Authority Control, 1995–1998

A search in the online version of Library Literature of the term "authority control," limited to the years 1995 through 1998, produced 66 matches. Of these records, 11 were news item or committee reports, which do not usually contain or imply topics for further research. Of the remaining 55 articles, 18 were three pages or less.

The most easily recognizable characteristic of this body of literature is its international scope. Many of the articles appeared in such journals as International Cataloguing and Bibliographic Control (17, many of these are fairly short reports from the International Seminar on Authority Control held in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1995), Catalogue and Index (4), Herald of Library Science (India, 1), Library Review (Scotland, 2), and others. Authority control is a concern throughout the libraries of the world and is not limited to the West. However, only 3 articles were in languages other than English—German, Italian, and French. Of the library science serials published in the United States, Cataloging and Classification Quarterly contained 10 pieces; Library Resources & Technical Services, 5; and Technical Services Quarterly, 4.

The recent literature falls into four categories: retrieval issues, cost issues, international cooperation, and cross-thesaurus problems. The issue of retrieval is at the core of authority control, and in essence, all authority work is about retrievability and most of the articles touched upon it in some way. Some of this literature is about the controlled headings as they appear on the bibliographic record, and some concern the contents of the authority record itself. For example, one study compared subject searching on two OPAC systems, one with and one without authority control (Wilkes, 1995). Another explored the “information seeking behavior” of catalog users and how this behavior was helped or hindered by the contents of authority records in the OPAC (Bangalore, 1995). Chan and Vizine-Goetz (1995) examined Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) for errors and obsolete elements and attempted to determine their effect on retrieval.

The cost of doing authority work was the most common theme appearing in the literature over the past four years. One article explored the cost effectiveness of post-cataloging authority work compared to pre-cataloging authority work (Greever, 1997). Another proposed that the concept of "utility" be considered when deciding when to create an authority record (Younger, 1995). Pappas (1996) discusses the creation of a “preferred list” of libraries that contribute to RLIN; the purpose was to speed cataloging and increase effectiveness. The topic of international cooperation is discussed by several authors, two of whom are from the British Library. Oddy (1996) describes the British Library’s participation in the Anglo-American Authority File, and Danskin (1998) addresses the need for more international standards and a couple of current international projects. Danskin also touches on a topic closely related to international cooperation, searching across different thesauri, including thesauri of different languages. Miller (1997) contributed to this discussion by comparing LCSH and Moving-Image Materials: Genre Terms. The idea of worldwide authority control, with all the issues surrounding it, is probably the most important subject in the future of authority control.

The following topics for further research in authority control were either explicitly stated in the current literature or were inferred from it.

1. Comparing keyword searching with subject searching in catalogs with and without authority control
2. Determining any correlation between length of subject headings and probability of error
3. Determining the cost-effectiveness of authority control for subject headings used only once in OPACs
4. Research on the online information seeking behavior of users
5. Research on cross-mapping and compatibility of thesauri used in OPACS
6. Research on compatibility and uniformity of headings among different types of databases (periodical indexes, catalogs, etc.)
7. International authority control—language issues, authority of various agencies, governance issues
8. Comparison study of authority errors that affect retrieval and those that do not influence retrieval
9. Cost of local versus vendor-supplied authority control
10. Research on the possibility more and different levels of completeness and authoritativeness of authority records

Works Cited


Wilkes, Adeline, and Antoinette Nelson. 1995. “Subject searching in two online catalogs: Authority control vs. non-authority control.” Cataloging & Classification Quarterly 20, no. 4, 57–79.

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