INTRODUCTION

In the last four years, authority data has seen its own existential crisis. Traditional authority records have been expanded under Resource Description & Access (RDA), asking more of the cataloger and time spent on authority control. The request from RDA and the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) for expanded authority records reignited the classic debate in cataloging circles: Is authority control worth it? Authority control was already a costly process – add in the use of individual attributes, and a library could find itself spending far longer on their contributions to the NACO Authority File (NAF). The expansion of authority records in RDA is an expansion that was met with both enthusiasm and disdain, while some librarians see a future in RDA authority data in their catalogs, others see a future beyond libraries – utilizing data from outside sources to lighten the load authority control can have on participating institutions. But as the debate over traditional authority records rages, a strong argument for utilizing other types of authority data emerges as a Linked Data future comes into focus.

IS AUTHORITY CONTROL DYING?

A few commentators outline their concern for authority control overall. A common reason for debating the importance of authority control comes in the form of librarians dealing with shrinking budgets, looking for areas to cut their staff and their workload (Dunn, 2015). Dunn (2015) and Maurer & Panchyshyn (2014) provide examples of the arguments surrounding the necessity (or lack thereof) of authority control on the whole. A common topic of discussion among the literature is the increase in cost that RDA implementation has caused for libraries held to the Name Authority Cooperative (NACO) standard of record creation. Maurer & Panchyshyn (2014) and Jones (2015) touch on the areas of increased workflow that came along with RDA updates. These changes caused increased staff time per record, as well as time for maintenance and updates on the whole (Maurer & Panchyshyn, 2014, p. 267). Already seen as one of the more expensive aspects of cataloging, authority control is often under attack, the difference this time being the cost of new record creation and supporting new roles for authority data. “Authority records no longer exist ONLY to support access points in bibliographic records,” Jones asserts in her piece on RDA changes to authorities (Jones, 2015, p. 3). Discussions of the potential importance of authority data in the future of Linked Data and the Semantic Web are touched upon in Sandberg & Jin (2016), Van der Graff & Waaijers (2014), and Maurer & Panchyshyn (2014). These arguments typically touch on the potential of RDA authority records as a basis for BIBFRAME and other online ontologies.

For a while, it looked like authority files would fade out, along with traditional libraries. However, with the rise of the internet and the explosion of digital information, authority files have gained a new life, becoming Internet signposts in general, and of digital research information in particular. (Van der Graff & Waaijers, 2014, p. 10).
RDA AUTHORITY WORK

The full implementation of RDA by the Library of Congress and other national libraries in 2013 prompted a burst of discussion about RDA authority data in the literature. Hennessey (2014), Lisius (2015), and Hawkins, Nguyen, & Moreno (2016) provide detailed accounts of the implementation process and the issues encountered. Lisius (2015) writes that implementers worked in phases to ensure that all authority records were updated to make them RDA-compliant. This strict attitude towards RDA implementation was true of other aspects of implementation, as well. The addition of new fields recording attributes of persons was introduced, creating controversy among librarians. Moulaison (2016) notes that these new fields included information about a person’s birth and death dates, birth and death places, profession, gender, affiliations, and languages. These new fields provided new ways of differentiating as well as contextualizing. She also suggests that while many commentators placed importance in using the attributes, in practice they were underutilized. Maurer & Panchyshyn (2014) points out that the extra time it takes to include the additional content in authority records can be costly and changes the purpose of authority records created under AACR2. “The primary purpose of a name authorized access point under RDA is to identify rather than to differentiate (as it was under AACR2)” (Maurer & Panchyshyn, 2014, p. 272). No longer just the record of disambiguation and collocation, RDA authority data was meant to do more.

CONTROVERSIES

With significant change comes significant controversy. The addition of complex attributes in authority records made waves in the cataloging community. Billey, Drabinski, & Roberto (2014) and Thompson (2016) explore the potential for problems with the gender attribute, especially in regard to alienating the LGBTQIA+ community. Both pieces explore the ways that RDA asks catalogers to assume a person’s gender without knowing for sure if they want that information recorded, or if they are recording it correctly. While this attribute is one that could easily lead to mistakes that both offend and ensure assumption, it is not the only one that could pose this problem. In any of the instances of including new attributes, it is possible that a cataloger could mislabel several things about a person, jeopardizing the integrity of the record entirely (Billey, et al., 2014, p. 420).

In addition to controversy surrounding the content of the new attribute fields, Moulaison (2016) describes the potential for inequality in RDA authority records. “If the catalog is to provide equitable access based on attributes, it needs to include attributes for all, equally. More persons than English-speakers, males, and the educated, will need to be the object of attention,” (Moulaison, 2016, p. 22). If the future of authority data lies in the inclusion of these attributes, it is important that they are added with consistency, and certainly added for those individuals who need discovery the most (Moulaison, 2016, p. 22).

LINKED DATA AND THE DIGITAL FUTURE

Much of the literature focuses on the future of authority control, especially how authority data will fit into a web-based ontology such as BIBFRAME. Myntti & Cothran (2013), Sandberg & Jin (2016), Van der Graff & Waaijers (2014) and Niu (2013) all touch on the ways authority
data can be utilized non-traditional ways. Commenters give detailed case studies on the ways that their libraries have utilized authority data to their benefit on web-based projects. The projects discussed range from digital library efforts to acceptance of data from non-library institutions, all finding benefits in the potential of RDA authority records. MacEwan, Angjeli, & Gatenby (2013) and Van der Graff (2014) discuss emerging databases that utilize authority data in conjunction with rights management organizations. These efforts have created databases such as the International Standard Name Identifier (ISNI) and the Virtual International Authority File (VIAF). ISNI is an effort by rights management organizations and library organizations to create a “bridge identifier” that can operate in a “more diversified context” on the Web (MacEwan, et al., 2013, p. 56). This ID system provides a necessary global identifier than can begin the process of linking data in a way that an authorized heading cannot. The use of the ISNI in authority records and other places online could “fundamentally change the name authority control practices in libraries and archives and improve search precision and recall in institutional repositories, search engines, and beyond,” (Niu, 2013, p. 418).

MacEwan et al. (2013) describe how the Virtual International Authority File, utilizing ISNI data, provided an online aggregate of authority information. Describing it as a “robust, operational, and authoritative file of uniquely assigned ISNIs” (MacEwan, et al., 2013, p. 55), VIAF has been widely utilized. Sandberg & Jin (2016) provide unique insight into the ways that the VIAF could serve library institutions who currently do not do authority work on journal article writers, leaving out a fair amount of researchers in the process (Sandberg & Jin, 2016, p. 539). Tools such as the VIAF use traditional library authority data to create new avenues of production for libraries and other data institutions, as well as providing a “one-stop-shop” for authorized headings online. Ilik (2015) describes another non-traditional alternative, VIVO. This database is being used in a similar fashion, utilizing campus directory data as a means of disambiguation for researchers. As the PCC recognizes the “benefits of moving away from MARC into a world of greater interoperability” (Ilik, 2015, p. 385) there is no lack of options for the future of authority data.

CONCLUSION

While issues of consistency and undifferentiated records still plague most of these alternatives, the linked data future is a collaborative one. The future is one where “Semantic Web technologies liberate catalogers from their historically analog-based static world, re-conceptualize it, and transform it into a world of high-dimensionality and fluidity” (Ilik, 2015, p. 382). However, that linked data future is one where the prominent issues of authority data do not become simpler: issues of disambiguation and undifferentiation are issues that can be amplified on the Web, especially if collaboration means inconsistent data (Myntti & Cothran, 2013, p. 99). Still, the emergence of a concentrated effort to move away from authorized headings and towards unique global identifiers is a move that will free up precious time in the workflow of catalogers, while also inviting non-library data into the world of authorities. The emergence of the use of web forms (Wolverton, 2015, p. 280) and the “Wikipedia approach” (Van der Graff & Waaijers, 2014, p. 21) of authorities point to the future of collaboration in authority data, as catalogers become more comfortable with outside sources providing both guidance and data.
REFERENCES


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