

## Open Letter to the Library Leadership Team

*Friday, July 25, 2014*

Dear Members of the Library Leadership Team,

We are writing to you as Harvard Library technical services staff, some of whom participated in a working group tasked with revising guidelines for copy cataloging as part of the ITS Workflow and Infrastructure Projects. This project's goal was to modify procedures to quicken processing. All of the copy catalogers resigned from the project in June because of serious concerns about the nature of the proposed changes and the lack of adequate consultation with stakeholders. While we agree that there is a need to seek processing efficiencies, we do not believe that these particular modifications would lead to greater efficiencies. We believe that implementing these modifications would seriously degrade the collection's database and would harm the user's ability to find materials.

We were informed by Scott Wicks that he will be meeting with you on July 25 to discuss changes to workflows at Harvard libraries, starting with Widener, to be rolled out across Harvard libraries thereafter. We thought it might be helpful for you to hear concerns about the possible impact of some of these changes from people who work day to day in copy cataloging. Since neither we nor other concerned members of the library staff will be present at the July 25 meeting, we hope that this letter will lead to a more informed discussion.

We have recommended to Scott that a more open discussion take place, a discussion in which technical services staff, reference librarians, and researchers would be able to raise concerns about the proposed changes before they are implemented. At this point, it does not appear that such an open meeting will take place. We are thus sending this out as an open letter to encourage other members of the Harvard Library community to raise their concerns with you.

We were invited by Scott to explain our concerns at a meeting with Cataloging and Acquisitions managers on July 14th. We presented a detailed list of issues (organized according to the technical MARC fields used for creating bibliographic records in our library catalog, attached here for your review). Scott and the other managers advanced several positions in our extensive discussion. We have listed their main points below, followed by our responses:

- **That bibliographic 'records' will soon (in 5 years) be a thing of the past and will be replaced by 'linked data.'**

We think that in periods of transition it is especially important to maintain quality in current practices. Our ability to transition to 'linked data' will depend on more--not less--authority work. If we let things slide until the future arrives, we are likely to lose access to materials that have been processed in the transition period, and make it much more difficult for automated processes that rely on regularity and standards in mapping one system to another. We need to build a bridge to a future of linked data--that means continuing to strive for quality, accuracy, and clear standards in the present.

- **That automated services such as Machine Automated Record Service (MARS) and Bibliographic Notification Service (BNS) will correct deficiencies in records.**

We have discussed our concerns about MARS' inability to replace copy catalogers' scrutiny in the attached document. BNS raises a different set of problems. We contend that BNS is not a reliable

substitute for quality cataloging: enhancements often produce mixed records that include both correct and incorrect headings (leading to 'false positives' in a user's search); BNS can only enhance our records if other institutions contribute those enhancements. Dependence on BNS assumes that other libraries are investing the time and expertise in cataloging that Harvard is choosing not to. If everyone accepts substandard records and waits for BNS enhancements, no such enhancements will take place.

- **That the new Harvard Library portal PRIMO makes authoritative searches and indexes less significant because more and more materials that are not being cataloged in this way--such as articles--are brought together in an integrated search.**

Currently, researchers can either search for materials in an integrated single search, or search separately for sub-groups of materials at Harvard. It's clear that some of our researchers consider this an important feature. Two comments from faculty researchers from the Fall 2013 Harvard Library User Survey Summary emphasize this point:

*"But I wouldn't want a full integration all the time because sometimes all that I wish to look for are books, or articles, or images. So I'd want the option not to do an integrated search, too, but to search in separate categories more or less as I can now."*

And again:

*"The capabilities of Hollis Classic MUST be preserved if the catalogue is to be able to sustain real research. New Hollis makes searching by subject SO much more difficult. It is also not well suited to foreign language searching by subject. ALL my students, including knowledgeable undergraduates, prefer OLD Hollis, and for good reason."*

This is what makes the library catalogue a useful alternative to search engines such as Google. Reference librarians, who help students and researchers locate materials at Harvard, continue to depend on quality records for books and other materials, and have expressed serious concerns about decreased quality in cataloging.

- **That these are not significant departures from current practice for Widener Library.**

Published standards for Widener materials are different in all of the key areas we have listed in the attached document. Library workers continue to edit records conscientiously, motivated by a desire to continue preserving indexes for users.

Staff do not want to give up on the catalogue that we have maintained with great care for decades, nor do we wish to stop refining workflows. Given the widely acknowledged limitations of automated tools such as MARS and BNS, we believe that outsourcing through automation and other means cannot completely solve or comprehensively address the many issues of concern to Library administrators and stakeholders. Workflow shifts that rely too heavily on these services should be more closely analyzed and more widely discussed to ensure the quality of our catalogue for the sake of our patrons.

Once again, we'd like to encourage other members of the Harvard Library community to participate in

this discussion. We think that it is especially important for reference librarians and bibliographers to be heard, as they have the expertise to know how the 'back end' work of cataloging impacts the 'front end' of searching the catalogue and locating materials at Harvard. We hope that the Library Directors in particular will take these concerns into account before accepting significant workflow changes.

Sincerely, and on behalf of many other concerned colleagues,

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Attached document:

Below is a brief list highlighting some of the most important impacts we anticipate from the proposed changes to Harvard copy cataloging guidelines, followed by the list of concerns sent to Scott Wicks (referenced in our letter).

**We fear that the proposed changes will make it harder for patrons to find materials in the Harvard Libraries in the following ways:**

**Multiply incorrect attributions and split indexes for author names and other indexed headings.**

Under current rules, copy catalogers ensure that headings for author names (and other indexed headings) appear in authoritative form and are therefore grouped together under the correct name. New rules would leave verification of headings to MARS (Machine Assisted Record Service), an automated service that is intended to supplement--not replace--verification at the point of cataloging, as explicitly acknowledged by those working on its implementation.

**Prevent researchers from accessing materials by omitting essential information from bibliographic records.**

Such information includes that used in searching translations, names of non-primary authors

and corporate bodies responsible for the creation of a work, conference names and titles for multiple works contained in a single volume.

### **Decrease researchers' ability to find materials through refined subject searches.**

Currently, different works on the same subject are grouped together in indexes using a controlled vocabulary established by the Library of Congress. This type of index is especially valuable as an alternative to Google-type keyword searches that often return too many materials to sift through. Newer and ostensibly more 'efficient' processing guidelines would allow for very general subject headings, making it impossible to do a refined search (e.g. France *instead of* France – Politics and Government). Many of these overly general, or even inaccurate, Subject Headings are supplied by poorly-trained vendors or other unreliable institutions.

### **[Original List sent to Scott Wicks to summarize our concerns:]**

#### **List of unacceptable departures from current practice under the new Copy Cataloging Guidelines:**

1) **1XX, 7XX, 240**. New instruction: "Don't check, accept as is. Authority processing done automatically through MARS and/or manually using MARS-generated reports, as necessary." Elimination of authority verification at the point of cataloging for indexed fields on records that are anything less than encoding level blank (i.e. fully cataloged) LC or pcc records is a departure from current practice. As we have discussed extensively, we consider this the most significant and unacceptable change that would be instituted with the new guidelines.

To reiterate our main concerns, we contend that neither automated MARS processing, nor manual processing through MARS reports will replace authority verification at the point of cataloging in cases where an entry is present on the record **in authoritative form, but in the wrong form for the item in hand**. Such cases--which are numerous for common names in several languages--will not be detected by MARS. In cases where an entry is present in a non-authoritative form and there are several authoritative variants to choose from, it will appear on a MARS report, but will be difficult or impossible to correct without the item in hand.

A significant amount of substandard copy that would be accepted under the new guidelines omits key access points such as 111 conference names, 700 fields for added authors, uniform titles for translated works, and analytic entries for titles where several separate titles are contained in a single item. Under current practice, experienced copy catalogers either add these entries or pass along such materials to professional catalogers in Metadata Creation. Under the new guidelines, these points of access will simply be lost.

2) **246 title variants**. New instruction: "Don't check, accept as is." If significant title variants have not been entered in the record, this may decrease access considerably. (Examples: Title begins with an abbreviation on the title page, contains an important spelling mistake, or varies significantly from the title on the cover or spine.)

3) **300 field**. New instruction: "**Do a quick check of the 300 field (physical description):** Subfield **a** (ignore small discrepancies; larger variations may indicate a mismatch) and add **c** if missing." During discussion, it was made clear that under the new instructions, copy catalogers are only intended to check pagination to see whether the piece matches, but not to correct mistakes on the record. As we discussed in our meeting, pagination can be a significant guide to the difference between reprints and new editions, especially for publications from certain geographic regions (e.g. Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe). Losing an accurate record of this information can make it difficult for researchers, bibliographer/selectors and acquisitions staff to know whether a "new edition" really represents a

distinct item or a duplicate of existing holdings.

4) **5XX notes**. New instruction: “Accept as is.” Current practice is to proofread and verify accuracy. This can be especially significant for 505 contents notes. A significant number of these are entered into records at the CIP stage and never verified when the record is upgraded after publication by other libraries contributing copy to OCLC. Since BNS will not overlay fields that already exist in a fully cataloged record, the inaccurate 505 will not be corrected through BNS even if LC or some other library eventually enters a correct 505.

5) **6XX** : Instruction: “Don’t check. Accept as is.” While current practice for Widener materials varies with experience and training, experienced Copy-Catalogers with linguistic and/or cultural knowledge relevant to the materials they process provide a necessary function by ensuring that 6xx fields are attributed correctly.

We consider this a new instruction when taken together with the new guidelines for acceptable copy—guidelines that would allow type-M records from any institution to be treated as acceptable copy, provided only that they meet certain formal standards (presence of specified fields). There are an increasing number of records in OCLC entered by private agencies that routinely make glaring mistakes in 650s (e.g. DK Agencies, Touzot, Eastview). Many of these will not be caught by MARS since they are entered in authoritative form, but are either too broad to be useful, or simply incorrect for the item they are intended to describe. (E.g. A book written about the history of Kazakhstan is given geographic subdivision for the Russian Federation.) In some cases, BNS may bring in the correct headings if another library upgrades or enhances the record with appropriate subject analysis, but in that case the record will have both correct and incorrect headings. This means that the indexes for the incorrect headings will be made less valuable—the number of “false hits” in the catalog will be increased for those subject areas, and researchers will waste time finding and obtaining books that do not meet their needs.