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What's all this fuss about FRBR?

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As librarians, we have long since gotten used to almost constant change. Nevertheless, it can still be hard to face changes looming on the horizon when we don't fully understand their reasons or implications. FRBR (Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records) may fall into this category for many of us. Perhaps, if we view it as a means to address user expectations and needs, it will be easier to accept.

Even before Charles Ammi Cutter's *Rules for a Dictionary Catalog* (the 4th ed. was published in 1904), a main purpose of library catalogs has been to help the end-user find resources. This purpose, or function, of the library catalog continues to inform innovative concepts today, most notably FRBR.* (See note below.)

FRBR came about in response to nagging questions in the face of new information sources — and most especially electronic resources — that current cataloging rules and practices are trying to accommodate. The questions, as paraphrased by Glenn Patton of OCLC, are:

- What information is of the most value to users of the catalog?
- How can that most valuable information be used more effectively?

As a result of analyzing these questions, a prominent value of FRBR is that it spells out user tasks and helps clarify how catalogs should function.

FRBR is not a standard. It does not contain rules that one would implement. Rather, it is a conceptual model that will help us restructure catalogs to be more responsive to users' needs. It explains the bibliographic universe in a way that emphasizes the relationships among bibliographic entities. This allows for more collocation of records, more gathering together of related entities at a level higher than the individual bibliographic record. This will simplify displays of search results, and as a result, improve the navigation of a bibliographic database.

A search today in most bibliographic databases results in a list of bibliographic records. Each record is equal in value, and there is no hierarchy. If the search is performed in a large, shared database, like OCLC WorldCat, and, if the search is for works of a prolific writer or an often published title, the results can be bewildering at best. A "FRBR-ized" database (one constructed using FRBR concepts) would present results in a more hierarchical manner. For example, a search for Jane Austen in a hypothetical FRBR-ized database might first give us

a result with two choices: works by Jane Austen or works about Jane Austen. A click on the works by Jane Austen would take us to a list of titles, without specifying particular editions. Then, a click on a title would lead us to specific editions of that work. In this example, detailed information about individual publications is hidden or kept back until needed by the searcher.

In this same hypothetical FRBR-ized database, a search for *Pride and Prejudice* might first give us a display that lists the various formats of this Jane Austen work. A click on motion pictures would lead us to a listing of all the motion pictures. And, a click on the 2005 version would result in a list of all the various editions and material types (e.g. VHS, DVD) available for last year's motion picture.

FRBR concepts are already being used to restructure online databases. OCLC, RLG, and some library system vendors are incorporating the concepts of the FRBR model in various ways. For examples, see the list of references below. If you explore these, you will see that there is no one way to incorporate FRBR concepts.

FRBR concepts are also informing the reworking of our cataloging standards. RDA (Resource Description and Access), the successor to AACR2, is currently under development, and it is incorporating the terminology and concepts of the FRBR model. However, it is not yet known exactly how FRBR will be incorporated because *RDA Part II – Relationships* is yet to be developed.

As a result, we don't yet know the degree to which FRBR will influence our library lives. This will depend both on the cataloging rules and on system design. One thing we can be fairly sure of, however, is that the FRBR model does not need to be applied to every publication that we catalog. In fact, the vast majority of items we catalog do not need the benefit of FRBR's collocation because they represent only a single publication. Our FRBR efforts, then, can be concentrated on those works that will benefit greatly from the application of FRBR concepts, namely those that exist in many editions and a wide variety of media.

If you would like to get a jump start on a deeper understanding of FRBR and what it will mean for both technical services and public services, I urge you to explore some of the references listed below. And keep in mind, we are embracing this change in order to help our users.

*Note: FRBR (Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records) was developed by an IFLA Study Group (1992-1995). For details about the model, please see the list of references below.

References

For more information about FRBR: (Each of the references listed below will lead you to additional references about FRBR.)

Bowen, Jennifer. "FRBR: Coming Soon to Your Library?" *Library Resources and Technical Services*, 49 (July 2005):175-188.

Childress, Eric. "What's FRBR?" Presentation to the Central Ohio Chapter, American Society of Information Science & Technology, 21 July 2005, Columbus, Ohio.

<<http://www.oclc.org/research/presentations/childress/20050721-coasis%26t.ppt>>

Gonzalez, Linda. "What is FRBR?" *Library Journal NetConnect*, (Spring 2005): 12-14.

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, "Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records: Final Report," (1998).

<<http://www.ifla.org/VII/s13/frbr>>

Patton, Glenn. Various presentations, including "What's FRBR and Why Do I Care?" Presentation to the Ohio Library Council Annual Conference, October 5, 2005.

Tillett, Barbara. "What is FRBR?: A Conceptual Model for the Bibliographic Universe (2004)."

<<http://www.loc.gov/cds/FRBR.html>>

Originally published in *Technicalities* (v. 25, no. 5, Sept./Oct. 2003).

FRBR Projects:

- OCLC Research Activities related to FRBR
<<http://www.oclc.org/research/projects/frbr/default.htm>>
- OCLC Fiction Finder
<<http://fictionfinder.oclc.org/>>
- RLG. RedLightGreen
<<http://www.redlightgreen.com>>
- VTLs. FRBR Presentations
<<http://www.vtls.com/Corporate/FRBR.shtml>>

For more information about RDA

RDA: Resource Description and Access. Website includes Background, Prospectus, Drafts, Discussion List, FAQ, Presentations, Ongoing Activities.

<<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/jsc/rda.html>>