

Eugene W. Kelly III

Library catalogs and the changing political world

The importance of keeping current

One of my responsibilities when I served as an intern in the Library of Congress' European Division was to assist patrons to find material on Eastern European topics. While working at the front desk in the European Reading Room, I was approached one day by a patron who was looking for an issue of a Ukrainian journal. This man had never used the library's databases before and needed my help to locate this material. Using one of the reading room's research computers, we had difficulty finding the journal because it had been cataloged in the section for USSR documents instead for the modern nation of Ukraine. This was the case despite the fact that this particular issue of the journal had been published after 1991. The mistake greatly annoyed the patron and highlighted a major problem facing many libraries today, namely the need to update catalogs to reflect the ever-changing geopolitical realities.

Fortunately the scenario with the angry patron was a rare occurrence in the European Division because a concerted effort is made to place materials in the correct locations according to the most current national boundaries.

For example, as an intern, one of my tasks was to make sure that the books in the Serbian and former Yugoslav collections are labeled correctly in the holdings catalog. This is much more complicated than it sounds. Books labeled in the catalog as "Yugoslavia" have to be analyzed for content. I came across many books that are given the Yugoslavia label but whose content is entirely devoted to topics concerning Serbia. Those labeled "Serbia" are

generally filed correctly if they have already been placed in the Serbian section, but occasionally I came across a book labeled as such that covers several countries carved out of Yugoslavia and that needed to be put in the former Yugoslav section. Then there is the category of "Serbo-Croatian," which generally places the book in the former Yugoslav category.

However, at times I needed to look more carefully at the book's contents because if the book is heavily slanted toward either Serbia or Croatia, it has to be cataloged with that particular country, not Yugoslavia. Finally, there are the books that deal entirely with other countries, including Slovenia, Montenegro, and, oddly enough, Spain.

This is but one example of a problem that may well face libraries everywhere. In the Library of Congress European Division there are continuing efforts to separate books strictly about the Soviet Union from those concerning its successor states. Surprisingly, in my review of the literature I have not come across any examples of libraries addressing this issue. Nevertheless, in libraries that have a large international collection, categories will need to be updated. This process of updating catalogs will require continuous attention as political boundaries across the world change. New literature on the country of South Sudan

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will have to be given its own category as will materials on Kosovo if it becomes a fully recognized independent country. Libraries will need to stay aware of geopolitical changes in order to keep the organization of their collections relevant.

Rearranging library collections is not merely an exercise in the pursuit of having an up-to-date catalog, but it also affects critically how a library connects with its patrons. From my experience, miscataloged materials can cause great consternation among a library's readership. Libraries need to realize that patrons are not disinterested seekers of information but are individuals with their own convictions and personal interests. Imagine a person of Polish descent going to a library and finding all of the books on Poland lumped into a section called "Eastern Bloc" or someone with Kenyan roots finding all of the books on Kenya grouped under "British Empire." Such scenarios could be incredibly offensive to the patrons and embarrassing to the library, hurting the library's reputation and size of readership.

("Fledging the Purple Parrot" cont. from page 69)

"This is so cool" never fail to bring a smile to our faces, not to mention our surprise that there are actual undergraduate students using these materials. And that's really the primary demographic for the *Parrot*. Since it's a humor magazine written by students at NU, it provides current students a direct link to the past in a context they're comfortable with (humor), as opposed to publications like the student newspaper, the *Daily Northwestern*, which provides valuable day-to-day information and artifactual vignettes in the form of advertisements, but doesn't always generate the same connection.

The *Purple Parrot* shows students what was funny at NU in the 1920s, 1930s, and so on—and generally what was funny for their demographic, as some of the content included in the *Parrot* is syndicated College Humor material.

Recently, a group of students doing research for NU's next Senior Week (a week-

Nations rise, nations fall, and libraries must keep up with the geopolitical tides. As librarians we are keenly interested in keeping our collections as up-to-date as possible, but this means more than just acquiring the latest books and media materials. If our collection organization does not reflect modern political alignments, we could appear at best incompetent and at worst insensitive or even bigoted. A key goal for libraries is to draw people into the world of reading, research, and exploration of new knowledge. If their collections do not reflect current realities, people will see libraries as anachronistic and pointless. If our libraries are to be relevant repositories of knowledge, they must update their catalogs to show ever evolving political realities.

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long celebration that takes place around commencement) found the *Parrot* useful in providing not just context, but actual material (jokes, one-liners, etc.) that they could use in their advertising, publications, and so on. Our hope is that as a digitized resource, NU students will find more than just resources for a project in the pages of the *Purple Parrot*. We hope they'll find a connection to NU, and a connection to the students that came before them.

Notes

1. You can also view information about the project on CARLI's Web site at www.carli.illinois.edu/collman-digit.html.
2. Take a look at Northwestern's materials at the Internet Archive site at www.archive.org/details/northwesternuniversity.
3. Our Libguide lists each issue chronologically, and can be found at <http://libguides.northwestern.edu/purpleparrot>. *~*