> Today's metadata must prove reliable even in circumstances difficult or impossible to anticipate.

Giving the public what they want

"We are moving towards a global database integrating seamlessly and accessible to everyone, with no single point or source but as many sources as wish to participate each with their own vision of their own data and each, by and large, interoperable."

THESE are the words of Dr Lars G. Svensson during a discussion at the German National Library back in 2015[1]. But translating his vision into the nuts and bolts of the modern library is not straightforward.

Driving the LMS

The library has gone about its mission of getting the right book to the right reader through a tireless intellectual and technological effort. The library catalogue is the way the public get what they want. It drives the library management system (LMS), works with the librarian, the books on the shelves or stored digitally, and the public. The catalogue is metadata and it is governed by rules. Without it you have a Tower of Babel, chaos that renders all the other elements of the library meaningless.

But the creation of metadata and the nature of the catalogue has changed dramatically over the past 100 years, notably as it has embraced digitisation.

The Changing Catalogue

In a recently published interview[2], Lesley Whyte, Managing Director of Bibliographic Data Services, (BDS), covered the changes she has witnessed and, in some cases, instigated since she started her career as a cataloguer 40 years ago.

"At Glasgow University Library... we had three forms of catalogue. The guard book catalogue was a series of huge books with catalogue entries written or typed onto slips of paper that were glued onto the pages. This had been superseded by the sheaf catalogue, a variant of the card catalogue, which allowed multiple access points, but dominated the ground floor of the library... The third catalogue was a microfiche catalogue... Even though microfiche entries were necessarily short, my imagination couldn't help racing ahead, for the prospect of describing works in much greater detail was there, offering so many possibilities for resource discovery. And a new and exciting factor had come into the mix – computers... cataloguing was changing before my eyes..."

Not just cataloguing. The very concept of what knowledge means in a society, locally and globally, was changing. As Gordon Dunsire, RDA Technical Team Leader Liaison Officer, pointed out when I interviewed him in 2019[3]:

"Traditional classical cataloguing has as part of its function to act as a surrogate for the collection itself... That is no longer necessary and that's completely subsumed by machines. Where it gets interesting is going beyond that, onto a new way of looking at the world and, in particular, a new way of looking at information and how it is stored and disseminated."

New Ways to Access Knowledge

So how can metadata help enable this radical change? In truth, it is the vital component.

The early twenty-first century is one of virtual exploration. The result is a much greater reliance on metadata to navigate effectively. Creating that metadata for books, and other media, making it responsive, fit for purpose, fit for the future, super-fit to be used in diverse library management systems while at the same time making it affordable, is the challenge that faces a bibliographic metadata agency such as BDS[4].

Today's metadata must prove reliable even in circumstances difficult or impossible to anticipate. It must enable interrogation from diverse points of entry. The metadata must be machine-readable and readable by the public. The way this is achieved is not by anticipating every circumstance – that is simply impossible – but by adhering to rules and standards.

The Demands of RDA

In an article entitled *RDA: Moving into a new era of metadata management*[5] Jenny Wright, Chief Metadata Officer at BDS and one of the key figures in the introduction of RDA to the UK, describes the latest version of the standard that "takes us firmly into the future of metadata requirements."



John Hudson is a freelance writer and consultant on information and the arts.

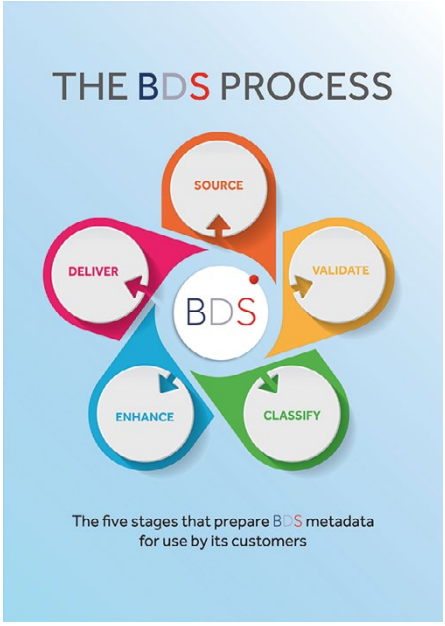
"The new RDA Toolkit addresses the cataloguing of all types of content and media and recognises the fact that different users have different needs."

RDA is just one of the requirements made upon metadata that enables library systems to function coherently. Add MARC21, NACO headings, Dewey Decimal Classification, Library of Congress Subject Headings, Thema codes – and you begin to realise that creating metadata is not for the faint-hearted. But RDA is interesting because it offers multiple, even infinitely varied access points to the information stored in the library.

Making Metadata

One method of bringing order to metadata compliant with the RDA standard has been developed by BDS. It can be simplified into: Source – Validate – Classify – Enhance – Deliver, something Lesley Whyte calls "The BDS Method".

"Source" starts the process by working closely with publishers. "Validation" checks the aggregated metadata. "Classification" employs the intellectual expertise of the cataloguer. This ensures each record conforms to accepted standards, guaranteeing consistent results when used in diverse systems. "Enhancement" links each record to all the extra information such as book jacket covers, popular in public libraries where an image can identify an item as successfully as the title, or tables of contents, useful in an academic environment where students are searching for specific information or ideas. "Delivery"



The five stages that prepare BDS metadata for use by its customers

is giving the library exactly what it wants in a way that fits its LMS.

The Working Library

Back in 2012, I went to see how this works when I visited The Hive, a recently opened library in Worcester that combined the functions of public and university library as well as being a civic space where the public could engage with local government and simply get together. While there, I spoke with David Pearson who was then Stock Manager for Worcestershire Libraries[6].

"We think it is the first fully shared and integrated library in Europe, maybe the world. We achieved this only after addressing huge technical, practical and personnel questions. If the new vision was to be achieved, three collections and two library catalogues had to be amalgamated... We were fortunate as both the Worcestershire and the university catalogues used the same library management system that employs BDS as the source for their catalogue metadata."

The Hive is a mirror of the human mind achieved through technological progress and inspired inventiveness. It is just one attempt to answer to the questions that the nuts and bolts of the real-world library asks of the vision described by Lars G. Svensson at the beginning of this article.

When Andrew Carnegie described his model library, he wanted a glass lantern atop each building that would let in light; today that lantern is a searchlight, illuminating wherever we choose to look. It is powered by a combination of developments in technology, training and systems built on intellectual rigour and enquiry, and at its heart it is metadata that ensures people get what they want. **BG**

References

1 "A Connected World" www.bdslive.com/bdslife-online/a-connected-courageous-world/

2 *Catalogue & Index*, issue 200, Lesley Whyte, "40 Years a Cataloguer". https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/collection/0C44DCEE-84F7-4540-A5B6-716A05454B64/C&I_200.pdf

3 "Information, Catalogues and the Future" *BDSLife for Libraries*, Summer 2019, pp 8-9

4 Bibliographic Data Services (BDS) supplies metadata to all UK public libraries, the British Library and many academic libraries in the UK

5 *Information Professional*, October/November 2020

6 Bringing A Buss Back to Libraries, *BDSLife for Libraries*, Autumn 2012, pp 6-7.


The Hive at the University of Worcester.
Photo: Elliot Brown / Wikimedia Commons
Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic