Authority Control, 1999–2003

At the heart of the profession of librarianship is the organization of information. And at the heart of information organization created by professionals is authority control. (Yee 1999)

A little of the old, a little of the new—such is the literature of authority control over the last five years. Themes include vendor services, international cooperation, automated agents, and use of the Web in establishing and distinguishing name headings. Add to this mix the first textbook to be published on authority control in over a decade and the result is a rich literature on a topic of enduring importance.

Maxwell’s Guide to Authority Work (2002) provides much-needed guidance in this important area. This ALA publication is the first text on authority control to appear since Diane Clack’s Authority Control: Principles, Applications, and Instructions (1990). Maxwell’s book, written in straightforward prose, details all authority record types, sources of authority records, and cooperative programs. The book is highly readable, and of value to both experts and novices alike. Maxwell’s contribution to the authority control literature of this period is unparalleled.

An interesting recent theme is the use of the Web for authority work. Two thoughtful pieces exemplifying this trend are authored by Russell and Spillane (2001) and Ellero (2002). Russell and Spillane note that the Web can be used to verify the identity of authors, gather contact information, understand corporate body relationships, and search online versions of print publications. Ellero reiterates these points, but also introduces the concept of using the Web for special collections authority work, where the names involved may be hundreds of years old. These authors share the opinion that the Web is a terrific supplement to the Library of Congress’s Name Authority File.

Outstanding efforts in the area of international cooperation were begun and documented during the past five years. Tillett (2000, 2003), Kaiser (2003), Bourdon (2002), and Vellucci (2001) describe various international efforts to link and otherwise take advantage of authority records. No one has been more active in this arena than Barbara Tillett. Tillett, Chair of IFLA’s Minimal Level Authority Records (MLAR) Working Group, describes a number of international authority control initiatives, including Project AUTHOR, a European project that shares authority records from five countries: France, the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, and Belgium. The prototype system converts each country’s records into UNIMARC, and utilizes Z39.50 software to deliver the results. She also describes the International Standard Authority Data Number (ISADN), a way of simplifying use of authority records in a multilingual environment. Tillett introduces the idea of international authority control, commonly referred to as Universal Bibliographic Control, as assisting in the Semantic Web. Such assistance could take the form of authority elements mapped to metadata schema. The concept of authority control in a metadata environment has been proposed by others (Hearn 1999, Vellucci 2000). Bourdon, another member of the MLAR Working Group, discusses Functional Requirements and Numbering of Authority Records (FRANAR), an initiative concerned with establishing international standard authority data numbers. Kaiser describes another ambitious project, LEAF (Linking and Exploring Authority Files). Like the aforementioned projects, LEAF, a European collaborative based at the Berlin State Library, seeks to exchange authority data on an international scale. LEAF is intended as a means of gathering, linking, and making available name authority records through an elaborate system architecture. Vellucci offers an excellent summary of many of these initiatives in her paper, and cautions that authority control will only become more important and difficult to achieve in a heterogeneous future.

Great potential exists, however, for automation of some authority work. Hearn (2000) reviews attempts to use computers for quality control. Validation of subdivision order is identified as a relatively simple computer-based task. DiLauro (2001) describes an automated authority control system that disambiguates names based on review of existing authority records, publication dates versus birth/death dates, and commonness of name. French, Powell and Schulman (2000) describe a clustering approach that uses an algorithm to bring variant forms together.
It’s worth noting that a handful of commentators have questioned the value of authority control. Ayres (2001), in the candidly titled, “Authority Control Simply Does Not Work,” demonstrates how lack of exhaustive cross references can imperil a search. As the author notes, “[T]he preferred entry point for library users is the one that they are using, and Â— if their choice is different from that used by the catalogue, they are entitled to be provided with a cross reference.” Jeng (2002) contends that catalogers, not users, are those who value authority control, and that the utility of this expensive and time-consuming activity should be reexamined.

More commentators are disheartened by the well-known expense of authority control. Indeed, authority control is the most expensive work professional catalogers perform (Yee 1999). Outsourcing, though no panacea, has provided many libraries with quality authority records at a lower cost than had the work been done by in-house staff. Tsui and Hinders (1998), Lam (2001), Zhang (2001), and Aschmann (2003) describe use of vendor-supplied authority control services. Although most libraries turn to vendors because of the labor involved in performing authority work, each author emphasizes that outsourcing authority control does not save much staff time. Zhang states that after contracting with an authority vendor, staff time was still needed to oversee the routines, which included an unavoidable manual review process. Aschmann’s results were similar. She states that no reduction in staff time was realized through use of an authority control vendor, but does note that numerous benefits result from the relationship. Nonetheless, many cataloging units continue to outsource authority control, anticipating high-quality output at a relatively low cost.

It seems clear that future progress in the areas of automated techniques holds promise for reducing the time and expense of authority control. Likewise, international collaboration should also provide benefits to creators and users of authority records. Though authority control has its critics, it seems likely to remain a cornerstone of information organization and retrieval.

**Works Cited**


Further Reading


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