FRBR: Is this the beginning of a beautiful friendship?

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1. Background

Functional Requirement for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) is the conceptual model of the bibliographic universe developed by IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions). It was approved in 1997 and published in 1998. Interestingly enough, we still mostly refer to is as 'the new library model'. This can be explained by the fact that there are not many real-life implementations of FRBR. The model is often seen as (only) an interesting intellectual exercise, but the cataloguing practice stays the same. Current cataloguing rules are still based on Paris principles (from 1961) and our catalogues are in fact only an electronic replica of a card catalogue.

But it is encouraging to see some implementations of FRBR, for example FictionFinder of OCLC, developments of VTLS, etc. The problem of legacy data, millions of existing bibliographic records, is addressed by the so-called FRBRisation algorithms.

FRBR, which is a general framework, is complemented by two additional segments: FRAR (Functional Requirements for Authority Records) and FRSAR (Functional Requirements for Subject Authority Records). FRAR is ready for final review, while FRSAR is still under development. When finished, they will offer a comprehensive conceptual model, covering all aspects, important for library users.

The IFLA FRBR Review group, established in 2004 is taking a proactive role in development and use of FRBR. Newly formed working groups are focusing on particular problems. Two have to be mentioned in particular: WG on expression entity and WG on aggregates. The first has already provided a pragmatic interpretation of the expression entity and the latter will deal with anthologies, series, augmentations, journals (all composites of individually created dependent/independent works), which have not been treated in detail in the original model. The Review Group has already decided to review the attributes of all entities.

2. Interoperability within the library community

This seems to be the crucial issue for 'survival' of FRBR: unless the problem of legacy data is solved, the model will not be accepted by the library community.

Theoretically, assuming that we have complete and consistent MARC records, it is possible to extract enough information to identify FRBR entities (work, expression, manifestation). Several FRBRisation experiments have confirmed that, but also the fact that the records we normally have are neither complete nor consistent. In addition, quite a lot of important information is recorded as unstructured text, mostly as notes, and not appropriate for computer processing.

Most librarians are also not encouraged by statistics reported by Hickey and O'Neill: a large percentage of works have only one expression and manifestation and only a relatively small number have more than one expression. Superficially, these results bring into question the economy of FRBR. What is usually overlooked is the fact that the latter works are central for the users…

What is the solution? First, librarians have to accept a less-than-perfect result of FRBRisation and allow for subsequent corrections. It might be even worth to try user annotation and social tagging. Second: cataloguing rules according to FRBR have to be developedi. RDA (Resorce Description and Access) seems to be going in that direction and there are reports of new Italian cataloguing rules. Third: we need to develop a data model and interface prototypes. As long as we only have a theoretical discussions there will be no real breakthrough.

3. Interoperability with other communities

In the study there is a claim that all types of materials are covered by the model. Most critics point out that the focus is really on traditional, mostly textual publications. The interoperability with other communities has not really been the focus of discussions.

But there is no doubt that there is potential, particularly with other cultural heritage institutions: museums and archives.

An important development is the work of FRBR/CRM Harmonisation Group, a joint effort of IFLA and ICOM CIDOC (International Council of Museums – International Committee for Documentation). Libraries and museums share users and types of materials, it is therefore important that a common view of cultural heritage information is developed. The goal is to bring together (harmonise) the library model (FRBR) and museum model (CRM: Conceptual Reference Model). While preparing an object-oriented version of FRBR, additional goals are to check FRBR's internal consistency, enable interoperability and integration, to extend the scope of both conceptual models, and open the way to future applications. The first complete draft of the object-oriented FRBR has been published for public comment as "FRBRoo". The harmonised model will be further developed and refined.

Another area of possible (and so far overlooked) cooperation outside the library community is intellectual rights management. The FRBR entities can be linked to intellectual rights and if also take into account the wealth of name authority files the benefit is obvious.

This may be the turning point for FRBR implementation. Several parallel current developments seem to be very favourable to FRBR: development of new cataloguing rules (RDA) and, at the same time, International Meetings of Experts for an International Cataloguing Code (IME-ICC) under the auspices of IFLA, in charge of the definition of new International Cataloguing Principles to replace the "Paris Principles". New FRBRisation tools are being developed and tested and we may expect more and more prototypes of new catalogues.

After a relatively slow start FRBR has recently gained some momentum. To foster further development we have to emphasise the model's biggest potential: access to distributed bibliographic information in union catalogues and portals such as The European Library. For such portals FRBR offers meaningful clustering of search results and navigation. The same approach could then be applied to access to all cultural information.