



FIVE

FRBR

STANDARD FOR INTERNATIONAL SHARING

As I write this in 2015, the term *FRBR* has meaning on its own. The full form, Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records, is still known but has faded into the background. The concept that that library world needed functional requirements for its bibliographic records was foremost in 1992, when the Study Group on Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records was formed as an IFLA group. We must go back to that time to understand the original intention of the task, and what problems it was asked to solve.

The impetus to define functional requirements for bibliographic records (FRBR) arose out of the IFLA-sponsored Stockholm Seminar on Cataloguing in 1990. The IFLA cataloging section had been addressing international cataloging standards for decades, most prominently through the creation of the International Standards for Bibliographic Description (ISBD) and the International Cataloguing Principles (ICP1961). I don't find evidence that the seminar produced any of its own documents; 1990 predated the IFLA web site, which is where outcomes are reported today. I therefore rely on reports written at later dates. Significantly, the key reports

were written by American members of the FRBR Study Group, and therefore may not reflect exactly the point of view of other participants at the Stockholm Seminar.

Barbara Tillett's 1994 report on the meeting and its outcomes describes the factors that led to the assignment of the FRBR Study Group; she refers to "the mounting costs of cataloging," the proliferation of new media, "exploding bibliographic universe," the need to economize in cataloging, and, "the continuing pressures to adapt cataloguing practices and codes to the machine environment." Regarding the concerns about the costs of cataloging, she states: "Some speakers proposed that cataloguing could be considerably simplified. One speaker stated that the number of descriptive data elements needed in a bibliographic record could be reduced without seriously affecting access" (Tillett 1994). In that same document, Tillett states that the members of the Seminar could not reach consensus on the "functions of bibliographic records," and failed to reach "common agreement on what the bibliographic record is to achieve in answering user needs." This is a strong statement about the perceived state of cataloging in 1990, 150 years after Panizzi drew up his ninety-one rules, 110 years after Cutter's statement of the objectives of the catalog, fifty years after the first International Standard for Bibliographic Description, and over two decades after the creation of the detailed cataloging rules in the Anglo-American community. Yet this harks back to Seymour Lubetzky's 1946 criticism of the cataloging rules: they appeared to be arbitrary because they did not include a functional justification for the purpose of each rule. For catalogers, it might have been disconcerting to discover that the rules that they had been applying for years did not have any specific user goals behind them.

Olivia Madison, who chaired the FRBR Study Group for part of its time, reported on the group's results at a meeting of the International Congress on National Bibliographic Services in Copenhagen in 1998. Her summary of the activity stated: "The central goals of this study were to assist in decreasing the costs of cataloguing by encouraging the sharing of bibliographic data records and to recommend the most useful and important data elements in those records for their users" (Madison 1998).

The goals, then, that prompted the formation of the FRBR Study Group were:

- ▶ Determine a minimum set of data elements needed to satisfy user needs.
- ▶ Reduce the costs of cataloging.
- ▶ Encourage sharing of bibliographic records (internationally).

It is interesting to compare these to the goals of ISBD. The ISBD document opens with this statement of its goals:

The primary purpose of the ISBD is to provide the stipulations for compatible descriptive cataloguing worldwide in order to aid the international exchange of bibliographic records between national bibliographic agencies and throughout the international library and information community. (ISBD 2011, 1)

One would think that “basic bibliographic data” and “consistency when sharing” would fit in with the goals that came out of the Stockholm Seminar. Given the proximity of these goals to those of the FRBR study, it is not clear why ISBD, or an ISBD variant, was not considered as an answer to the needs as stated, particularly because of the emphasis on “bibliographic records,” which is precisely the area in which ISBD performs (and FRBR does not). Comparisons of ISBD and FRBR show how close they are in terms of data elements, which appears to be by design, not by accident. The Final Report of the FRBR Study Group hints at this when it says:

The attributes defined for the study were derived from a logical analysis of the data that are typically reflected in bibliographic records. (FRBR Final Report, 31)

In terms of defining a “minimum set” of bibliographic elements, by my count ISBD has a few less than one hundred data elements, while FRBR has about eighty-five, which doesn’t reduce the number of elements in any significant way.

Some minor adjustments were made to ISBD to avoid conflicts with FRBR, but any other interrelation is difficult to describe. As we’ll see, FRBR does not include cataloging instructions nor display information, although both are important aspects of ISBD. In spite of the fact that the term *bibliographic records* is in the name of the standard, FRBR does not address record structure, while ISBD does, although not as the term *record* would be interpreted by a programmer or database designer. ISBD adherence should result in relatively consistent textual output from diverse cataloging departments, and the resulting data, with its specialized punctuation, should be comprehensible even when the language of cataloging is not understood. Because FRBR does not define a record format, there is no equivalent in FRBR to the ISBD punctuation and display rules.

THE FRBR TERMS OF REFERENCE

Coming out of the Stockholm Seminar, a strong motivation for the development of a new bibliographic model was economics: the need to serve users while reducing the cost of cataloging worldwide. The economic issue is addressed repeatedly

in the introductory section of the Final Report of the FRBR Study Group, with statements such as:

The purpose of formulating recommendations for a basic level national bibliographic record was to address the need identified at the Stockholm Seminar for a core level standard that would allow national bibliographic agencies to reduce their cataloguing costs through the creation, as necessary, of less-than-full-level records, but at the same time ensure that all records produced by national bibliographic agencies met essential user needs. (FRBR Final Report, 2)

A document called the *Terms of Reference*, authored by Tom Delsey and Henriette Avram, gave the official charge to the FRBR Study Group. It defined the problem and the intended outcomes of the group's work.

As defined in the *Terms*, the FRBR Study Group would consist of group members as well as consultants chosen to draft the report. The first consultants were Elaine Svenonius, Barbara Tillett, and Ben Tucker. Over the course of the work, the group of consultants changed. Tom Delsey joined the group a year later when Tucker left. Later, Elizabeth Dulabahn of the Library of Congress was added.

The consultants had four required tasks, as laid out in the Terms of Reference:

1. Determine the full range of functions of the bibliographic record and then state the primary uses of the record as a whole.
2. Develop a framework that identifies and clearly defines the full range of *entities* (e.g., work, texts, subjects, editions, and authors) that are the subject of interest to users of a bibliographic record and the types of *relationships* (e.g., part/whole, derivative, and chronological) that may exist between those *entities*.
3. For each of the *entities* in the framework, identify and define the *functions* (e.g., to describe, to identify, to differentiate, to relate) that the bibliographic record is expected to perform.
4. Identify the key *attributes* (e.g., title, date, and size) of each *entity* or *relationship* that are required for each specific *function* to be performed. *Attribute* requirements should relate specifically to the media or format of the bibliographic item where applicable.

The final requirement was assigned to the FRBR Study Group itself:

5. For the National Libraries: for bibliographic records created by the national bibliographic agencies, recommend a basic level of functionality that relates

specifically to the *entities* identified in the framework and the *functions* that are relevant to each.

The Terms are more specific than the goals that came out of the Stockholm Seminar; they clearly define how the Group is to go about its work, by defining entities and relationships, a modeling method that had been developed for relational database design. The *Terms* even include a reference to *Data Analysis: The Key to Data Base Design* by Richard C. Perkinson (1984), as background for performing an entity-relation analysis. According to Olivia Madison, who was chair of the FRBR Study Group from 1991 to 1993 and again from 1995 to 1997:

As mentioned earlier, Delsey had originally authored, with Avram, the initial CDNL [nb: Conference of Directors of National Libraries] *Terms of Reference*, and was well versed in the research literature and potential applications of E-R modeling. In fact, it was largely due to Delsey's commitment to this modeling technique that it was explicitly included in the CDNL *Terms of Reference*. (Madison 2005)

The Terms of Reference were accepted at the 1992 IFLA Conference in New Delhi, after two additions were made by the Standing Committee of the Section on Cataloguing (Madison 2005):

1. Subjects were added to the list of entities.
2. The FRBR Study Group was charged with proposing minimal level standards for bibliographic records.

It is particularly interesting that the first version of the Terms of Reference ignored both subject access (which surely has user implications) as well as the primary purpose of the study, which was to address the costs of cataloging for national bibliographic agencies by creating a minimal-level record requirement. The version of the Terms of Reference published in 1992 makes only a brief mention of the economic goals, referring to “operating under increasing budgetary constraints and increasing pressures to reduce cataloging costs through minimal-level cataloging.” The remainder of the Terms document focuses on a technical analysis of bibliographic data.

In the end, what came to dominate the outcome of the FRBR Study Group's work had little to say about minimal level records or about addressing economic issues. The “user tasks” that have become a near mantra in some cataloging circles (“find, identify, select, obtain”) are placed adjacent to bibliographic elements in one section of the FRBR Final Report, but their relation to the user is left unstated.

During the development of FRBR there were periods of review, and comments were received, but these have not been made public. (For a profession that prides itself on preserving knowledge for the future, we are terrible at keeping our own history.) Olivia Madison recounts a 1996 review of FRBR that received forty responses from sixteen different countries. Of these, seven were critical of FRBR.

The principal issues reflected honest difference of professional perspectives related to the research methodology, the actual need for this particular study, the adequacy of its user-focus, and the work process and adequacy of detail. (Madison 2005)

It would be interesting to know which libraries responded, and what those differences of opinion were. That criticism was made of the research methodology (which may or may not refer to the insertion of an E-R analysis into the study) and the adequacy of its user focus seems important from today's perspective. Madison calls these forty responses from sixteen countries a "worldwide review," although it seems a bit "world-narrow." In the end, FRBR was developed and reviewed by a very small constituency that was not representative, by any measure, of the library community that prompted its development. That said, the use of select expert committees to develop standards is not unusual, when few libraries can give staff leave to devote themselves to such demanding activities. While this is understandable, one must acknowledge the fact that the end result of such a process may not actually serve the larger library community.