and sufficient, continuing with the remark that "the primary and overriding definition for quality in any setting: fitness for purpose—as true for metadata as it is for designing a car or boiling an egg" (p. 296). The future success of digital repositories, he states, is intimately related to "an awareness of how to address the aforementioned aspects of quality . . . [and an] understanding of the implications of making compromises in metadata quality within large systems" (ibid.). Discussing rules of metadata creation (AACR, etc.) Robertson notes that

within any given library the implementation of these rules and the completeness of a record will be interpreted through local priorities and resource constraints, there is an acknowledgement that a, nearly, perfect record is possible. There are also mechanisms which allow libraries to buy or exchange this agreed "perfect" minimal record from external sources to reduce the volume and cost of in-house cataloguing. Mechanisms such as this can exist because the library community has shared purpose and conception of metadata quality, which allows an agreed "level" for exchange.<sup>43</sup>

In this context it is “local priorities and resource constraints” that determine what a “perfect record” will be, but it would probably have been much more accurate to describe those as determining what an “acceptable record” would be. After all, “a, nearly, perfect record” and an “agreed ‘perfect’ minimal record” effectively vacate all meaning from the adjective *perfect*.

This is followed by a section entitled “Implications of defining metadata quality outside the library.” I balk at his statement “within the library community the purpose [of metadata quality?] is understood and the context is clearly limited” as it seems to me that the purpose of metadata is anything but understood and the contexts envisioned among librarians anything but limited! We have the death of the OPAC and library catalogs that search every imaginable resource through a Google style box in which both metadata and limitations are ignored by all but a few. While it is true that “different settings and purposes require different types of metadata quality” and that “there are already other domains of knowledge management which have very different standards and purposes,” it seems strange to follow this recognition with the statement “The metadata record for the same book will look very different in each setting and no one option is objectively better.”

“Objectively” makes no sense at all if one is referring to different types of institutions, with different user needs and different purposes. The metadata record for an individual item created in one type of institution will not be acceptable in another because it was created to serve different purposes. We should therefore turn the discussion of “the perfect record” completely on its head and state that there are as many “perfect records” as there are user needs, search strategies and administrators: whenever the user is happy, whenever the search succeeds, whenever the administrator is happy, the record is “perfectly” adequate. The problem is that in a shared database, no record serves just one user, just one search strategy, or just one purpose.

The final two paragraphs of this section of Robertson’s paper reach out into the unknown, again much like three of the papers previously discussed. In the first of these he discusses the requirements for metadata records using IEEE LOM standard.

[A] record using the IEEE LOM standard (IEEE, 2002) is as complex as a MARC record but has a smaller bibliographic description and supports extensive educational description of the nature and use of the resource. By implication, such a record requires differ-

ent skills to create its different parts. The use and life expectancy of such learning resources is however, a very unknown quantity and it remains to be seen how justifiable an investment in extensive and precise cataloging is.

That last sentence mirrors the debate over cataloging the “long tail,” the books which catalogers are accused of cataloging only for themselves. Mowat suggested that this is a matter first of all of collection development: if it is not worth the time and money to catalog it, should we acquire it in the first place? Should we be locating and cataloging *any* Internet resources of unknown life expectancy?

In his summary Robertson offers a list of observations coupled with their implications. Let me repeat three of those implications:

1. The metadata required to support such multiple purposes, will require the use of new or multiple standards, and may demand compromising on library metadata guidelines.
2. The granularity required for a given purpose and the scale of the digital repository may influence what metadata can be provided and how it is created.
3. The nature of the resource being described should influence how much metadata is created.

There is room for many approaches in these implications, but not for “the perfect record.”

### ***THE IMPERFECT RECORD: IS THIS WHAT THE USERS WANT?***

Which helps our patrons more, one perfect catalog record or ten slightly imperfect records that could be created in the same amount of time?<sup>44</sup>

If the perfect record is an object of scorn and derision, an ideal which should be and must be refused and abandoned, will we make our users happy by providing “the imperfect record”? Is this not exactly what has been advocated by proponents of the below minimal level records, Intner with her “faulty records” and Anderson in the quotation above? Not exactly, for to refer to the creation of below minimal level records

as “the quest for the imperfect record” would be to engage in the same kind of dishonest rhetorical strategies that the despisers of “the perfect record” do when they write of that. The truth is that below minimal level records work for certain purposes and certain kinds of search strategies. Below minimal level records (and all manner of erroneous, imperfect, incomplete and faulty records) will work perfectly for many library needs (e.g., shelving, circulation), but only a record correctly coded for date, language and country of publication will serve the users who search by any of those elements. While a “perfect record” is meaningless in a bibliographic universe of different needs, goals and purposes, an imperfect record by whatever standards would seem to be by definition a problem.

One of the constant themes in the articles discussed in the previous section was that what was adequate at one time in one place for the purposes of a particular institution may not and probably will not be adequate for that same institution at a different time, much less other institutions in different places at different times. I regularly use records from the Czech and Polish national libraries because these are “perfect” in my opinion, yet I have to change almost all of the fields because the language of description, subjects and classification are all created according to systems and standards which differ from those in use where I work. It is not simply a matter of the presence or absence of information or of errors, but of fitness for a purpose.

The institution and adaptation of standards for description, subject headings and classification systems, exactly like the creation and elaboration of encoding systems like MARC, Dublin Core and ONYX have been undertaken so that libraries (and other institutions) can share data. Intelligibility, interpretation and interoperability are all facilitated by the various languages (LCSH, AACR, MARC, English, Polish, etc.) which catalogers use in communicating to the world what it is that their particular institution has made available for use. Without those standards and structures, intelligibility and interpretation by human beings would be severely reduced, and interoperability among various brands and generations of technical systems would be impossible.

### *CONCLUSION*

The cataloger’s commitment to useful (accurate, consistent and sufficient to a purpose) bibliographic information is the basis of communica-

tion with the users in libraries. Burger insisted that “in spite of the differences among the attitudes catalogers hold toward cataloging, all of them will eventually claim that they are involved in an act of communication.”<sup>45</sup> Information technologies require doing this according to shared standards and metadata structures. The increasing emphasis on the system and format of the data led Burger to suggest that “We are spending a great deal of time and resources on the system of data definition and spending less time and resources than is necessary on the substance of the data.”<sup>46</sup> We quarrel endlessly over RDA, markup languages, and encoding level standards, but any look at what these technical structures are supposed to support, their only reason for existing, is met with scornful references to “the perfect record.”

Disparaging the very part of the bibliographic record which matters most by rhetorically reducing it to the impossible fiction of “the perfect record” is not a step in the direction of understanding what is being done, nor of what can be done, much less of what ought to be done in the service of library users. “The perfect record” is most often employed in an effort to disregard or dispense with one or even all demands for or questions about the adequacy, fitness to purpose, truth and usefulness of all bibliographic information and the standards established to aid librarians in their efforts to interpret the library’s materials for machine manipulation as well as communication with the library’s users.

Future discussion of database quality needs to refuse the rhetoric of “the perfect record” as it is just as true to suggest that “perhaps there is no perfect record” (Hamaker, 2001) as it is to suggest that “whatever pleases the user” or “whatever pleases the administration” is the perfect record. What we need to discuss instead is the following:

1. What data elements are useful for the kind of library research performed here in this particular institution?
2. How much, and which elements of that necessary information can this institution afford to support? (This means either creating it initially, correcting or adding it to bibliographic records imported from external sources, and future maintenance in cases of changing standards, new headings, data definitions, etc.)

An honest response to the first question will provide the basis for discussing the second. An honest answer to the second question will put everyone—library administrators, bibliographers, catalogers, reference

personnel, library boards, college presidents, bursars, faculty, students and all users—in the same position: knowing what they are paying for and what they can expect. That may not be a perfect outcome, but it would be an honest one, and therefore one on which we could agree.

*Received:* December, 2006

*Revised:* June, 2007

*Accepted:* September, 2007

## NOTES

1. The talk itself (“Structures, standards and the people who make them meaningful”, available at: <http://www.loc.gov/bibliographic-future/meetings/docs/bade-may9-2007.pdf>) was not about quality, much less perfection, but rather about communication, the activity which gives meaning to the act of cataloging, the activity for which structures and standards were created to facilitate and support. A videocast of both my talk and Lynch’s summary is available (<http://www.loc.gov/bibliographic-future/meetings/webcasts-may9.html>—accessed June 18, 2007). Mark Lindner reported Lynch’s remark as “Perfect quality is easy to talk about and advocate for—is a moral position, and few human systems can provide this.” <http://marklindner.info/blog/2007/05/13/lc-working-group-structures-and-standards-part-6-public-testimony-and-wrap-up/> For another report, see Diane Hillmann’s report “Structures and Standards for Bibliographic Data” (pt. 2) May 9th, 2007 at: <http://litablog.org/>

2. Sheila S. Intner, “Copy Cataloging and the Perfect Record Mentality.” *Technicalities*, 10: 7 (July 1990): 12-15.

3. David Bade, *The Creation and Persistence of Misinformation in Shared Library Catalogs: Language and Subject Knowledge in a Technological Era* (Urbana: Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana = Champaign, 2002. Occasional Papers, no. 211 (April 2002)): 19.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

5. Elizabeth N. Steinhagen and Sharon A. Moynahan, “Catalogers Must Change! Surviving Between the Rock and the Hard Place,” *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, v.26:3 (1998): 3.

6. Moya K. Mason, *Copy Cataloguing: Where is it Taking Us On Our Quest for the Perfect Copy?* <http://www.moyak.com/researcher/resume/papers/clog4mkm.html>

7. “Costs of upgrading cataloging,” *Library Journal*, 103: 11 (June 1, 1978): 1124

8. Christian Boissonnas, “The Quality of OCLC Bibliographic Records: The Cornell Law Library Experience,” *Law Library Journal*, 72:1 (1979): 80-85.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

13. Ruth Hafter, *Academic Librarians and Cataloging Networks: Visibility, Quality Control, and Professional Status*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986): 44-45.

14. Intner, op. cit.: 13.
15. Barbara B. Tillett, "Catalog It Once for All: A History of Cooperative Cataloging in the United States Prior to 1967 (Before MARC)," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 17:3/4 (1993): 28.
16. Remark made by Joan Swanekamp at the 1994 OLAC/MOUG Conference, October 5-8, 1994, Oak Brook, Illinois. Taken from the report by Richard A. Stewart and available at: <http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/cts/olac/conferences/1994.html>
17. Ed O'Neill, "Matching and Validating Personal Names Authority Records" *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 22:1 (1996): 100.
18. Chuck Hamaker, "Creating Record Sets For E-content in OPACs" *Charleston Advisor* 2:3 (January 2001). Available at: <http://www.charlestonco.com/features.cfm?id=52&type+fr>
19. Nelia C. Wurangian, "Dressing the Part. . ." *OLA Quarterly* 9:1 (Spring 2003) Available at: <http://www.olaweb.org/quarterly/quar9-1/wurangian.shtml>
20. From: K.G. Schneider . Subject: Re: "Third Order"—was Libraries & the Web. Newsgroups: gmane.culture.libraries.ngc4lib Date: 2007-05-19 12:32:46 GMT <http://article.gmane.org/gmane.culture.libraries.ngc4lib/2121> (viewed 31 May 2007)
21. JoAnne Deeken, "Quicker, Cheaper, Better: Pick Two. A Report on the ALCTS Heads of Technical Services at Medium Sized Libraries discussion group meeting. American Library Association Midwinter Meetings, Boston, January 2005" *Technical Services Quarterly*, 23:3 (2006): 81-89.
22. Ibid., p.83.
23. Stephen J. Smith, "Cataloging With Copy: Methods for Increasing Productivity" *Technical Services Quarterly* v.11:4 (1994), p.4-5.
24. Intner (1990), op. cit.: 13.
25. Ibid.: 14. Her high hopes for expert systems in cataloging have presumably vanished in the wake of the actual results as discussed by Šauperl and others. That "host of different humans" whom she so disdains produces remarkably useful metadata when brought into the cataloging process in the practice of what we now know as "social tagging."
26. Op. cit.
27. Sarah E. Thomas, "Quality in Bibliographic Control," *Library Trends* 44:3 (Winter 1996): 491-505.
28. Roma M. Harris and Victoria Marshall, "Reorganizing Canadian Libraries: a Giant Step Back from the Front?" *Library Trends* 46:3 (Winter 1998).
29. Boissonnas, op. cit.: 81.
30. Richard De Gennaro, "Libraries & Networks in Transition: Problems and Prospects for the 1980's" *Library Journal* 106 (May 15, 1981): 1045-1049.
31. Tony Campbell, "Retroconversion of the British Library's Map Catalogue—The Art of the Possible." *Liber Quarterly* 3:1 (1992): 1-6, <http://liber-maps.kb.nl/articles/campbell.htm>
32. Ian R.M. Mowat, "Edinburgh University Library: A Vision For the Immediate Future. Paper presented to Library Committee, 21st October 1998." Available at: <http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/about/vision.shtml>
33. National Library of Australia. Libraries Australia. *Cataloguing Workflows Options for Australian Libraries*. Available at: <http://www.nla.gov.au/librariesaustralia/workflowoptions.html>



34. Martha Yee, "Beyond the OPAC: Future Directions For Web-Based Catalogs." [http://www.nla.gov.au/lis/stdnrds/grps/acoc/documents/Yee\\_Keynote.doc](http://www.nla.gov.au/lis/stdnrds/grps/acoc/documents/Yee_Keynote.doc)
35. R. John Robertson, "Metadata Quality: Implications for Library and Information Science Professionals" *Library Review*, 54:5 (2005): 295-300.
36. Campbell, op. cit.
37. Andrew Osborn, "Cataloging Costs and a Changing Conception of Cataloging," *Catalogers' and Classifiers' Yearbook* 5 (1936): 48.
38. Mowat, op. cit.
39. Intner, op cit.: 14: "there is no hope of success in collection development."
40. National Library of Australia., op. cit.
41. Yee, op. cit.
42. Robertson, op. cit.
43. Ibid.: 297.
44. Rick Anderson, "The Library is Dead, Long Live the Library: Why Everything is Different Now and What We Can Do About It." <http://www2.library.unr.edu/anderson/molospeech.htm>
45. Robert H. Burger, "Data Definition & the Decline of Cataloging Quality," *Library Journal* 108 (October 15, 1983): 1924.
46. Ibid.: 1926.

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