
Public-Access Provocations: An Informal Column

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Last year, the "Worst Serial Title Change Awards" report included an item scolding Ziff-Davis Publishing for abruptly changing the volume numbering on Popular Photography. [1] After all, Ziff-Davis, with some of the most popular and longest established special-interest magazines, should know better.

Just one problem with the item: Ziff-Davis doesn't publish Popular Photography and hasn't for several years. Ziff-Davis also doesn't publish Stereo Review or several other popular special-interest magazines that it used to. The current publisher for both magazines mentioned is Hachette Filipacchi Magazines, Inc. But then, Ziff-Davis didn't sell the magazines to Hachette; Ziff-Davis sold them to CBS Magazines, which in turn sold them to Hachette.

This all happened in the 1980s, when Ziff-Davis chose to focus its publishing efforts on its growing stable of computer magazines and other computer-related information.

Source of the Confusion?

What happened here? I can't be sure, but here's a good guess. The committee members did just what you or I would probably do to check a publisher's name: they went to the catalog--either a local online catalog, OCLC, or RLIN. And they found Ziff-Davis as the publisher for Popular Photography because technical processing departments and CONSER participants don't update catalog records for a serial when such a trivial detail as the publisher's name changes.

Oh, the CONSER record's been changed, partly to note the change in volume numbering (which catalogers do care about). Now it has "CBS Magazines etc." as publisher and "Los Angeles etc." as place, where only the "etc." parts are currently correct.

I'm not saying this practice is wrong, but it does mean that online catalogs are essentially worthless as sources for publisher information on serials. Do most patrons know that? Well, if serials librarians forget it, how likely is it that the patrons are warned?

Everything Is Checked Unless It Isn't

What can patrons trust in the online catalog? Librarians take considerable (and generally justifiable) pride in authority control, assuring not only that information is correct, but that it's checked and normalized. The catalog database is part of

what makes a library more than just a big heap of books; it must be right.

There are two gotchas to that assumption. First, "right" for authority-controlled information means the normalized form, not necessarily the form as it appears on the item. That may not be a major factor most of the time, although some patrons may be puzzled that the author they see atop the catalog record isn't what they see on the book cover.

The more important factor: what gets checked, and what gets changed from copy cataloging sources (including cataloging-in-publication records), is only what the library regards as significant. Form of name is significant. Pagination probably isn't. Publisher's name and address don't always seem to be. I know there are catalog records for my book Patron Access: Issues for Online Catalogs that show the publisher as Knowledge Industry Publications, rather than G.K. Hall, because the cataloging-in-publication record was created before KIPI sold the series to Hall, although Hall actually published the book. No cataloger ever saw an actual physical book with that title and Knowledge Industry as the publisher; that's irrelevant. (I should note that most records have the correct publisher.)

Who Really Cares?

None of this constitutes a library emergency. Experienced librarians have some sense of which information in catalog records can be trusted and which should be used with care. Do patrons? Probably not.

Should they? Yes, if missing or inaccurate data will affect them. Users need to know when skepticism is warranted--when they should assume that the computer catalog may be telling them lies.

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Sins of Omission

A much greater problem than bad data in the catalog is missing data. A close friend who runs a small college library with half a dozen CD-ROM periodical indexes and a CD-ROM catalog (with full recon) sometimes despairs because students needing quick topical information just go for the periodical indexes. My friend knows that the students would frequently get better (more useful, more thoughtful, better organized, and more balanced) background from a chapter in a book--but they don't have ready access to those chapters. These sins of omission would be costly to rectify. And although this problem has been known for many years, solving it doesn't seem sexy, particularly to those who regard books as passe in any case. It's tough enough just to complete retrospective conversion (and I still believe it's more important to get everything into the catalog first, then move on to providing greater depth of access).

Balance? Thoughtfulness? Not nearly as important as timeliness. What's new is best, even if it's shallow or incorrect, or far too specialized for the user's needs.

But that's another topic for another day.

Notes

1. Rosanna M. O'Neil, "Worst Serial Title Change Awards," ALCTS Newsletter 4, nos. 6-7 (1993): 80.

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