The Future-of-Cataloging Brouhaha, or, The Sky Might Not Fall After All

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The purpose of this short talk is just to introduce a controversy which affects not only the world of cataloging, but of research libraries generally as they are starting to find ways of dealing with current technological advancements and those which are predicted for the future. It is based on two reports issued earlier this year which were called to my attention by an e-mail message on the Music Library Association Listserv, and which engendered a long thread of messages on this listserv.

1. The changing nature of the catalog and its integration with other discovery tools / prepared for the Library of Congress by Karen Calhoun, Cornell Univ. Lib.

2. A critical review [of same] / by Thomas Mann (prepared for the LC's local chapter of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees)

Mann finds fault with both the methodology and conclusions of the Calhoun report. He writes that "according to[it], library operations that are not digital, that do not result in resources that are remotely accessible, that involve professional human judgment or expertise, or that require conceptual categorization and standardization rather than relevance ranking of keywords, do not fit into its proposed "leadership" strategy. This strategy itself, however, is based on an inappropriate . . . model"—i.e. business model—and, even then, a misrepresentation of that model." [The misrepresentation he is referring to is Calhoun's assumption that business aims to succeed by improving its market position rather than its profits.]

He also finds that the report "[1] draws unjustified conclusions about the digital age, [2] inflates wishful thinking, [3] fails to make critical distinctions, and [4] disregards . . . an alternative "niche" strategy for research libraries"—which is "to promote scholarship"—and, instead, defines for it a niche strategy based on subject specialty.

Examples of faulty thinking in the report:

1. It draws the unjustified conclusion it is difficult to teach use of LCSH. On the contrary, Mann claims, it is *much* easier to teach browse displays of LCSH subject strings, and do it quickly, than it is to teach "critical thinking in evaluating Web sites."
2. An example of wishful thinking is the idea that, these days, people only want to use full-text online sources. Mann calls attention to an OCLC study which shows that people do indeed still want to use books, even when full text is available online.

3. No distinction is made between immediate information-seeking needs of the general public—including scholars—and the research needs of scholars. (Mann lists 7 of the latter. Since none of them is speed of access, he thus directly challenges Calhoun's assertion that "fast turnaround and delivery of library materials to users is the gold standard of quality service".