What Is FRBR?

It’s not a small rodent, explains Linda Gonzalez, but a striking way to improve catalogs.

Catalogers, catalog managers, and others in library technical services have become increasingly interested in, worried over, and excited about FRBR (the acronym for Functional Requirements of Bibliographic Records). Staff outside of the management of the library’s bibliographic database may wonder what the fuss is about (FERBER? FURBUR?), assuming that FRBR is just another addition to the stable of acronyms that catalogers bandy about, a mate or sibling to MARC and AACR2. FRBR, however, has the potential to inspire dramatic changes in library catalogs, and those changes will greatly impact how reference and resource sharing staff and patrons use this core tool.

FRBR is a conceptual model for how bibliographic databases might be structured, considering what functions bibliographic records should fulfill in an era when card catalogs are databases with unique possibilities. In some ways FRBR clarifies certain cataloging practices that librarians have been using for over 160 years, since Sir Anthony Panizzi, Keeper of the Printed Books at the British Museum, introduced a set of 91 rules to catalog the print collections of the museum. Sir Anthony believed that patrons should be able to find a particular work by looking in the catalog, that all of an author’s works should be retrievable, and that all editions of a work should be assembled together.

In other ways, FRBR extends upon past practice to take advantage fully of the capabilities of digital technology to associate bibliographic records in ways a card catalog cannot. FRBR was prepared by a study group assembled by IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) that included staff of the Library of Congress (LC). The final report of the group, “Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records,” is available online. The group began by asking how an online library catalog might better meet users’ needs to find, identify, select, and obtain the resources they want.

Better navigation
FRBR is a way of explaining the bibliographic world, in a library context, to allow for a better arrangement and collocation of records in a bibliographic database and, consequently, better navigation. FRBR could make possible a catalog that would group all the bibliographic records for all the filmed versions of Romeo and Juliet in sets organized by the language of the production, for example.

Within each language’s set would be separate subsets for those on DVD and those on videocassette. This would eliminate the screen after screen of displays of bibliographic headings, each of which a user has to investigate to determine if the record is really for the resource he or she needs (“Where’s the movie version on DVD?”). The larger the size of the database, the more such organization promises cleaner, more navigable displays to searchers. This is why FRBR is especially important in resource sharing environments—where databases seem to grow exponentially.
From items to works

One of the bases for that organization is FRBR's conception of bibliographic resources, which fall into four "entities": item, manifestation, expression, and work.

An "item" is familiar to us: the object that sits on a shelf, which gets checked out, damaged, repaired, then eventually discarded. In the current era, it may not be physical but instead virtual, like an ebook.

The "item," an individual copy, is a single example of a "manifestation," the publication by a certain publisher of a text, or of a sound or video recording. Seamus Heaney's translation of Beowulf, published in hardback by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1999, is one manifestation. Heaney's translation of Beowulf published in paperback by W.W. Norton in 2000 is another. Heaney's Beowulf as it appears in the collection Wizards: Stories of Magic, Mischief and Mayhem (Thunder's Mouth, 2001) is yet another manifestation. Manifestations are generally what catalogs catalog.

All of these are manifestations of an "expression," a more abstract and intangible entity. Heaney's translation of Beowulf, independent of who is publishing it and when, is one "expression" of that work. The translation by Barry Tharaud is another.

What are these two Beowulf translations "expressions" of? I used the term work above, an even more abstract concept in the FRBR model. In this case, the "work" is Beowulf, that ancient intellectual creation or effort that over time has been expressed in multiple ways, each manifested in several different ways itself, with one or more items in each manifestation.

This is a pretty gross oversimplification of FRBR, which also details other relationships: among these entities; between these entities and various persons (such as creators, publishers, and owners); and between these entities and their subjects. It also specifies characteristics, or "attributes," of the different types of entities (such as title, physical media, date, availability, and more). But it should be enough to grasp the possibilities.

Now apply it

Imagine that you have a patron who needs a copy of Heaney's translation of Beowulf. She doesn't care who published it or when, only that it's Heaney's translation. What if you (or your patron) could place an interlibrary loan call on that expression, instead of looking through multiple bibliographic records (as of March, OCLC's WorldCat had nine regular print editions) for multiple manifestations and then judging which record is the best bet on which to place a request? Combine that with functionality that lets you specify "not Braille, not large print," and it could save you time. Now imagine a patron in want of a copy, any copy, in English, of Romeo and Juliet. Saving staff time means saving money.

Whether or not this actually happens depends upon what the library community decides to do with FRBR. It is not a set of cataloging rules or a system design, but it can influence both. Several library system vendors are working with FRBR ideas; VTLS's current integrated library system product Virtua incorporates FRBR concepts in its design. More vendors may follow. How the Joint Steering Committee for Revision of Anglo-American Cataloging Rules develops the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules (AACR) to incorporate FRBR will necessarily be a strong determinant of how records work in a "FRBR-ized" bibliographic database.

National FRBR experiments

The larger the bibliographic database, the greater the effect of "FRBR-like" design in reducing the appearance of duplicate records. LC, RLG, and OCLC, all influenced by FRBR, are experimenting with the redesign of their databases.

LC's Network Development and MARC Standards Office has posted at its web site the results of some of its investigations into FRBR and MARC, including possible display options for bibliographic information. The design of RLG's public catalog, RedLightGreen, has been described as "FRBR-ish" by Merrilee Proffitt, RLG's program officer. If you try a search for a prolific author or much-published title in RedLightGreen, you'll probably find that the display of search results is much different than what you would expect. OCLC Research has developed a prototype "frbrized" database for fiction, OCLC FictionFinder. Try a title search for a classic title like Romeo and Juliet and observe that OCLC includes, in the initial display of results (described as "works"), a graphic indicator (stars, ranging from one to five). These show in rough terms how many libraries own the work—Romeo and Juliet clearly gets a five. Indicators like this are something resource sharing staff can consider an "ILL quality rating."

If you're intrigued by FRBR's possibilities and what they could mean to resource sharing workflow, start talking. Now is the time to connect with colleagues, your local and/or consortial system vendor, RLG, OCLC, and your professional organizations. Have input into how systems develop in the FRBR world.

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