

Newbie cataloguer goes to the Metadata and Discovery Group Conference 2023. What happens next will shock you.

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Last September I was very grateful to receive a sponsored place at CILIP's Metadata and Discovery Group (MDG) Conference 2023, taking place in my hometown Birmingham. I knew that the experience would be extremely informative – especially for someone who had only been cataloguing about a year and a half – but I didn't anticipate that I would also leave the conference feeling as inspired and welcomed to the profession as I did. The breadth and depth of topics discussed proved how diverse and rich a field metadata and discovery is. I learnt far too much to cover everything here, but what I will try to convey is how the conference helped give me a sense of the trajectory of cataloguing – both where we've come from and where we're heading next.

The conference actually started a day early for me, as I was involved in a tour of Birmingham for early arrivals – a wonderful way to meet a few friendly faces before the conference properly started! For the Birmingham City University (BCU) part of the tour, we showed delegates items from our University Archive and Special Collections Centre and chatted about the trials of cataloguing archival material in a Library Management System. I greatly appreciated hearing about how Dr Getaneh Alemu and Clare Delamore have innovatively dealt with this challenge in their respective institutions in their talks, giving us much food for thought at BCU.

Alan Danskin's keynote speech was an excellent way to kick off the conference, providing a concise overview of the history of cataloguing through the lens of his career at the British Library. Before this, I had not appreciated how much historical cataloguing techniques such as card cataloguing impacts our metadata today. For instance, it had never occurred to me that I see so many abbreviations in MARC records now because they were necessary for fitting as much information as possible on a handwritten card. Similarly, I was really interested to learn about the Languid project at the British Library. Cataloguing policy at the British Library ensured that titles were transcribed as written (i.e. rather than translated into English). Because of this decision, machine learning could be used to add language codes to 5 million records. As someone who has been apprehensive about artificial intelligence, this productive combination of up to 150 year old cataloguing policy and machine learning was heartening to see, and has made me feel much more excited about the possibilities machine learning can open up for our metadata and catalogues.

During his talk, Alan shared the words of Pat Oddy: "The items in the collection are not only the organized output of human endeavour: the library also records and arranges these items in such a way as to give a further structural and organizational layer, which adds value to the whole and makes it far greater than the sum of its parts" (1996: 11). One tool for creating this "structural and organizational layer" that I've thought about a lot before and since the conference are headings, which my table at the Cataloguing Code of Ethics workshop discussed in detail. The fourth statement of the code affirms that:

"interoperability and consistent application of standards help our users find and access materials. However, all standards are biased; we will approach them critically and advocate to make cataloguing more inclusive" (2022: 3).

Whilst the widespread use of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) makes it much easier to share records, we were all concerned about the well-documented biases within LCSH and how difficult and slow it can be to update offensive headings, especially when the Library of Congress has so much influence and power over decisions. There was a feeling that what we could achieve is limited when LCSH are so prevalent, essentially ensuring that information worldwide is being structured and organised according to the Library of Congress' worldview.



The issues with LCSH were further elucidated in two presentations. I was surprised to learn during Waseem Farooq's talk that native Bengali speakers often must learn the transliteration scheme used by the Library of Congress (e.g. for authority headings) in order to be able to access resources through libraries. Furthermore, Benjamin Cornish explored the challenges of trying to accurately describe items from the Natural History Museum's collection, in a way which accurately captures the colonial exploitation involved in natural history research expeditions. The cataloguer's decision about which information to include and exclude as well as which subject headings, authority headings, and relationship designators to use can all work to either reflect or obfuscate the history behind an item. The fact that the worldview, perspectives and contributions of indigenous people are not satisfactorily reflected in LCSH makes this task even harder. Hence, the Library of Congress has a concerning and deeply political influence over how we not only structure and organise, but also interpret and historicise the "organized output of human endeavour" (Oddy, 2022: 3).

That being said, I did not leave the conference feeling pessimistic by any means. The Cataloguing Code of Ethics highlights the importance of collaboration, which felt apt, as it was really energising talking to other cataloguers who care about ethical metadata in the workshop. Our table also discussed how helpful it is to build on other people's efforts. For instance, in their monthly blog *Critcatenate*, Violet Fox highlights any changes made to LCSH which are relevant to critical cataloguing; this list can help make it more manageable to update older, offensive LCSH without having to trawl through long PDFs, an approach we have considered doing at BCU. Martin Kelleher's work in setting up a UK NACO funnel – making it much easier for UK-based cataloguers to have an input in changes they want to see – further shows how committed the cataloguing community is to improving LCSH.

It was clear from the conference too that LCSH are by no means the only option available to cataloguers, and alternatives can at least be used to supplement LCSH, if not yet replace. In Jason Curtis and Lotty Summer's talk I learnt about how they have approached updating potentially offensive terminology in the Wessex Classification Scheme. Furthermore, Jenny Wright's informative talk really helped me understand the reasoning behind implementing FAST headings and how to go about using them. FAST headings were originally based on LCSH, but the process for petitioning changes to headings is supposed to be easier and faster. Since the conference, my colleague and I have begun using FAST headings at BCU as a result of Jenny's talk – as well as Homosaurus headings, which have now thankfully been added to Alma by Ex Libris!

As a newbie cataloguer, I'm sure it won't come as a surprise that I was apprehensive about the final part of the conference: the much-anticipated RDA Day. Whilst I had been made aware that I use RDA elements in my records and had seen the RDA Toolkit before, I had very little idea what was going on and was unsure whether the presentations would make much sense to me. I shouldn't have been worried, however. I was very grateful to the people on my table who answered my many questions (as well providing a really interesting discussion about linked data and the semantic web!). Furthermore, Gordon Dunsire, Thurstan Young, and Jenny Wright's presentations were all extremely useful, explaining the history of how RDA came about and its purpose.

I was interested to learn how RDA is a move away from AACR's emphasis on conveying the most important data in the most abbreviated form - originally to save space on handwritten cards, as mentioned in Alan Danskin's keynote speech. RDA offers cataloguers alternative choices which can improve discovery now that we're no longer so confined. On the other hand, RDA actually reduces the amount of information needed to meet the minimum requirements for a record. Libraries will likely continue to need a greater level of detail than this minimum requirement to meet their users' needs. However, this move towards economy opens up new possibilities for sharing metadata with organisations, groups and individuals outside of the library sector, who can use RDA to suit their own needs. Given the importance of collaboration in creating a more ethical metadata landscape, as affirmed in the Cataloguing Code of Ethics, I hope that RDA is able to open up new opportunities to share metadata more widely in the future.

Getting the chance to learn about all these new developments in metadata and cataloguing (as well as the hard work and dedication driving them behind the scenes) has made me feel like this is a really exciting time to be joining the profession. I'd really like to end this by thanking the MDG Committee for giving me this opportunity, but also all the delegates that I spoke to during the event. Everyone was happy to answer questions and explain acronyms and concepts to me. Moreover, I was always made to feel like my contributions to discussions were welcome and valued. It was certainly a little intimidating to begin with to be one of the least experienced people at the conference, but everyone was so welcoming and supportive that I was quickly put at ease (whilst perhaps not quite as shocking as the clickbait title would have you believe, it was a nice surprise for me!)

References

Oddy, P. (1996) *Future libraries future catalogues*. London: Library Association Publishing.

Cataloguing Ethics Steering Committee. (2022) *Cataloguing Code of Ethics*. Available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1lBz7nXQPfr3U1P6Xiar9cLAKzoNX_P9fg7eHvzfSIZ0/edit [Accessed 03 May 2024].