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UNIMARC, ONIX and the future

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Abstract:

This paper considers whether in order to achieve a “bibliographic continuum” the book trade and the library community can benefit from exchange of product metadata. It considers the potential of the ONIX metadata set for libraries.

Introduction

Brian Green has described how ONIX evolved and how it is being implemented by the booktrade. I want to turn to the opportunities and possibilities that ONIX represents for libraries. I will focus on the interchange of product metadata between the book trade and libraries, the so-called “bibliographic continuum”, considering along the way, the main barriers to interchange and the work which may surmount them. I will also briefly summarise my work on mapping ONIX to UNIMARC.

The Bibliographic Continuum

Although the business objectives and requirements of the booktrade and the library community differ, they have in common the requirement to accurately describe and locate documents. Each community would benefit from the facility to reuse the others' data. For the library community, provisional bibliographic records provide valuable information for selection and acquisition functions and can reduce cataloguing

costs. For the publishing industry, the expression of bibliographic relationships and the provision of authoritative name and subject data improve discovery, resulting in additional business. The idea of the bibliographic continuum has been around for a long time without being fully realised. This is not to denigrate successful programmes, such as Cataloguing in Publication or CORC and projects such as Biblink

ONIX v MARC

Ironically, a major obstacle to exchange of product metadata is the exchange format. As Brian explained, the book trade has habitually used proprietary formats rather than MARC, as a result libraries tend to rely on intermediaries to convert publisher information to MARC. Conversion routines as we all know generally change data and are expensive and difficult to maintain. The arrival of ONIX has at least provided a single standard for the book trade, with the potential to reduce conversion costs. Last Summer I was asked to compare ONIX and UNIMARC and write a crosswalk.

I created a spreadsheet in which each element or code in ONIX 1.1 was mapped to the equivalent UNIMARC code. This work has been published on the Editeur Website and formed the basis for the ONIX/MARC 21 mapping carried out by OCLC, which can be viewed on the LC website. I was unable to carry out extensive testing of the mappings (in any case I only had access to two ONIX records); however by applying the mapping I was able to turn the ONIX data into recognisable UNIMARC records. However although ONIX offers a rich metadata dictionary, capable of describing printed and e-books and CDs etc; it does not yet support serials. Work is underway to remedy this, but clearly it restricts the value of ONIX to libraries. It did not prove possible to map UNIMARC data back into ONIX; certainly a round trip conversion will never be possible. However it would be possible to enhance ONIX records with limited parcels of information, in particular subject data. The Interparty project will look at how ONIX might be extended to accommodate authority data.

Content

Limited capability to exchange data is all very well, but the bibliographic continuum is an economic argument and savings will only be achieved if the data exchanged is reusable. ONIX forces some data elements into forms that libraries can use, or at least flags that data needs to be reviewed, but as Priscilla Caplan has highlighted this does not compensate for the absence of common content standards. While it is even less likely that publishers will adopt AACR2 or ISBD than MARC, both communities would benefit from reviewing their prejudices and discussing how content could be aligned. In the UK, the BNB Research Fund has funded a survey along these lines, asking librarians to consider what they find useful (or otherwise) in potential requirements records.

Conclusion

ONIX is not yet a viable successor to UNIMARC, but once stable could act as a conduit for exchange of data. However to get the maximum benefit from this we should question our own cataloguing practices: are we doing things because that's how they have always been done? If so, we should be prepared change our policies to take advantage of the metadata being created by the booktrade; then our cataloguers will be able to focus on providing the authority control, collocation, classification and indexing which make library catalogues superior to the dot com browsers.

References

Caplan, Priscilla *A blooming garden, traversed by crosswalks, atop a steep and rocky road*. Paper presented at the Conference on Bibliographic Control in the New Millennium. (23/11/2000, Library of Congress)

http://lcweb.loc.gov/catdir/bibcontrol/caplan_paper.html

ONIX International Release 1.1 / Editeur

<http://www.editeur.org/onixfiles.html>

ONIX/MARC Mappings : <http://www.editeur.org/onixmarc.html>