



# *Cui prodest* libraries authority work?

Simona Turbanti

## 1 Authority Control: State Of The Art And Trends

Eleven years have passed since the International Conference on Authority Control<sup>1</sup> took place in Florence and the meeting "Faster, smarter and richer: reshaping the library catalogue" held in Rome at the end of February has given us the possibility to look at the current state of one of the most relevant activity in library life, the authority control (Buizza). It is known that the functionality of a catalog without syndetic structure is limited, for this reason in the Seventies several authority databases doing a connection with bibliographic data have been developed (Tillett). It is time to ask ourselves if it is worth to still invest time and resources in the complex construction and maintenance of the authority files. Are we sure that this tool, as it stands now, is useful in the world of the web 2.0 in continuous evolution? How can we improve the authority data and what is the best way to reshape this part of cataloguer's activities? Certainly, authority work is the most expensive part of cataloging and today it is increasingly difficult to justify this costly process, moreover used

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<sup>1</sup>International Conference Authority Control: definition and international experiences, Florence, Italy, February 10-12, 2003; <http://www.sba.unifi.it/ac/en/program.htm>.



by few end users (it is well known that users are often unfamiliar with authority lists and controlled vocabularies). Therefore, really *Cui prodest* libraries authority work? Although authority lists are aimed at serving users, they are conceived as tools for cataloguers to control the author's information.<sup>2</sup> Other librarians and not end users are service main recipients, as demonstrated by the information about the cataloguer's decisions often present in authority record (used web sources and bio-bibliographic repertories on paper, adopted cataloguing rules, reasons for the cataloguer's choices, etc.). According to Calhoun ("A Bird's Eye View of Authority Control in Cataloging"), name and subject authority files have four functions: authority function (the uniformity in naming catalogue's «object»), finding function (the ability for users to search for and find an «object» in the catalogue with one of the various names), information function (the documentation about sources used by cataloguer to establish uniform headings), maintenance function (the authority lists are the way to discover and correct errors in catalogue, both automatically and manually). As Barbara Tillett writes ("Authority Control: State of the Art and New Perspectives"), the authority control main purpose more than informational is organizational; the Library of Congress authority lists are one of the most considerable example of this concept of authority work. In the first Frequently Asked Questions of Library of Congress Authorities help pages we can read «It is important to note that authority records do not represent materials in the Library's collection, rather they are a tool used by librarians to organize the library catalog and assist users in finding those materials. A recent reviewer (in a library publica-

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<sup>2</sup>Paul Gabriele Weston, «Authority control, l'evoluzione di una pratica dal back office al semantic web», to be published in a miscellany of writings in honor of Marco Santoro. I am grateful to Paul Gabriele for sharing with me the piece preview and for all his cues. I thank also Alberto Petrucciani for discussing the topic and for his support.

tion) noted that users may find helpful information in Library of Congress Authorities, such as an author's middle name or a company name change. But generally speaking, Library of Congress Authorities is a service intended for use by technical services librarians and others interested in using LC authority records in their catalogs». <sup>3</sup> However, the "autorités BnF" of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, <sup>4</sup> also available from the portal data.bnf.fr <sup>5</sup> carried out according to principles of the semantic web, shows that the authority work purpose can also be informative. Thanks to integration between catalogue and authority lists, biographic information about the authors and relationships among the entities are clearly visible to users. The possibility to search within different indices and the usability of author's and work's data are the French authority file main strength. A factor to be taken into account when discussing about authority work is the costs/benefits ratio. For several decades we have been trying to reduce costs through shared authority files (Kaiser et al.); but probably the high cost of authority work it is not the only reason for its lack on having a full approval. I think that unfortunately authority control runs the risk of being even now «the poor relative of cataloguing» (Petrucciani).

## 2 Standard For Authority Data: UNIMARC Authorities

A well-known authority control standard is *UNIMARC Manual, Authorities Format*, published in 1991 from IFLA, and in 2009 at its third edition (with the updates of 2012). With UNIMARC Authorities

<sup>3</sup><http://authorities.loc.gov/help/auth-faq.htm#1>.

<sup>4</sup>[http://catalogue.bnf.fr/jsp/recherche\\_autorites\\_bnf.jsp?nouvelleRecherche=O&host=catalogue](http://catalogue.bnf.fr/jsp/recherche_autorites_bnf.jsp?nouvelleRecherche=O&host=catalogue).

<sup>5</sup><http://data.bnf.fr/liste-auteurs>.

it is possible to create detailed descriptions of uniform headings for persons, corporate bodies, works and expressions that include information about the entity (e.g. for a work: kind of opera, date of publication, reference sources, etc.) and also technical data (adopted cataloguing rules, bibliographic agency creating the authority record etc.) (Willer). One considerable example of authority file based on UNIMARC Authorities is the «autorités BnF». Also the National Library of Russia, the Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal, some Eastern European libraries in COBISS System and some Italian Universities – e.g. Pisa, Siena and Genova – use UNIMARC Authorities. Despite its analysis capacity and the ability to support FRBR structure (Le Pape; Arastoopoor and Fattahi; Aalberg, Pisanski, and Žumer), this format is not so widespread in the world’s authority databases. This is due to many reasons, but there are probably three main causes: a flat structure, the «non-granularity» and the complexity. However, although the death of the MARC formats has been predicted (Tennant), there is still much to do to find a valid alternative; for the moment, UNIMARC Authorities it still seems to be the best pathway suited for authority files.

### **3 Opac and Authority Files: the same Fortune?**

Let me make a comparison between authority files and OPAC present condition. Our catalogues are not very “FRBRized”: other than some experimentation, a completely structured around FRBR bibliographic levels catalog doesn’t exist. Our databases are accessible to a public non limited to the libraries users but they don’t offer many opportunities to users; especially in crowded bibliographic databases it’s wasteful and sometimes even impossible to know how

many and which versions of *Divina Commedia* are available in the library or if the library holds a film based on the Dante Alighieri work. To get a response, the user should first search correctly, then browse all the bibliographic records obtained, finally identify the pertinent documents. It takes too long; we could save user's time by implementing a real FRBR architecture in our catalogues. Otherwise, we will have lost a great opportunity and at the same time the more important challenge for a user-oriented bibliographic service. Similarly, our authority databases present inadequate advantages for users. It is impossible for end users to do complex researches, for example by selecting an author starting from sex, or languages used in his works or starting from the period he is operative, although if this information is present and codified in specific fields. Therefore, on one hand we have authority data well structured in codified fields and we are not able to take advantage of it, on the other our authority files are not quite competitive in information if we compare them with the data sources of Wikipedia and free information resources. As it is known, search engines, and not catalogues, are users research starting point; therefore, authority control can't remain within the common *milieu* of the library catalog.

## 4 Feasible Cues ...

If we really want a reassertion of library authority files in the present context we should aim for a cooperation with other partners, especially cultural and research institutions but also publishers, local governments and other interested subjects, like Wikipedia. Activities for authority control require a large amount of work and professional competences; libraries can make available procedures and methods developed and tested in their long cataloguing tradition. Cataloguers and experts in information retrieval should be part of

an information network in which the libraries can play a preeminent role by developing specialized authority lists for authors. In particular, it would be advantageous make a comparison with the archival environment, more used to include «the socio-historical contexts (which includes people, families, and corporate bodies) in which the records were created».<sup>6</sup> As Paul Gabriele Weston states,<sup>7</sup> the authority information function is essential for search in archival database; in libraries catalogs the authors qualifiers are aimed at disambiguation of homonyms and, consequently, at correct indexing. The biographic data are not intended to familiarize users, especially those who belong to different countries and cultures, with the catalog context. An interesting project of shared authority file for libraries, archives and museums is SNAC: the Social Networks and Archival Context Project; «the SNAC project is addressing a longstanding research challenge: discovering, locating, and using distributed historical records».<sup>8</sup> The project began in 2010 by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities; many research institutions and consortia in France, United States and United Kingdom (Smithsonian Institution, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration - NARA, Library of Congress, British Library, Archives nationales - France, Bibliothèque nationale de France, OCLC, etc.) are contributing source data (Bourdon). The project uses Encoded Archival Context-Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families (EAC-CPF),<sup>9</sup> a Society of American Archivists communication standard for encoding information about persons, corporate bodies, and families based on the International Standard Archival Authority Record for

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<sup>6</sup>See the home page of SNAC: the Social Networks and Archival Context Project, <http://socialarchive.iath.virginia.edu>.

<sup>7</sup>Paul Gabriele Weston, «Authority control, l'evouzione di una pratica dal back office al semantic web», to be published.

<sup>8</sup><http://socialarchive.iath.virginia.edu>.

<sup>9</sup><http://eac.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de>.

Corporate Bodies, Persons and Familie. At the moment the SNAC prototype consists of circa 129.000 names; for every record of person, corporate body, family there are the following data: alternative forms of name, occupations, subjects, a rich biographical history, related entries (archival collections which the person is creator, people and corporate bodies, bibliographic resources in Worldcat which the person is author, linked data that is the record VIAF). Certainly, we can no longer afford to maintain many general stand-alone authorities within the library's universe; we have to aim more and more for cooperation between bibliographic agencies of different countries and cultural contexts. The different characteristics and skills of each participant could be the cooperation strength. To this end, it would be necessary a strong synergy between all the parties involved and a common working environment as VIAF (Loesch; see also Manzotti), the Virtual International Authority File, whose «goal [...] is to lower the cost and increase the utility of library authority files by matching and linking widely-used authority files and making that information available on the Web».<sup>10</sup> Many libraries and research institutions collaborate on VIAF; launched in 2003 by OCLC, Library of Congress, Bibliothèque nationale de France and Deutsche National Bibliothek, the Virtual International Authority File consists of more than 20 millions of authors. Moreover, this wider concept of authority control could concern also bibliographic databases that abound with homonymies and are devoid of authority lists (how many authors called "M. Rossi" are there in the ejournals of Nature Publishing Group?<sup>11</sup>). The online database developer do not seem interested in standardization process of authors and they prefer rapidity than costly control (Jeng). In our opinion, the control of access elements within extensive database could be an important step toward an in-

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<sup>10</sup><http://viaf.org>.

<sup>11</sup><http://www.nature.com/siteindex/index.html>.

creased influence of authority work; it would be indeed desirable that we make our controlled uniform headings available to anyone who wants them. It's in our interest to encourage potential users and partners. We can not restrict our tools to libraries; we should take advantage of semantic web potentialities and try to increase the value of library services.

## 5 Conclusion

Thus, we could continue to have our own in-house authority files in almost all the libraries if we wish, but probably it's time for a faster, smarter and richer authority control.

Authority control remains the most expensive part of cataloging, but through cooperative projects - like VIAF and SNAC and others not mentioned in this article - the achievements gained in one library and in one country can be shared internationally to lower the cost. I would like to conclude by quoting Michael Gorman: «Authority control is central and vital to the activities we call cataloguing. Cataloguing – the logical assembling of bibliographic data into retrievable and usable records –is the one activity that enables the library to pursue its central missions of service and free and open access to all recorded knowledge and information. We cannot have real library service without a bibliographic architecture and we cannot have that bibliographic architecture without authority control. It is as simple and as profound as that» (Gorman; Taylor et al., p. 11-22).



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SIMONA TURBANTI, Università di Pisa; ; PHD student at the University of Rome "La Sapienza", Italy.

[simona.turbanti@uniroma1.it](mailto:simona.turbanti@uniroma1.it)

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ABSTRACT: Eleven years ago, in Florence, during an international conference on authority control, many experts reflected on this important aspect of cataloguing. This paper looks at the current state of authority work and try to conceive some cues to reshape authority control. Libraries can afford this costly process only in cooperation with other partners, especially cultural and research institutions but also publishers, local governments and other interested subjects. Two examples of successful partnership are the Social Networks and Archival Context Project and the well-known Virtual International Authority File. An opportunity for libraries could be also to extend authority control to wide bibliographic databases that abound with homonymies.

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