

DATE: May 24, 2002

TO: Hennepin County Board of Commissioners, Local/Library Press

FROM: Sanford Berman, Former Head Cataloger, Hennepin County Library
(4400 Morningside Road, Edina, MN 55416; 952-925-5738)

SUBJECT: WHY DESTROY THE HENNEPIN COUNTY LIBRARY CATALOG AND AUTHORITY FILE?

The Demolition Derby now underway at HCL has little to do with me. It also has little to do with the declared intention to "expand our users" access to the full range of HCL's rich resources and the ever-increasing range of global information resources."

Replacing user-friendly, staff-developed cataloging practices and tools with "standardized," frequently irrelevant and dysfunctional forms and protocols will only diminish access and compromise both the clarity and utility of HCL's bibliographic products. Put candidly, it will be (and in some regards already is) harder to identify and reach "HCL's rich resources." And it will be tougher for ordinary users to make sense of HCL catalog records.

HCL's previously critical and innovative approach to cataloging would IMPROVE, rather than REDUCE, the identification and retrieval of web resources and other new formats. (Government documents have been selectively and effectively cataloged at HCL for many years.) The given reasons for the rush to "standardization" and "compatibility" are deceptive. What drives this cataclysmic change is not sincere concern for expanding or enhancing service to library users, but rather a purely managerial fixation on cutting staff costs, linked with a mistaken belief that electronic manipulation of data somehow compensates for the absence or inaccuracy or unhelpfulness of the data itself. The unmistakable purpose of the switch is to measurably lessen, if not totally eliminate, human (that is, professional cataloger) intervention or mediation, thus allowing bibliographic records supplied by such vendors as OCLC and MARCIVE to be simply dumped into the HCL database without much, if any, serious scrutiny, editing, or enhancement. It coincides with the "dumbing down" already evident in HCL collection development, which will produce a shallow, superficial array of "resources" more like that of a fast-turnover superstore than a diverse, in-depth library.

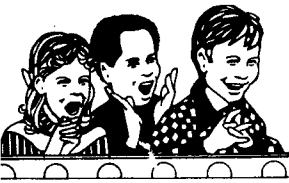
While it may be difficult for non-librarians and even some colleagues to accept, cataloging as performed by the Library of Congress--strictly adhering to the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules and employing its own subject heading thesaurus--often doesn't "work." To assume that it does is plainly to engage in magical thinking. (Indeed, professional staff at LC itself lately testified before Congress that "While cataloging was once one of the Library's crown jewels, a world-renowned operation, now we can no longer afford to perform quality cataloging because of insufficient professional staff." They added: "Acquisitions of materials continues to surge, while staff to catalog those acquisitions has plummeted. Just since the end of fiscal 1997 there has been a 16% drop in professional book cataloger staffing levels. Faced with these...circumstances, Library management has implemented various schemes to catalog more with less, all resulting in a deleterious effect on the quality of our cataloging product and our once pristine data base. This is a grave error because good cataloging is the foundation of good librarianship. Acquisitions and reference staff cannot adequately perform their duties when they cannot rely on the accuracy of our cataloging records. Moreover, this lack of quality has an obvious adverse impact on our patrons..." The content of most catalog records supplied by vendors or networks to public libraries derives from the Library of Congress.

Yes, apparent savings may accrue from slashing cataloging staff and dumbing-down bib-records, but they are only "apparent," not real. In fact, poor, inadequate cataloging costs more by alienating users and severely limiting access to and exploitation of valuable resources, in effect undermining and nullifying the considerable expense involved in selecting and processing library materials.

For further details:

- +Berman, S. "Good Luck, Folks! Finding Material On 'Those People' (And Their Concerns) In Library Catalogs," MultiCultural Review, v. 9, no. 2 (June 2000), p. 26-28, 48-52.
- +Berman, S. "Jackdaws Strut In Peacock's Feathers: the Sham of 'Standard' Cataloging," Librarians At Liberty, v. 5, no. 2/v. 6, nos. 1-2 (June 1998), p. 1, 4-21; reprinted in Alternative Library Literature, 1998-1999 (McFarland, 2000), p. 317-35.

**MASS GRAVE
PLEASE
KEEP OFF**



- +Berman, S. "'Tips On Cataloging and Classification For Library Users': a Generic Handout," Public Image, v. 3, no. 1 (October 1990), p. 1-3.
- +Berman, S. "Why Catalog?," Unabashed Librarian, no. 116 (2000), p. 11-12.
- +Moore, Maureen. "Library of Congress Service Erosion," IG Communicator, v. 34, no. 5 (September/October 2000), p. 16-18; reprinted in Alternative Library Literature, 2000-2001 (McFarland, 2002), p. 159-61.
- +Statement of the Library of Congress Professional Guild, AFSCME Local 2910, Before the Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Legislative Branch Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives, May 1, 2002.

