Authority Control in the Online Environment: An Introduction

Betsy N. Hine
Head, Monographic Cataloging
Cunningham Memorial Library
Indiana State University
Terre Haute

This collection of experiences with authority control in various libraries in Indiana comes at a critical time in the state. Automation has been evolving at a very rapid pace over the past five years in Indiana, and, as a result, many pertinent issues have had to be faced, planned for, implemented, and cleaned up after. The same issues will be dealt with in the years to come as more and more libraries automate.

One of the important issues to consider for the database is authority work and all that it entails. When a panel discussion on this topic was held during the ILA/ILTA annual meeting in Fort Wayne in 1988 and met with a good response, it was obvious that there is a great deal of interest in authority control. This editor and the contributing authors hope that this issue of *Indiana Libraries* will not only answer some questions about authority work, but also raise some questions that might be the catalyst for planning and evaluating authority control in other libraries. At this very important time in Indiana, all the people involved with *Indiana Libraries* hope that this issue will benefit libraries who are considering automation and are evaluating the way they do authority work.

To begin the discussion of the topic, it is important to understand how the contributors conceive or define authority work and authority control. Throughout the planning of this issue the following definitions have been used, as set forth on pages 3 and 4 of *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* (vol. 9, no. 3, 1989) edited by Barbara Tillett. First, an **authority record** refers to a unit (on a card or online) that shows an established heading and cross references, among other possible information. This unit records decisions made over time during authority work. The next level would be an **authority file**, or a group of authority records. Such a file may or may not interact with a library's bibliographic file. **Authority work** is the "process" and includes the research and intellectual effort involved in creating and updating authority records. Last, **authority control** is the overall term for the "concept" encompassing the operations of authority work; it emphasizes the control over variant forms of access points that might appear as cross references, etc., in an authority record.

Who benefits from authority control? Certainly when a library patron is confronted with the dilemma of searching for items by an author but is not certain what that author's real name is, or how to spell it, authority work helps that user either by entering all material by that author under one heading or by leading the user to other possible headings via helps such as cross references. When the patron is looking for material about a specific subject, and the library uses one of the controlled vocabulary lists such as LCSH or Sears for subject headings, subject authority work can help the user find out under what headings the library gathers material about his or her subject needs. When a library patron reads something that has been published as part of a series and wants more material in the same series, successful authority work will have gathered this series together for that user. For example, uniform title authority work will have gathered together all the manifestations of the *Nutcracker*, no matter what the various title pages, record album covers, or scores might say. Who then benefits from authority work? It is not the library patron alone. It is certain that the reference librarian answering a reference question or assisting a patron to use the catalog benefits also. It is definitely the cataloger, who provides the access points by which material is found, who also benefits from authority work. In the automated environment which truly integrates the technical record and its associated files with the record accessed by the public, the most successful authority work allows easy access and smooth, almost invisible, transition from an uncertain search to a definite hit.

What happens when there is no authority work done? At least one of the contributors to this issue would say that authority work is ultimately done by someone, either by a library staff member or by the user him or herself, with or without the assistance of a reference librarian. When authority work is not done by the library, the chances are great that the user may not find all the library's material by or about a given heading if he or she must guess what that heading is or how it is used by the particular library.

Just how much authority work can or should be done (some would say just how much user error should be accounted for) depends on many factors. In a totally manual situation, particularly one with a small number of staff, authority work often must be minimal at best. There are staffing constraints and demands in every library situation, manual or online, and even though there might be some who would say that authority work is essential no matter what, these staffing constraints and other economic issues are very real indeed. On the other hand, should this decision be based on economics? Just how much authority work can a library afford to do or not to do? When does lack of authority control actually cost that library more, in terms of reference staff time as well as in user frustration? Each individual library must ultimately decide what it can afford to do to assist the user. Some libraries might have to decide that any authority work, much less extensive authority work, is impossible.

The way libraries have done authority work over the years has been greatly affected by the availability of the bibliographic utilities. As libraries found the utilities more accessible, so also did they find that those utilities could provide the basis for authority work. Some libraries

who were automated with local systems could download authority records from the utility just as they could bibliographic records, either by tape or by direct transfer. Other libraries who were not automated locally could still use those online authority and bibliographic records as the basis for their own manual files. This certainly made the "work" of authority control a little easier in some respects.

Automation, or the possibility of automation in the near future, has forced many libraries to re-evaluate the status of authority work locally. What a totally manual situation might demand could be quite different from what is demanded by an automated situation. Even implementing AACR2 ten years ago forced some libraries who had previously not done authority work to begin doing it in some form, because cataloging under those new rules demanded so many changes in headings and access points. Then the online record was not so different from any other record, and those headings designated as access points needed to be consistent. Otherwise whatever the form of the catalog, finding anything could have been chaotic. Many libraries chose at that point to do massive authority projects in order to better prepare their records for automation, whenever that might happen. At that time, many libraries changed the way authority work was being done in preparation for automation. Tapes were sent to vendors to have headings flipped to AACR2 forms. Authority files were begun to keep track of all the changes resulting from AACR2. More attention was given to converting records, including authority records, to machine readable form. Automation seemed more likely, more feasible, more necessary, and more imminent than ever before.

How does preparation for automation change the way one looks at authority work? Consistency of heading has always been important for maximum access to the information in the library. However, there was always the chance that the library patron might "stumble" upon all the material by or about a given heading especially if the variance in form of heading was only slight. Cards under variant headings might be in close enough proximity in the card catalog that material would be uncovered. In the online environment, however, the "machine" is usually capable of giving up information only in the version of the search string itself. Not many systems are so perfect that they can guess what the searcher means. Any variant search string must be built into a sophisticated and truly interactive system in order that any user error will be accounted for.

Even with Keyword/Boolean, truncation, or other sophisticated searches, there is still a need for authority work. Headings and access points are still integral parts of a bibliographic record and must be consistent to maximize success for the library user. This is especially true when one considers that, on certain index screens, consistency of heading is still needed to perform that "gathering function" that Cutter described so long ago and that Janet Hartzell mentions in this issue. As sophisticated as Keyword/Boolean capability is, not having those consistent headings when one does a "simple" author, title, or subject search would mean that not all material under one heading would be found or displayed together. One cannot depend on a system to read the mind and guess what is really meant. The MARC record, built around access points, is still the best that libraries have to offer at this time. Especially in the larger libraries, patrons do not want to

wade through a long list of heading variances. In other words, they want librarians to do the authority work.

Librarians are asking what should be done with their card catalogs when automation is in place. Should they be phased out? Should they be maintained, and if so, to what level? Should they be kept until retrospective conversion is 100% complete? These same questions are being asked of what were previously considered the working files of the library — the shelflist and the authority files. What should be done with those other manual files when automation is in place? This issue will not address the shelflist question but will offer some suggestions for the manual authority file.

The articles included in this issue on the topic of authority control cover a variety of library types in Indiana. Three automated systems are represented, CLSI, DRA, and NOTIS; One library is not yet automated. The contributors are from libraries which represent varying levels of past and current authority work, and each one has addressed a different aspect of authority work for the reader to consider.

The article by Janet Hartzell deals with several issues of concern to public libraries in particular. Although Allen County Public is a large library with several branches, the issues and questions raised in this article are critical in many public libraries, no matter what their size or stage in the automation race.

Steve Mussett of the University of Evansville reminds the reader that, even in libraries with a small staff, authority work is attempted on different levels, sometimes to the frustration of the staff who try to keep up with it. His experience has been in two similar libraries which over the years have taken quite different approaches in their authority work. He maintains that authority work is done — if not by the library staff, then by the library patron. Staff in small-to-medium sized academic libraries will particularly recognize and relate to some of the choices necessary in their situations as described in his article.

Sylvia Turchyn describes authority control over the years at a large academic library, a complicated endeavor. Indiana University had a long history of very complete authority control and a large manual authority file. When the decision was made to automate with NOTIS, a vendor-produced authority file was created. The point is made that evaluating the need for authority control is an important task in any case. In this article, as well as in the article by Judy Hill, the necessity of cooperation between public service and technical service staff in authority control is discussed. Many of the issues raised in this article are useful to all libraries, not just to large academic ones.

At Indiana State University a multi-institutional online system has been in place for several years, including the process of authority work. Sally Baker and Pam Firestone describe the development of such a situation, the process of maintaining it, and the basic approaches one can take.

The special library is represented by Christian Theological Seminary and the article on uniform title authority control by Nancy Eckerman, formerly Associate Librarian for Technical Services there. This article addresses the very unique problems of creating special title

entries that collocate varying manifestations of titles proper. Even though, as Eckerman states, many libraries will never deal with this specific aspect of authority control, it is a very real and necessary component to many others.

Tom Lehman discusses the series authority file retrospective conversion project at Notre Dame as well as current series authority work there. Libraries facing the conversion of their various manual authority files will find the description of this project very informative.

Judy Hill traces authority practices over the years at Butler University and, in so doing, describes scenarios that are all too-familiar in many libraries. The way in which Butler has come to grips with a seemingly total lack of authority control and has undergone many adjustments, including re-classification of the entire collection, in preparation for automation makes a very interesting narrative. It provides good insights to others who find themselves in similar predicaments.

Each article is different. Each covers a particular aspect of authority control, and all combine to provide a collection that is very comprehensive in scope and practical in nature. As mentioned previously, if solutions are not always given, it is hoped that the questions raised can provide insight and lay the groundwork for planning as automation in Indiana libraries proceeds.

The editor wishes to thank the contributors for their work on this topic. All concerned hope that some part of this issue will benefit libraries who are planning for automation; who are coming to grips with the need for authority control in some form or at some level; who have automated and discovered what lack of, or minimum level, authority control now looks like online; or who have done some amount of authority control and now find themselves ready to consider more, in other areas, such as uniform titles. Authority work is done by someone. Ideally, good authority work in an online environment will mean that the library patron does less of it.