

Replacing the French National Bibliography's website: a discussion on National Bibliographies' role as a tool for democracy

English translation of the original paper: « Le remplacement du site internet de la Bibliographie nationale française : une discussion sur le rôle des Bibliographies nationales comme outil au service de la démocratie ».

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Abstract:

The replacement of the French National Bibliography website, the need for which seemed obvious for practical reasons (obsolescence of the current site), gave rise to important discussions within the French National Library. Once the initial reflex of focusing the discussion directly and solely on practical and economic aspects had been overcome, the necessity to return to users' needs and the fundamental missions of a national bibliography became apparent. This made it possible to establish the principles of a tool adapted to serve the public of the information society, with a strong commitment to support democratic practices.

Keywords: National Bibliography; metadata; access to information; democracy; trusted data.

INTRODUCTION

The Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) is preparing to replace the French National Bibliography website. This replacement, which was necessary for practical and technical reasons (obsolescence of the site, created in 2001), goes beyond a simple overhaul and gives rise to rich discussions within the Library. To set the framework, a return both to the role and missions of a National Bibliography, as well as a return to the sources and a resolutely forward-looking approach toward their current and future meaning, proved necessary.

I- BACKGROUND

The Bibliographie nationale française was created in 1811 (then called *Bibliographie de l'Empire français*) to "announce all future editions of printed or engraved works"¹. Its mission has always been to report national production, but with goals that have fluctuated over time, from political (census to control and censor) to administrative (ensure compliance with a legal obligation, such as legal deposit or payment of import taxes) and intellectual (navigate one's way through the sheer amount of resources available).

In the recent period, the constitution of the French National Bibliography is intrinsically linked to legal deposit, both by the founding decree of the BnF² and by the Heritage Code³. In this respect, France adapts to the national context the recommendations emanating from UNESCO and IFLA for universal bibliographic control (CBU), the fundamental principle of which is that of exhaustive reporting of national production. Each country is responsible for its production and must report it in its entirety. The exchange of bibliographic data between different countries, made possible technically through cataloguing standards, should make it possible to achieve this objective of universality.

These laws clearly place the National Bibliography in the heritage field, thus in the third of the main goals we have identified above. However, the reasons why a nation constitutes its heritage, what it puts into it, can change, as can the practical modalities. What constitutes heritage, who has access to it, and how, is a real question of democracy: is there a distinction between objects considered as part of popular culture and objects considered as part of learned culture? Are all cultures represented in the nation's memory, or is it only the dominant culture or cultures? Heritage cannot be considered as something fixed; it is a living, contemporary material. Consequently, the issues at stake here concern current information and intellectual and artistic creation as well as the constitution of historical sources for tomorrow. As we have seen, a State's attention to national production can also be driven by a desire for control and censorship. It is therefore necessary to take strong positions so that the tools put in place serve democracy. To do so, it is not enough to rule out the possibility of political control; it also requires conscious efforts to serve the public.

The fundamental principle of reporting national intellectual production is still relevant, but must be considered in a constantly changing technical environment, in which access to information has evolved considerably since the Bibliography website went online in the early 2000s. It is this context that must be taken into account in a redesign of the site. The objective of such a project is to be able to go on fulfilling this reporting mission in the best possible way. This implies therefore a considered reflection on the needs, perennial and new, of users and on the new tools that can be used to meet these needs.

The current site of the National Bibliography (<http://bibliographienationale.bnf.fr>) was designed in 2001 to replace the printed publication, with the same general principles: to provide a list of records gathered by classification scheme in static pages, with access by indexes adapted to each of its five constituent parts (Books, Serials, Music, Audiovisual material, Cartography). Functionalities have been added over the years: retrieval of single

¹ « Décret impérial qui autorise la direction générale de l'Imprimerie et de la Librairie à publier un journal d'annonce de toutes les éditions d'ouvrages imprimés ou gravés », dit décret d'Amsterdam (Bulletin des lois, 4e série, bull. n° 404, loi n° 7 459).

² Décret n°94-3 du 3 janvier 1994 portant création de la Bibliothèque nationale de France.

³ Code du patrimoine, Titre III, Chapitre I^{er}, articles L131-1.

records, then links to records in the BnF's General catalogue to be able to use its retrieval tools (such as carts, Z39-50, etc.), evolution and addition of new indexes, access by clickable maps, RSS feeds. The graphic design was revised in 2009, but the structure remains the same. However, what used to be an asset can be a detriment today. For example, a few years ago, the static pages made the National Bibliography site the only bibliographic resource of the BnF indexed by search engines. Today, one especially notices the sluggishness of navigation compared to modern usage. As for its presence where search engine users are, it is eclipsed by data.bnf.fr, expressly designed for this purpose, and by other more recent BnF sites. The technical problems of a site that, because of its dated infrastructure, is increasingly difficult to maintain and evolve are here compounded by a strategy problem: the BnF has multiplied its online offer, giving access to its metadata at different stages of completion via sites adapted to different uses, without always taking the trouble to ask the question of the position of these sites in relation to each other. The National Bibliography, one of the oldest, has particularly suffered. To regain its full meaning, it is high time for it to adapt to new practices of access to information online. It is not only a question of being where users are, of being more visible, but also of relying on the real assets of the metadata of a national bibliography to offer a redesigned service, adapted to the era of mass information.

II- THE PROJECT

In practice, the project started from very concrete observations: on one hand, the impossibility of continuing to develop the existing site and the decreasing number of visits on the other hand.

The idea of a project to replace the website became obvious to the small group of Bibliography managers.

a- Users study

In this perspective of replacing the website, it seemed necessary to prepare the consideration of its possible developments by a study of usage, the realisation of which was the subject of a Master 2 course in written heritage and digital publishing. This three-month internship (from the end of March to the end of June 2017), jointly piloted by a representative of the Bibliography's production departments and the Strategy Delegation's users studies officer, led to the drafting of a survey report. That report's main conclusions are as follows: the number of visitors to the site fell sharply, obsolescence was noted, but users were attached to the site and the satisfaction rate was high.

Data from the generic audience measurement tool integrated into the National Bibliography's website indicates a very sharp drop in the number of visitors since 2009. The study incoming traffic sources made it possible to put forward the hypothesis of a tightening of visits around a public of very good connoisseurs who access the site directly, without using a search engine. This data was crossed with that from a double qualitative and quantitative survey. An online questionnaire aimed at determining user profiles, measuring their level of satisfaction and collecting their expectations was put in place on the Bibliography's website during the month of May 2017 and was also widely distributed by e-mail. The vast majority of respondents are library staff, and more particularly French public (municipal) libraries. The main reason for consulting the site is to select bibliographic records for retrieval. Next comes the use of the Bibliography as a monitoring tool for the editorial production of a type of document, an author, a genre, etc. Indexes are the most commonly used search mode, far

ahead of the classification scheme. The satisfaction rate is very high (94%). It is above all the quality of the notices that is acclaimed (reliability, accuracy, exhaustiveness, standards compliance). Other strong points were also mentioned: periodicity, keeping abreast of editorial production, the possibility for users to draw up statistics on this production and, on several occasions, the quality of the site itself, appreciated for its simplicity of use.

Selected for their different profiles, qualitative interviews were then conducted with 14 people from the respondents in the first phase. These interviews made it possible to distinguish three types of profiles among the interviewees: the confused, the faithful, and the remote or abandoning. Thus, they showed, as did the questionnaire, that the distinction between the BnF's General catalogue and the French National Bibliography site was not always clear, even for librarians. And if some highlighted the reliability and quality of the records, the completeness of the offer or the simplicity of navigation on the site, others noted that, unlike other BnF sites such as the General Catalogue or data.bnf.fr, the site no longer met users' expectations in terms of data reuse and documentary research.

b- Discussions following the report

This report gave rise to initial discussions between representatives of the units responsible for the Bibliography, who began to reflect on the new needs to be taken into account. Initially, maintaining a separate website from the BnF's General catalogue was the main topic of discussion, which was a surprise for some of us. Indeed, the existence of the French National Bibliography, which boasts of being one of the oldest national bibliographies, seems established. However, if its production, enshrined in law, has not been called into question, the model of publication of its notices, i.e. its very existence as a separate publication, has been.

We had to advocate for the National Bibliography with our colleagues and policy makers. Maintaining two publication channels for national bibliographic data, a national bibliographic agency catalogue and a separate bibliography, may seem less cost-effective, but basing the decision on cost alone is too limiting. Without neglecting purely practical and economic considerations, the starting point for instruction on what a National Bibliography should look like should be its missions and how best to fulfil them.

At the end of 2017, the BnF finally approved the continued existence of a specific website, with the objective of opening a new site in 2019.

c- Project organisation

The Scrum method, an Agile method adopted by the BnF for most of its internal IT developments, was chosen for the project management. A steering group of bibliography production departments' representatives has been set up. It will work closely with the Information Systems Department of the BnF.

During the first half of 2018, preliminary work was carried out, in particular the drafting of two notes setting out the main principles that could be used as points of reference: the first on the missions and objectives of the French National Bibliography, which will serve as a reference for the website development project; the second reviewing the place of the site in the environment of the BnF bibliographic websites.

Discussions within the group immediately focused about whether to preserve the specific functionalities of a bibliography: indexing, browsing, and “freezing”⁴ records in time. The representatives of the bibliographic production departments expressed the wish to benefit from new functionalities: search and display by publication date, exports, editorialisation of the site. These discussions quickly became too specific, and the difficulty of reaching consensus led the group to ask themselves more generally about the main principles that should guide the process of setting up a new site. The first step was to set out these broad principles, from which decisions on functionality would follow. It is this approach that led to the drafting of the two notes.

Preliminary appraisal work will begin in the autumn of 2018 with the assistance of an expert from the Information Systems Department. Developments are expected to begin in early 2019 and last approximately 6 months.

III- THE AIMS AND MISSIONS OF A NATIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

a- Main general principles

The work of enunciation of the main principles began with a return to the sources, based on fundamental IFLA documents.

Universal bibliographic control

IFLA encourages States to adopt legislation on legal deposit, which should cover all aspects of the chain: document collection, reporting and access. In this context, Universal Bibliographic Control keeps all its interest and all its topicality, contrary to what was sometimes stated in the recent past. While some principles have lost their relevance, on the whole the model is still working. IFLA thus reaffirmed the importance of the subject in 2012 by publishing a Professional Statement on Universal Bibliographic Control⁵ with broad principles. The principles set out in this document are essential and provide a solid starting point. The Best Practice for National Bibliographic Agencies in the Digital Age⁶, published by IFLA's Bibliography section, provides an interesting complement by providing an overview of technical and normative possibilities.

National Bibliography: A Snapshot of National Production

Unlike a catalogue, a bibliography gives access to information in a pre-organised way. The producing entity of a bibliography gives it a perimeter and an intellectual organisation upstream (information structured through ordered lists, grouping of records by classification scheme, adapted indexes). The French National Bibliography gives the possibility to search in this delimited set that is the legal deposit. It must have tools adapted to this set: groupings by constituent parts, classification schemes and specific indexes, access by clickable maps, etc. It constitutes a corpus that makes sense to users, and whose consistency allows use for statistical purposes, which makes it possible to formulate and verify scientific hypotheses more reliably than with the data in the BnF's General Catalogue. The *Observatoire du depot*

⁴ See below, under “National Bibliography: A Snapshot of National Production”, pp. 5-6.

⁵ <https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/bibliography/Documents/ifla-professional-statement-on-ubc-en.pdf>.

⁶ <https://www.ifla.org/node/7858>.

*légal*⁷ relies on this aspect of the National Bibliography to offer statistics on the music sector (2016), the profile of contemporary authors (2015), etc.

A bibliography has a different relationship to time than a catalogue. The records in the Catalogue are alive and continue to evolve to fulfil its missions, while the Bibliography offers this very particular service of freezing records in time, showing what was offered to the public (and entered into Legal Deposit) at a given time. The Bibliography is a tool for monitoring Legal Deposit, which is useful not only for monitoring current production, but, from a retrospective point of view, for History.

Thus, in the Bibliography, it is important to know that a serial was alive on the date in question, whereas in the Catalogue, it is important to know that a serial is no longer published, which implies that the record is frozen in the first and not in the second.

The General Catalogue gathers the records of a very large number of documents, well beyond legal deposit. These records were created at different times, to meet different needs, in compliance with standards that have changed; they are of very variable quality. Records in the National Bibliography are all reference-level records: they are created at the authoritative level defined by current standards.

This application of internationally recognised standards enables the BnF to fulfil its role as a trusted third party. In an information society context that is also that of a disinformation society, where information is numerous and difficult to verify and prioritise, public bodies such as the BnF are expected to fulfil this role of trusted third parties. BnF data (bibliographic and authority data) is thus guaranteed data: it is reliable, true and accurate⁸. Hence the importance of promoting this website, which is an asset and must therefore have a strong identity and be highly visible.

Importance of record creation and accessibility

The BnF's description of national intellectual production enables access to that production. Without these freely available and reliable records, the existence of many resources would not be known, and there would not even be a question of having access to them. This openness is necessary from an economic and intellectual point of view, to enable citizens to inform themselves, to cultivate themselves, to create their own work, etc.

Without BnF data, which is not limited to what is widely distributed through commercial channels, much of this intellectual production would be invisible, or visible only in a hierarchical manner according to the commercial or other biases of the major distribution channels.

In a truly democratic approach, this project for a new National Bibliography site is taking a proactive stance to place it on the path of users in several places and in various ways. The BnF offers a wide variety of resources and sites, such as data.bnf.fr, Gallica, the General Catalogue, etc. This situation apparently undermined the French National Bibliography but is in reality an argument in its favour: data production is centralised but this data is presented in different ways to meet different uses. Of course, we must work on optimisation:

⁷ Observatory of Legal Deposit, statistical data collection and synthesis on the national editorial production published annually by the BnF since 2011, on the basis of legal deposit.

http://www.bnf.fr/fr/professionnels/depot_legal_definition/s.depot_legal_observatoire.html.

⁸ For a more in-depth look at these concepts, see Boulet et al., 2016, p. 8.

developments will be able to build on already proven models. Thus, with a controlled amount of work, there will be significant added value in services on offer.

b- Core Project Commitments

In our opinion, this is what gives rise to the fundamental commitments of such a project. We have discussed them within the BnF and offer them through this article to the international professional community for discussion and adaptation. We present below what seemed essential in the French context.

The need for a variety of search modes and the importance of indexes

The plurality mentioned above is not only necessary in the online offer of the BnF (plurality of sites), but also, within a site like that of the Bibliography, in the search modes offered (plurality of accesses).

In this context, it is important to affirm the fundamental importance of offering varied search modes, meeting not only different information needs but also different cognitive profiles.

For example, searches such as the ones online search engines (or "word search" in the General Catalogue) offer have provided users with unprecedented simplicity. But they have hidden pitfalls, the main one being that we do not know, when information does not appear, if it is because it does not exist or because it is missing. Users have less control over the data, as the algorithms for relevance ranking are not visible⁹. This is the case for the General Catalogue, which uses an external search engine whose relevance algorithm the BnF does not have complete control of.

Index searches, on the other hand, offer better visibility to users on how the results are obtained, which guarantees their quality and relevance. Indexes allow a systematic and rigorous search of a set of bibliographic data and constitute a guarantee of exhaustiveness for a given search. The index is therefore an excellent tool for removing ambiguities, particularly useful for "advanced" users (information professionals, researchers).

The point is not to pit "word" search and index search against each other, but to assert their complementarity. For the Bibliography, it is particularly important to preserve a plurality of heuristic paths and thus a true diversity in the way of searching. Risk is an impoverishment of intellectual processes that results in searches that miss relevant results without realising it. But the risk is also that of a uniformity of cognitive processes and thinking. This lesser diversity of search modes, which may not be suitable for everyone, may constitute a risk of a single thought and therefore also an increased risk of control of that thought. It is the role of the Library as a public service of a democratic state that is at stake.

There is an opportunity here to offer a better public service to more people. The point, therefore, is to invest in various modes of access to our data, which allow a different organisation of search results. And, in a process of intellectual openness, to offer a tool to make our users well-informed citizens.

⁹ For more on these questions, one should of course refer to the seminal work of Jean-Noël Jeanneney, 2005.

Strategy and editorialization

The current version of the National Bibliography has gradually lost public attention for the reasons mentioned above. To get out of this situation and justify the radical choice of maintaining a separate site from the General Catalogue, it is necessary to clearly define the site's place in the galaxy of sites giving access to BnF metadata, and to have a well-defined communication plan on this subject. A global vision on these different sites, how they complement each other and the links between them is necessary.

This begins, of course, with a census. These sites were created gradually, each with a different objective. They do not cover the same perimeter, do not offer the same metadata status. But as this has been done gradually, the overall strategy has not necessarily been updated.

At this first stage of our reflection, we propose a convergence of sites that present metadata related to legal deposit at different stages of their processing, i.e. mainly a convergence of the Bibliography with Nouveautés Éditeurs, which presents metadata provided by publishers in their online legal deposit declarations, before BnF intervention, and on a temporary basis (notices remain online 6 months after the publication date announced by the publisher).

We also propose to better highlight, on the Bibliography site itself, the data resulting from legal deposit and the National Bibliography which is currently separate and not very visible on the site, i.e. mainly that of the *Observatoire du dépôt légal*. This would amount to highlighting the work done by the BnF, the multiple uses of the Bibliography's metadata, and their added value.

Finally, we propose to facilitate the identification of the various sites and their complementary uses by the users as well as the navigation between sites by an effort of editorialisation and links. This would imply the establishment of an "editorial charter", avoiding setting objectives that are too ambitious in terms of news or original content for the project to be viable. In practice, this will require a simple, shared tool that makes it possible to quickly transmit succinct information that keeps an audience on a site: new issues published, changes to the standards we apply, workshops, etc. The BnF has numerous and important activities around the Bibliography and its metadata (*Observatoire*, "Metadata Days", history, digitisation), which are currently outside the Bibliography site. Bringing them together would highlight the work done, the many current and retrospective uses of the Bibliography's metadata, and would offer, in short, an offer presented in a much more coherent manner. The Bibliography's link with history on the one hand and current standardisation work on the other would be explicit.

c- Universal scope

The preliminary reflections presented here should serve as a frame of reference for the entire project to replace the French National Bibliography website. The main principles presented in this article stem from this.

It is obvious that some of these principles are closely linked to the French context and that not everyone will necessarily recognise the problems they encounter here. For some countries, the problem of the National Bibliography is not the obsolescence of its website, but the very creation of such a site, or even the creation of the Bibliography itself. We hope, however, that our colleagues will also find in these practical aspects, which relate to different contexts, elements useful for their own reflection. With regard to intellectual aspects, we

offer them as an example of good practice for National Bibliographies as a tenet of democratic life, and call on librarians to examine the political implications of their activity, as IFLA encourages us to do, and as far as their political context allows.

CONCLUSION

Within the BnF, the discussion on the National Bibliography has proved necessary and fruitful, as we now have a strategy for its publication.

We are aware that ideals must meet an audience. Thus, the French National Bibliography must find a place in the Library's metadata landscape, more diversified than in 2001. The whole process has highlighted the fact that what we take as established library values is not necessarily self-evident and is in reality not neutral but political. In France, the objectives of the National Bibliography have varied from police and censorship to intellectual and cultural information. We take that for granted, but it will only remain so if we make sure that this is the case. The foundations of democracy are shifting and require our constant vigilance.

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