



FOUR

FRBR IN CONTEXT

Nearly twenty years after the first draft of the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR), and fifteen years after its final draft was released, the use of concepts and structures defined in FRBR is assumed to be the way forward. Yet it isn't at all clear to me that we have an understanding of what FRBR means for library practice and for library users.

The FRBR model of bibliographic data is the most radical change to library catalog thinking since Panizzi developed his ninety-one rules for the British Museum Catalog. The model presented by FRBR is complex, but it is made even more complex by the competing concepts in the Final Report from the FRBR Study Group that developed FRBR (IFLA 2009). FRBR is alternately seen as an analysis of user needs, a description of the cataloging workflow, and as a data model for a future bibliographic record format. It is rarely viewed, however, as what it was originally intended to be: as the development of basic requirements for an international standard national bibliographic record.

Few of us have done a close reading of the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records document, although I would guess that many have glanced at the diagrams, either within the context of the document or as illustrations used in presentations that we've attended. This means that many of us have had our concept of FRBR formed from secondary sources that emphasized only a portion of the content of the document. The FRBR Final Report is 142 pages in length, including appendixes, which makes it a formidable read. The document includes three very high-level entity-relation diagrams—high-level in the sense that they contain very little detail. Although a picture may be worth a thousand words, these three diagrams are far from expressing the full meaning of the work of the FRBR Study Group. There is some ambiguity between the textual description of the conceptual model and the entity-relation diagrams that have come to represent FRBR for most librarians.

Most discussions of FRBR begin with a list of the entities in the three groups, and then illustrate these entities with one or more of the diagrams from the document. I hope to do something quite different here, which is to focus on the text itself, and how the text describes goals and conclusions of the study. I also will provide some historical context for the work of the Study Group.

With the implementation of FRBR concepts in the cataloging standard Resource Description and Access (RDA), FRBR has been accepted by some members of the library community. However, there have been few studies testing the library user's view of FRBR and there are not a great number of implementations of FRBR as an actual catalog.

A report produced in 2006 for the Library of Congress by Karen Calhoun recommended investigating FRBR, which showed that the author did not consider FRBR a “given,” but only one possible direction for bibliographic data: “4.2.6 Support experimentation with FRBR and urge vendors and library service organizations to implement clustering based on FRBR concepts” (Calhoun 2006, 18).

The 2008 Library of Congress report on the Future of Bibliographic Control, titled *On the Record* recommended that all work on RDA be halted while studies can be done on the viability of FRBR. Although these two major LC reports called for systematic investigation of the ideas presented in FRBR, that did not happen. In the meanwhile, FRBR concepts were incorporated into RDA, which had an implementation date of March 31, 2013, for participating libraries.

The analysis in this book takes a broad view of the cataloging culture that preceded FRBR in an attempt to understand the motivation of the members of the FRBR Study Group. What problems were they trying to solve, and what were the tools at their disposal?

We will see that the primary direction taken by FRBR Study Group, using an entity-relation analysis model, greatly influenced the outcome of the study. Proponents of that method in the FRBR Study Group were also key members of the cataloging standards community that developed the successor to AACR that began shortly after the publication of the FRBR Final Report. After a false start on AACR3, the cataloging rules were reborn as rules for an implementation of the FRBR entity-relation model, RDA.

It is clear that these two standards, FRBR and RDA, were heavily influenced by the thinking of a small group of people, perhaps no more than a score. Even if the meetings of the FRBR Study Group were open to the public, the standard was developed by a group with a closed membership and who did not use available social media to extend the conversation and deliberation beyond itself. Comments were solicited from IFLA institutional members, but, of course commenting on a draft of a document is far from participating in its creation. That said, this is a common standards development method in the library community, which contrasts with the groups that develop the Internet and the World Wide Web. The Internet Engineering Task Force allows anyone to make proposals relating to the technology. Those proposals are called (and remain throughout their use) “Requests for Comments.” Changes are not only discussed; they are implemented in code as the proposal progresses through discussion. Anyone can participate in the development of standards. The World Wide Web Consortium, another standards development body, does have members—over 400, in fact. Members are companies and institutions. Some committees are limited to member representatives, but most communication takes place on open mailing lists to which anyone can post, and document drafts often are developed on publicly accessible wiki pages. Members can submit documents that discuss or propose web-related technology.

Another significant difference between these library standards and standards in other communities is that library standards not only do not provide proof of concept through “running code,” they actually eschew technology altogether. At least, they claim to. Both FRBR and RDA are stated to be “technology neutral.” This is obviously not true, because the analysis in FRBR made use of a very specific technology, the entity-relation model. Perhaps it would have been more accurate to say that FRBR was “application neutral.” However, it is probable that the members of the group did not understand how much the technology of relational model determined the group’s outcome. As we’ll see, there is at least some evidence that the entity-relation model was not well understood, and that this has resulted in some contradictions between statements in the text of the report and presentation of the model as entity-relation diagrams.

What is notable about FRBR, and in some respects RDA also, is that it makes numerous assumptions that were never tested. Because FRBR was couched in terms of a known technology, it was assumed to be technically valid and perhaps even implementable, in spite of the declarations of technology neutrality. Yet no implementations of FRBR, even on a small set of test data, were developed as part of the FRBR Study Group's process. RDA is therefore a cataloging standard based on an unproven conceptual model. The technology that would support them is, at the time of this writing, still unavailable.

In spite of lack of proof of FRBR as a bibliographic model, the concept of FRBR has reached beyond the library community. These implementations often differ considerably from the presumed library implementation. Unfortunately, these variations generally do not provide an explicit statement of their interpretations of FRBR or why they chose a different reinterpretation of FRBR as defined in the FRBR Final Report.

To understand how the library community got to this point, it is necessary to revisit the context in which the FRBR standard was developed.