Much of traditional book cataloging is influenced by a touch-it-once mentality, where work is completed in as few steps as possible. By avoiding unnecessary revision, libraries can process materials quickly and benefit from economies of scale. Valuable staff time is preserved to process additional materials. However, the touch-it-once mentality is problematic when dealing with special collections materials, since they often differ between manifestations and are primary sources for research that informs their description. This paper discusses the idea of “progressive bibliography,” or proceeding from minimal to fuller descriptions, as an intellectually valid and pragmatically essential methodology. It examines some already existing approaches and discusses a few of the challenges and further areas of research. While the idea of positive accumulation of knowledge is old, computerized tools and modern information theories enables us to streamline this process to the benefit of patrons and scholars, and so managers of these collections have new tools to tackle ever-increasing backlogs of underprocessed materials.

The issue of achieving access to special collections materials has received a great deal of attention in recent years. The concepts of rare book cataloging, however, are often firmly seated in traditions that predate the computer. The traditional ways of cataloging and documenting have not typically included the possibility of enhancing the description as knowledge changes over time. Yet, in many cases, not everything is known about a document before it is cataloged, especially since undercataloged materials have not been previously available to scholars. Modern scholarship can put the mundane into a new light that highlights its importance. Thus, the work of the rare book cataloger is often the beginning of more substantial bibliographical research, and there is a desperate need for new ways to integrate computerized tools into the construction of scholarly databases. As knowledge progresses, it needs to be included in our progressing descriptions, which in turn help progress scholarly knowledge.
Earlier Literature

Progressive description can be adapted to various economic environments to do rare material cataloging inexpensively while still doing full description as needed. Scholarly databases, such as the catalogs maintained by libraries, are a public good. However, libraries face increasingly difficult financial situations. The economic realities that most cataloging departments face include cut or transferred cataloging positions, so having catalogers work on detailed descriptions for each item as it is acquired becomes less feasible for many institutions. M. Winslow Lundy suggests using noncatalogers, who are subject experts and bibliographically sophisticated, to provide initial access to collections.1 Lundy’s procedure uses the supervision of catalogers and is based in part on the idea of “Phased Cataloging” as described by Lawrence J. McCrank.

McCrank uses survey methodology to describe and analyze the rare book cataloging workflows of various institutions. The survey supports a hierarchy of ten descriptive levels: directory description, collection description, short-title cataloging, item level standard cataloging, standard rare book cataloging, advanced variant descriptive cataloging, full-text retrieval for edited materials, facsimile retrieval for unedited materials, document retrieval in actuality, and retrieval at the lower levels plus contextual information.2 These levels represent progression from library-focused directory information and short-title cataloging to the descriptions created by textual critics and bibliographers. In McCrank’s observations, optimal processing levels are generally assigned as goals to parts of collections. Although he doesn’t discuss a method, he suggests that description and surrogation are ongoing processes and that “revision is always taking place.” Interestingly, McCrank observes that the cost per item seems to tie most strongly to the size of the collection and the geographic location. The per-item cost becomes slightly cheaper as collections reach ten to twenty-five thousand items and then begins to grow with collection sizes. McCrank hypothesizes that this relates to the quality of cataloging done at larger institutions.

In archival circles, the work of Greene and Meissner continues to make an impact on both the economics and the efficiency of descriptive work.3 They suggest that some access to everything should come before detailed access to anything. In archives, that idea translates to using original order, if present, and

---

accepting brief access until more detailed access is warranted. Archival description is built with an awareness of progression as part of the history of the methods; but progressive description has not been fully implemented at most institutions, nor has progression been adapted to rare books and other special collections materials.

The Association of Research Libraries identified developing a continuum of description as an important step toward providing intellectual access to collections for scholarly purposes.4 The recommendation suggests: "View the description of content as a continuum, take advantage of existing standards that can address the wide varieties of materials and needs, and promote flexibility in selecting the standard to be applied to any materials." This desire for an ability to work on description along a continuum of description is echoed in the work of the Library of Congress in their Report on the Future of Bibliographic Control.5

The Report, recently released by the Working Group at the Library of Congress, focuses strongly on the need to enhance access to rare, unique, and other special hidden materials. Access to hidden materials is an urgent topic for libraries as custodians of our nation’s cultural heritage and as we move into an increasingly digital realm, where physical manifestations become more removed from the physical location of scholarship. Part of the statement is particularly germane to the work of rare book catalogers:

2.1.2.1 All: Adopt as a guiding principle that some level of access must be provided to all materials as a first step to comprehensive access, as appropriate. Allow for different cataloging levels depending on the types of documents, their nature, and richness.

Although this might seem revolutionary considering the prevailing touch-it-once mentality for rare book cataloging, it actually has a historical basis. In 1908, Falconer Madan, a librarian at the Bodleian Library, almost certainly faced with a

---


surfeit of uncataloged books and a dearth of time, proposed to address his problem with Degressive Bibliography.6 Restated in 1923:

We have learnt not to regard books in a library as all equal in importance and all to be treated alike, as if they were a rank of drilled soldiers. The lesser books must stand back, and the greater be brought into prominence. We must make use of mental perspective, and provide Degressive Description… The idea is that different periods of printing and different classes of books should meet with correspondingly varying treatment.7

Madan splits time into Early (to 1550), Middle (to 1800), and Modern (after 1800), and classes books as Important, Interesting, and Ordinary. Claiming this solution is important for any library holding more than one thousand volumes, he then goes on to give a scheme, and example descriptions, that catalogers can use along with their judgment to ensure the correct level of description.

The Library of Congress’s principle of “cataloging levels depending on the types of documents, their nature, and richness” is a clear reformulation of Madan’s Degressive Description. The revolutionary reinterpretation is supported by the technology now available. Madan, and his successors, were working with codex catalogs and, later on, card catalogs. To revise these descriptions, physicality became a major obstacle. Pages had to be erased and leaves had to be added, or cards must be replaced. Since every book would receive description based on its age and importance eventually, it was more efficient to handle a book once and describe it for all time. This is a valid time efficiency if knowledge is canonical and well-defined. That is, if early books would always be early, important authors and printers would always be the same and no new important actors would be identified. Thus, the cataloger would know these things about the book at the time of cataloging and set them in stone.

This is similar to the model espoused by Bennett and other catalogers from the print tradition.8 Bennett states “…since rare books will attract inquiry and must sooner or later be properly described, it would appear to be a question of covering an initial expense or absorbing a running expense as it accrues.” Furthermore, “It has been suggested to me that I enlarge upon this, showing that the initial expense is less than the running expense of temporary cataloguing and eventual revision.”

---

In the current cataloging environment, the cost savings of the touch-it-once mentality has proved effective in the cooperative cataloging environment and provides the financial impetus for the standard records of the Program for Cooperative Cataloging. In this environment, one participant describes something correctly once and then other institutions can use the same record. This saves time and money, since books will not have to be cataloged more than once. Yet, touch-it-once cataloging can be problematic, since many of the characteristics of rare materials are unique to the holding repository, and the awareness of certain characteristics may not even exist when the initial cataloging is done.

For example, consider the case of information about stereotype foundries often found on the verso of the title page in nineteenth-century books. This information indicates the shop that built the printing surfaces and is thus an important piece of industrialized printing history. Very reasonably, this sort of information is excluded from the catalog record by the Library of Congress Rule Interpretations of the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, which are not primarily concerned with rare books or bibliographical research into the nineteenth century. This makes sense in a cooperative cataloging environment where libraries are only concerned with the content of the book, but it omits characteristics of primary sources in industrial print history. Unfortunately, the records are structured with a touch-it-once mentality so that updating this information in a shared record might be inaccurate for books which have a different stereotyper, but share the record. This harkens back to the days of purchasing printed cards where revision, and addition of information, was done only locally.

Our technological environment has, however, changed. Information is fungible with the ease of a mouse click and keyboard stroke; catalog records can be automatically updated; databases can be linked; and knowledge can be intertwined and transcluded, ideas originated by Nelson. Nelson argues that computerized text can be repeated and digitally connected between various systems. Transcluding is the process of repeating information from one context in another, essentially providing a two-way footnote to another document. Intertwingularity is the awareness that knowledge can be connected by cross-connections, through linking, transclusion, and other such citations. These ideas have proved extremely powerful and useful already. Nelson’s early work led to the development of hypertext, which

---


formed the basis of Tim Berners-Lee’s work on HyperText Markup Language, that has become the lingua franca of the Internet. In library cataloging, evidence of transclusion can be found in authority records that provide a linking mechanism for materials based on a standard title and that can then connect different databases. The intertwingled catalog would thus be a network of bidirectional connections allowing users to explore a bibliographic galaxy. The technology for this exists and has been implemented for various projects such as Wikipedia, WorldCat, and ZigZag.¹¹

Furthermore, our intellectual environment is dynamic. Knowledge is not canonical; we have multiple perspectives: postmodernism, regional studies, Kuhnian paradigms, print culture, reader response, the sociology of the text, and many other ontological and epistemological theories. Heaney points out that the role of catalogs is much larger than the original purpose of inventory control: “The problems arise from the fact that library catalogs do not function solely as descriptive lists of books: they function also as elements in library management systems and, in the electronic age, as sophisticated information retrieval tools.”¹² Sensitivity to changes over time is the core of the progressive methodology, and something that library cataloging has overlooked for years.¹³ While current staffing and knowledge might lead to minimal description, the description generated by a rare book cataloger begins the process that can lead to a critical edition, progressing along a bibliographical continuum.

The revolutionary part of the idea of progression as traced through this literature is that we finally have the technology to efficiently “provide [access] to all materials as a first step to comprehensive access,”¹⁴ and this is a good idea because of the changing face of scholarship. In other words, degressive description becomes progressive description, which becomes more detailed as the importance of the work grows. It also reacts to changes in scholarly knowledge, as D.W. Krummel has suggested.¹⁵ The cataloger is no longer the judge, jury, and executioner of the records of the material of the rare book room, but a gatekeeper and ally to the whole Gutenberg galaxy of information, ideas, and connections.

Bibliographic(al) Information

Rare books are often of value because they can be located in a particular bibliographical milieu. Changes between printings and editions can indicate the social reception of the text. Offensive text might be canceled, lazy compositors may add significant errors, and the physical resources used by the printing house may change. Furthermore, lists of materials can provide evidence clarifying many questions, such as “Which books were printed at the same house at the same time? What types of books were being sold?” These questions can be addressed in a number of ways including interrogating the object directly through physical bibliographical research. Physical bibliography is interested in the physical state of the book and what this implies about the conditions of its creation, and a highly detailed physical bibliography is generally given the honor of being called a descriptive bibliography. Of course, the facts of the physical nature of a book are endless—lines can be individually measured, broken type can be counted, bindings can be identified, and such ad nauseam. To put a limit on the amount of data collected in a physical bibliography, Professor Bowers suggests that one should focus on a specific purpose and scope: “It should have a unified subject, a definite purpose expressed in its arrangement and in its treatment of the books described so that a shaping intelligence guides the work.” This differs from the goal of cataloging that must describe materials that exist within a particular collection to fit within a constellation of different databases that adhere to various standards. Libraries don’t necessarily have a unified subject, definite purpose, or a complete authoritative collection in all areas, so to attempt a library bibliography would be foolhardy. Even in cases where a library has a comprehensive collection, the records usually adhere to external standards such as those for OCLC WorldCat or the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules. Thus, the apparatus of a catalog differs from a bibliography.

Bibliographical scholarship can thus be distinguished from cataloging in both scope and methodology. While a catalog describes the holdings of a particular institution, bibliographical scholarship attempts to formulate some sort of understanding of the deeper nature of the work or text. The activities are, however, closely connected. Tanselle describes the connection:

The two are naturally related pursuits, and the interests of all who are concerned with books are best served by a spirit of cooperation between them; the split which threatens to make them continually more incompatible does no one any good … Bibliographers and cataloguers, and many other people

as well, constantly consult both catalogues and bibliographies; the two kinds of works are necessarily different, having different aims, but they are both parts of a larger undertaking—the recording of intellectual products and their physical embodiments.\(^{18}\)

This connection was also emphasized by John Alden, who suggested “bibliographical cataloging” as describing an object with an awareness of the study of bibliography.\(^{19}\) He argued that special cataloging provided the opportunity for scholars to find significant patterns by looking at whole collections and using the descriptions of librarians as starting points. Josiah Q. Bennett argues that the cataloger is responsible for putting a rare book within its “bibliographical milieu”\(^{20}\) by describing connections and relationships between it, published bibliographies, other catalogs, and other versions of the work that are likely to exist.

In both these cases of bibliographical awareness in cataloging, two things are happening: one for current scholarship and one for future bibliographical scholarship. For current scholarship, the cataloger must serve due diligence to existing knowledge about the material in question, since users of the materials would presumably be interested in this aspect. This aligns with the identify objective described by Svenonius, “to confirm that the entity described in a record corresponds to the entity sought or to distinguish between two or more entities with similar characteristics.”\(^{21}\) Thus, the additional detail in bibliographical cataloging is motivated by users of rare books and special collections materials, who have an exceptional awareness of different characteristics of entities.

For future bibliographical scholarship, later scholars can use the library’s description as a starting point for further developing some sort of scholarly resource. This method is described in many textbooks, including that by D.C. Greetham,\(^{22}\) and is important because a sizable amount of material exists within libraries as handled by librarians. Through familiarity and close observation, catalogers are often aware of details in which future bibliographical scholars will be deeply interested. The practice of cataloging gives the experience sought in bibliographical laboratories like McKerrow’s and conforms to William A. Jackson’s suggestion of handling many books to become familiar with what is

---

normal. Bibliographical information that develops through handling the material can be recorded in library catalog records that are shared widely and thus contribute to the accumulation of knowledge on these subjects.

The bibliographical information recorded in catalog records is, however, not static. Lagoze points out that “objects may change over time, morphing into new versions of their former selves or into things altogether different.” In rare books, this fluidity is certainly true, but the challenge lies in keeping the description from becoming too complicated. Books may become disbound through repeated handling or be rebound in new forms after initial cataloging. Colors may fade and sewing might weaken to reveal bibliographical evidence that was obscured by tight bindings. Additionally, different curators and catalogers might possess expertise in different issues of intellectual and cultural history and so be able to contribute knowledge where previous librarians were mute. Once the tenant of recording bibliographical information is accepted, revision and change over time becomes necessary since bibliographical scholarship is not static.

Time awareness in revisions is visibly absent from early cataloging and bibliographical methodologies. This makes sense when the description is published in a book and is difficult to revise; but, as Fattahi points out, the computerized bibliographic environment dramatically changes the sort of work that can be done. With the advent of computerized bibliographic databases, the work of libraries has become more involved and cooperative, while at the same time the amount of information needing cataloging has grown rapidly. This growth has obscured the advantages of computer-based organization of rare books with additional work in more voluminous areas. However, the fungibility of computer-based information provides an amazing opportunity to develop better work flows that can adapt to scholarship. Nicolas Barker eloquently puts it:


... [the computer] can tell you where to find books, what is in them, and much else, that books have been forced, against their nature (try reading the back of today’s title-pages), to tell us themselves. Let the computer do this: what then? The books can be in random order. If order is needed, let it be, like Samuel Pepys’s, order of height; it looks well and is better for the books.27

Ultimately, the fungibility and reusability of computer-based information allows progressive description to more accurately reflect the nature of scholarship and the issue of time in cataloging.28

The Fungibility of Knowledge

Knowledge and scholarship have always been mutable. Thomas Kuhn famously describes the social construction of paradigms in scientific revolutions,29 while Ian Hacking explores how the idea that knowledge is socially constructed has permeated modern discourse and that writing papers about social construction has become a sort of game.30 Bella Weinberg argues that the depth and nature of all cataloging is relative to the particular collection in which something belongs.31 Norman Anderson likewise points out that cataloging can be in need of correction since it might be biased toward language, romanization, religion, type of library, description versus subject, form of heading, and fiscal concerns.32 A correct canon implies the existence of other canons, and modern scholarship has become increasingly interested in finding these alternative canons. In particular, bibliographical scholarship is highly revisionist and frequently explores previously unnoticed aspects of the book. The intellectual paradigms change with each succeeding generation of scholars, who must find new things to talk about.

An easy example of an intellectual change is the awareness of nineteenth-century publisher’s cloth book designers. Sue Allen pioneered research into this area, which has been expanded upon by many art history and book history enthusiasts.33 The

28. However, the limits of this fungibility have interesting implications for the study of the history of cataloging. See Matthew G. Kirshenbaum, Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).
work of nineteenth-century designer John Feely is thus easy to identify. In most libraries, samples of his characteristic gold-stamped bindings can be found on some popular mass-market books. Likewise, one can find other books designed by him but rebound in buckram. When the volume was rebound in buckram, the libraries probably did not consider the graphical work of Feely significant. Since the book was from the nineteenth century, a comparatively recent era, and about a popular topic, his designs were probably looked upon like much of the cover art of newer books: possibly interesting, but not essential to scholarship. Thus recent, unimportant books received minimal treatment, which we would expect from the standard degressive bibliographical point of view.

However, since the books were first cataloged and received minimal treatment, people have studied the process of the creation of these bindings and the artist has been identified. The images of John Feely have been used to explore the social reaction to various books and ideas, and his aesthetic is studied as a serious decorative art. Many catalog records, even for rare books, don’t mention him as the cover designer, largely because no one knew who he was (or cared) when the original records were created. Now institutions cherish their publishers’ bindings and often construct special digital libraries to show off their holdings. Publishers’ bindings have now become a worthy topic of study; and, thus, catalog descriptions of books ought to progress to support this research. Since the descriptions already exist, the only way to proceed is through progression. This can be done by adding information to a catalog record, but approaches to progression other than continually updating catalogs also exist.

Approaches to Progression

An example of an essentially revisable descriptive source is the English Short Title Catalog.\(^\text{34}\) It was begun as the Short Title Catalog of Redgrave and Pollard\(^\text{35}\) and continued with the unifying purpose of comprehensively identifying every separate printing, issuance, state, and edition of every book printed in the English language; description is thus limited to a short one and the sufficient details needed to distinguish the various states of books. Other information is rightly omitted because it does not address the purpose of this bibliography.

As a cooperative resource and as a product of human hands, errors creep into the description. Stephen Tabor in his 2007 article sampled 150 ESTC records and found an average rate of errors (that would hinder identification) of 17 percent.\(^\text{36}\) Among

---

34. *English Short Title Catalog*. Available online at http://estc.bl.uk/. [Accessed 1 September 2009].
the oldest records, all books printed up to 1640, he found a surprising 52 percent of errors in the records. An immutable, describe-it-once-and-shelve-it mentality would have no way of correcting these errors. The errors would quickly be regarded as truth since they are in such an esteemed bibliography. Bibliographically identical items would be identified as something new since their description did not match the errors present in the old description. Tabor concludes that we must be diligent in revising records and continually reviewing books as we come across changes. The strength of our digital fungible data is that we have the eyes of decades of contributors—librarians, scholars, both, and amateurs—to ferret out the mistakes that come along.

Not every revision needs to be due to an error. Scholarly information sources can provide information that is useful for adding to records. Exhibition catalogs can provide a wealth of information about materials that are held by a library and the institutional focus on a particular topic so that the information can be discovered. Yet the information in the exhibit catalog may not make it into the bibliographic catalog. For example, an exhibit catalog on machine-era books might bring out specific facts about the books but not contain full catalog entries, and the method for describing the materials may not be compatible with traditional cataloging. Consider a copy of *Sermons on Various Subjects* by Joseph Lathrop, printed by Isiah Thomas on both handmade woven paper and laid paper. This is unusual, since both types of paper were used together for only a decade or so. However, the fact was apparently unrecorded until the publication of an exhibit catalog. Certainly this would be useful information for a historian of American printing or paper, but they would have no access to it since it was only publicized in a small print run exhibit catalog.

Every time someone publishes a bibliography, designs an exhibition catalog, makes an online exhibit, or adds an entry to a database, there is more information available about a book. Though the bibliographies may have a specific scope, the facts they give about the works are still true for the works. One cannot just arbitrarily add these facts to national level catalog records, however, because a large number of entities use the records and abide by various rules and guidelines. One approach, similar to attaching social tags to the catalog records, is to develop links to these other sources with other rules and guidelines, except that the librarians decide whether to ingest the data. This idea of the librarian collecting this supporting data predates the prevalence of the computer.

In the time before hypertextual information and the ability to intertwingle text, Josiah Bennett called the supporting data a “bibliographical file.” A file would be

---

kept on each book, and clippings, notes, data, photocopies, or anything else related to the book would go in the file. The file itself served as a research resource for the book, and in time the catalog record might be revised based on the contents. These resources would certainly be provided to scholars requesting more information about a particular book. However, scholars would have to inquire about a specific book and certainly could not automatically search the data in these files, and the information would only be whatever the librarian had found.

In the age of networked and harvestable data, we can share far more information than Bennett could. Scholars, enthusiasts, and librarians routinely generate useful digital data about books held in trust by special collections. Katz recommends that libraries use scholars to expose collections and materials to a wider audience, while Schreyer encourages the use of students in enhancing description. Tabor argues that some problems in distinguishing rare books might be better handled by scholars than catalogers. In-house knowledge can be recorded in an accessible form, the catalogs from exhibitions can be encoded so that their research is available, local and visiting scholars can provide their notes for encoding, courses taught in the manner of Rare Book School, through direct interaction with materials, can accumulate data about books and check them repeatedly as exercises, scholarly publications can be encoded, and many other activities can generate information.

Once information is recorded in digitally accessible repositories, it can be linked to the catalog records for library materials. Readers of the digitally accessible information could trace the link to the record for the actual book, which could be used to locate the material for use. This approach would be much like the one-way scholarship of years past, only more efficient—a reader of one of these resources could always find the materials in a collection by using the citation. Digital linking would only add to the ease of paper citations. More data can be accessed quickly by linking catalog records back to the entries in the bibliographies and exhibit catalogs. Then, a scholar researching a particular book in a collection might be alerted that some preliminary investigation had already occurred, without having to travel to the collection, and at the same time could see what is unique.

This approach becomes significant when multiple sources of information exist. In such a case, a researcher can find a reference in one document (for example, about the paper used in a book), then trace the type of paper on the record for the particular item, and then trace the item to another reference (about, for example,

the binding). This linking would truly allow the exploration of the sociology of the text, as D.F. McKenzie advanced, because a scholar could trace themes from one textual object to another in the socially related objects. Furthermore, a single catalog record, representing a physical item, would contain a large amount of information. The institution may have started with one preliminary record; but, after doing a few exhibits, instruction sessions, inviting researchers, and other activities, one will suddenly have a great deal more information about our artifact. One can then revise our catalog record within the national finding aids that utilize it with local information.

Other approaches to progression have been attempted in catalogs. The master and institutional record concept recently brought to OCLC from RLG allowed institutions to enhance records with special information and to share that information. This allows institutions to progress their description without damaging the basic description, which is more useful for copy cataloging. However, the system does not provide a method for progression, since it has not been built with rare book cataloging in mind; it simply provides a mechanism that could be used for progression.

Another system for progression has been provided in the work of the Rare Books and Manuscript Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries (RBMS) in the development of Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (Books), or DCRM(B). The standard is part of a series of descriptive cataloging standards for rare materials. This descriptive standard builds on the shared work of the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, which is the standard cataloging rules used by many institutions. By building on AACR2, DCRM(B) provides an additional set of descriptive rules that are used to make enhanced descriptions of special collections materials. Thus, the step from AACR2 to DCRM(B) is a method of progressive description, based on the principle of remaining compatible with previous work.

Another important tool maintained by RBMS is a series of thesauri. The Section maintains six different flavors: binding, genre, paper, printing and publishing evidence, provenance, and type evidence. These controlled vocabularies contain

narrowly defined terms that can be used to systematically describe collections. The terms are created based on the needs of librarians and maintained as a semantically valid ANSI standard thesaurus. These terms can go beyond exposing hidden collections and instead expose hidden aspects of collections. By naming and exposing facts that are esoteric to the subject of the material, catalogers can enable researchers to find materials for which they would otherwise need stack access and browsing time.

While catalogers can apply these facts to their records to further enhance their work, noncatalogers with certain areas of expertise can also be trained to add thesaurus terms to catalog records. Institutions can select a small set of terms so that people inexperienced with rare materials can be trained to identify certain characteristics. The work then becomes answering yes or no to a series of discrete questions rather than the difficult work of placing an item within the vast bibliographical milieu. The smaller size of the set of terms would make this work easier. It would still essentially be the work of a librarian, but simplified.

Another set of familiar tools are those that form what is generally termed Web 2.0, or the social Internet. These tools are social tagging, user reviews, and comments, which have been enabled in many next-generation catalogs. OCLC has begun to provide some of this functionality in their open WorldCat database that now includes comments and reviews. These tools have not been explicitly applied to the idea of progressive bibliography, but they can be used to accumulate data about library materials. While these tools show great promise, there is a great deal of work to be done before they can be integrated into library work flows with both the clarity and authority that rare book cataloging generally requires. Rolla compares user tagging and Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and finds that, while tagging provides useful access, the LCSH provides types of access not covered by these tags.44 Rolla continues to discuss how tagging could be improved with ideas from the LCSH and the LCSH could be improved with ideas from tagging. It is not surprising that LCSH provides better access in certain ways since professional librarians build it, using their knowledge of information architecture, while users build tag sets, using their knowledge of what they want.

While tagging and subject cataloging address the fourth level of McCrank’s phased description (item level standard cataloging), they do not help with the higher levels of observing variants and building toward textual criticism. For these levels of description, tools like blogs can provide an information infrastructure. As described by Wikipedia—which is generally enlightening regarding new computer technology

(but not necessarily other things)—“A blog … is a type of website, usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video.”45 Blogs, in a library context, could allow the continuous accumulation of data about particular topics. A number of library curators are already using tools like blogs to highlight collections, but the blogs have no link back to a centralized information system. Adopting track-back functionality (an implementation of two-way links) in a library catalog could provide an easy way for this information to be accumulated in a digital bibliographic file.

Conclusion: Progressive Bibliography, or Organic Growth in the Bibliographic Record

Improving the quality of rare book cataloging through progressive description promises to improve research for many scholars. Scholars using the work of the catalog as a beginning to progress to new bibliographical description clearly benefit, but recently scholars of rare books and book history have also begun doing research using the data within library catalogs. Norbert Schürer uses library circulation records, based on cataloging records, to study the construction of knowledge,46 while Lishi Kwasitsu uses the National Union Catalog of Australia to explore the history of publishing in Victoria.47 These sorts of studies can be greatly improved by enhancing the raw data that the studies use, and progressive description is a method to continually improve information contained in catalogs.

To enable the sort of organic growth suggested here, much work is needed. Paradigms for information access are firmly entrenched, and fully conceptualized methods to allow the enhancement of records as proposed above do not yet exist. Likewise, the question of authority and trust—whom to allow to enhance records—is one that needs to be explored by further research. Should libraries allow any use to link data to official bibliographic records? Or would this open them up to manipulation by commercial advertisers and political groups seeking to manipulate the catalog? If libraries want to allow linking to official records, but control the process, what would the workflow be? Experimentation and research into these issues could provide us with ways to incorporate progressive description into bibliographic work. Ultimately, the computer has given us the ability to enhance the structure and content of records, but our workflows have yet to adapt. The idea of progressive description is the first step toward better systems that should function in our twenty-first–century information environment.