A Tale of Two Standards: recent developments in standardisation, and their impact on MulDiCat and the Best Practice for National Bibliographies

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Abstract

This paper explores how the Multilingual Dictionary of Cataloguing Terms and Concepts *(MulDiCat) and the* Best Practice for National Bibliographies *are taking different paths to adapt to the needs of the professional community as well as the moving landscape of bibliographic standardisation. While one is moving away from being a standard, and describes the whole range of possibilities rather than laying down the law, the other one wants to be a full-fledged standard, as it claims its position as a reference glossary for all IFLA bibliographic standards. In both cases though, it is interesting to notice that strategic orientations stemmed from practical considerations.*

Keywords: standards, guidelines, MulDiCat, Common Practices for National Bibliographies

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to common belief, the world of standards is not fixed, but in constant evolution; it is even capable of taking dramatic turns, as will be evidenced in this paper. IFLA in general and cataloguing standards in particular are a perfect exemplification of how lively standardisation can be. That is why this paper will tell the tale of two particular standards and their approach to recent changes in standardisation. At first glance, the *Multilingual Dictionary of Cataloguing Terms and Concepts* (otherwise known as MulDiCat), and the *Best Practice for National Bibliographies* don't bear much in common. Apart from their affiliation with two "sister sections" of Division III – namely Cataloguing and Bibliography, there was no particular reason for their paths to cross.

However, the similarities and differences between both projects make a powerful case study of the ways IFLA standards sometimes have to evolve in order to remain meaningful to the professional community, not only in terms of content but also and more importantly in terms of purpose and strategic orientations. It is telling that in the past decade, one project (the best practice) has gradually shifted from a standard to a professional document, describing a range of possibilities rather than laying down the law, while the other (the dictionary) is heading towards a full-fledged standard, as it claims its position as a reference glossary for all IFLA bibliographic standards.

Such strategic decisions should not conceal the practical side of standardisation, for even though those two projects came to contrasting conclusions, the pragmatic approach they took was comparatively similar. Both revision projects were appointed to an *ad-hoc* working group for which a decisive in-person meeting was instrumental in making significant headway. This paper will therefore explore to what extent practical considerations often determine strategic orientations in standardisation as the main takeaway of both experiences.

1. SETTING THE SCENE

The *Multilingual Dictionary of Cataloguing Terms and Concepts* (otherwise known as MulDiCat) "is intended to be used for authoritative translations of IFLA cataloguing standards and related documents"[1], and as such provides a list of terms in the bibliographic universe, alongside their definitions, in 26 languages (see figure 1). It was created in 1998, and took all its importance in the early 2000s in the context of the IFLA Meetings of Experts on an International Cataloguing Code (IME-ICC), when it was linked to the revision of the IFLA suite of bibliographic standards and models (FR-family of models, ISBD, ICP). During those years, efforts focused on improving its compatibility with the Semantic Web: once a proprietary database, the dictionary is now available in a Word table, a SKOS file, and on the Open Metadata Registry[2]. Technical issues regarding availability being prioritised, content remained relatively stable for a long time.

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[1] www.ifla.org/publications/multilingual-dictionary-of-cataloguing-terms-and-concepts-muldicat.
[2] http://metadataregistry.org/concept/list/vocabulary_id/299.html.

Throughout the years, the need for a content revision grew increasingly pressing, but the revision of MulDiCat was put off until solid ground was found in the realm of conceptual modelling: from 2013 onwards, the ongoing consolidation of FRBR, FRAD and FRSAD made it useless to engage in a concurrent revision that would have to be reworked as soon as published. The publication of the IFLA Library Reference Model (IFLA LRM)[3] in 2017 provided this solid ground, at the same time as it cast a light on the gap now separating the dictionary and the needs of the community it was designed to serve[4]. The urgent need for an update could not be ignored any longer, since new authoritative definitions were now required in all 26 languages for the concepts introduced or revised by IFLA LRM, so as to ensure consistent translations of the model worldwide. That is why the Cataloguing Section appointed a working group to the content revision of MulDiCat, and how the MulDiCat Editorial Group (or MEG, as they call themselves) came into being.

Preferred Label:	Bibliographic universe		
Language:	English		
URI:	http://iflastandards.info/ns/muldicat#BibliographicUniverse (RDF)		
Top Concept?:			
Status:	Published		
Properties Listed by Language			
Arabic	preferred label	العالم الببليوغرافي	Published
Arabic	definition	هو العالم المتعلق بمجموعات المكتبات، الأرشيفات، المتاحف وجمعيات المعلومات الأخرى.	Published
Bulgarian	preferred label	Библиографски универсум	Published
Bulgarian	definition	Сфера, която обхваща колекциите на библиотеки, архиви, музеи и други информационни общности.	Published
Catalan	preferred label	Univers bibliogràfic	Published
Catalan	definition	Àmbit relatiu a les col·leccions de biblioteques, d'arxius, de museus, i d'altres comunitats de l'entorn de la informació.	Published
Czech	preferred label	Bibliografické univerzum	Published
Czech	definition	Sféra vztahující se ke sbírkám knihoven, archivů, muzeí a dalších informačních komunit.	Published
German	preferred label	Bibliografisches Universum	Published
German	definition	Der Bereich, der sich auf die Bestände von Bibliotheken, Archiven, Museen und anderen Informationscommunitys bezieht.	Published
English	preferred label	Bibliographic universe	Published
English	definition	The realm related to the collections of libraries, archives, museums, and other information communities.	Published
Spanish	preferred label	Universo bibliográfico	Published
Spanish	definition	El ámbito relacionado con las colecciones de las bibliotecas, archivos, museos y otras comunidades de información.	Published
Finnish	preferred label	Bibliografinen universumi	Published
Finnish	definition	Kirjastojen, arkistojen, museoiden ja muiden informaatioyhteisöjen kokoelmiin liittyvät kohteet.	Published
French	preferred label	Univers bibliographique	Published
French	definition	Domaine relatif aux collections de bibliothèques, archives, musées et autres communautés du monde de l'information.	Published
Croatian	preferred label	Bibliografski univerzum	Published
Croatian	definition	Područje koje se odnosi na zbirke knjižnica, arhiva, muzeja i drugih informacijskih zajednica.	Published
Italian	preferred label	Universo bibliografico	Published
Italian	definition	Il regno relativo alle raccolte delle biblioteche, degli archivi, dei musei e delle altre comunità dell'informazione.	Published
Japanese	preferred label	書誌的宇宙	Published
Japanese	definition	図書館、文書館、博物館・美術館およびその他の情報コミュニティのコレクションに関連する領域。	Published
Korean	preferred label	서지 세계	Published

Figure 1: MulDiCat in its current state: the preferred label and definition for "Bibliographic universe" in the first 13 languages of the list.

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[3] www.ifla.org/files/assets/cataloguing/frbr-lrm/ifla-lrm-august-2017_rev201712.pdf.

[4] Mélanie Roche, 'What news from MulDiCat?', *IFLA Metadata newsletter*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (June 2018).

It was around the time when MulDiCat was first created that IFLA's Bibliography Section started working on guidelines for national bibliographies[5]. In the course of writing the document, it became evident that its first objective, "to help National Bibliographic Agencies start or improve bibliographic services"[6], had to be broadened to take into account electronic national bibliographies. The resulting guidelines, *National Bibliographies in the Digital Age: Guidance and New Directions*, were published in 2009. Reflections on a revised version started almost immediately, two major discussion points being how to make the resource freely available online and how to keep it dynamic and up-to-date. In 2012, the decision to turn it into a Web-based resource in order for it to be more easily updated, keeping pace with rapid changes in the field, was announced at the Standing Committee's Warsaw satellite meeting[7], together with a change in name, "Guidelines" being replaced by the term "Best practice".

The Web-resource was officially launched and publicised at the 2015 WLIC in Cape Town. Each subsection has its own separate webpage, which allows direct access and independent updates, but also makes browsing significantly slower and hides the structure of the whole document (see figure 2).
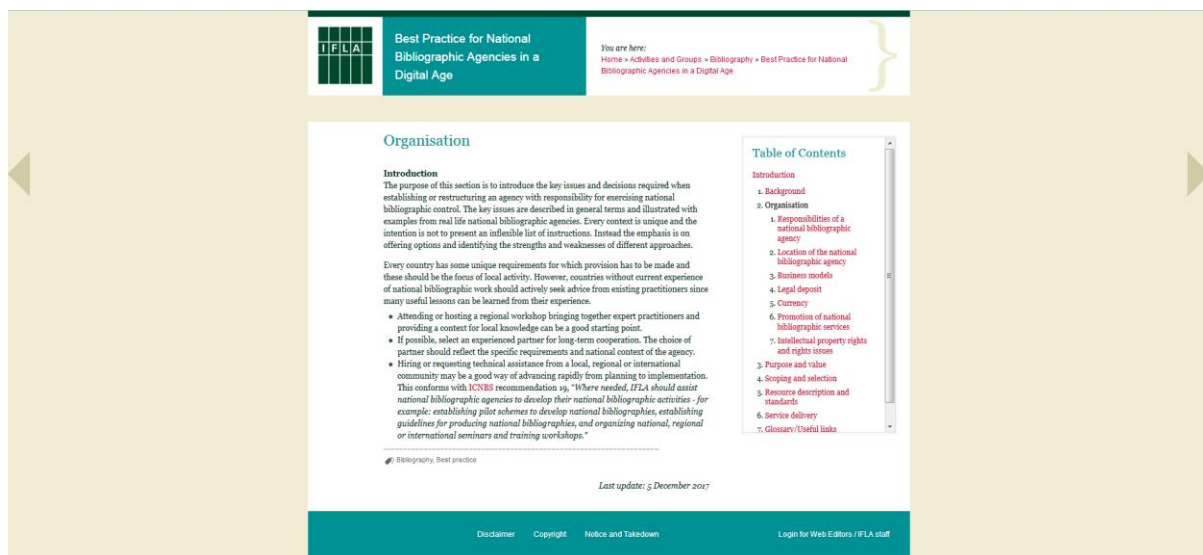

Figure 2: The Best Practice in its current form.

Born at the same time and faced with similar challenges, the two projects share little in terms of methodology and technical issues, but are very much akin as far as strategy is concerned. First of all, for MulDiCat and Best Practice alike, going through content revision made it necessary to question the very nature of standardisation work: "what is a standard and what is it for?". This is a fundamental question for the revision of any normative document, but one that is too often addressed only in very general terms.

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[5] *Guidelines for National Bibliographies in the Electronic Age*, 2008 draft, Introduction, p. IV.
[6] *loc. cit.*
[7] www.ifla.org/events/2012-bibliography-section-satellite-meeting.

2. STANDARDS: DEFINITION(S) AND PURPOSE

According to the International Standards Organisation (ISO), a standard is a document that provides "requirements, specifications, guidelines or characteristics that can be used consistently to ensure that materials, products, processes and services are fit for their purpose"[8]. Such a definition echoes some of IFLA's core missions, as indeed IFLA has steadily been issuing and maintaining standards, and its members still dedicate a significant amount of their time and energy to producing standards. IFLA defines a standard by its purpose: "IFLA standards should provide precise and useful information and guidance to an international audience"[9]. Yet, for a long time, no single unit was dedicated to standards: there were standardising groups but no central body.

The Committee on Standards was created in January 2012 to "provide a central focus for standards". It reports directly to the IFLA governing board, which places standards both at the centre of IFLA activities and very high up in the chain of decision. This makes sense in the context of IFLA's drive to maintain a strategic position at the international level and serve the global library community. Indeed, IFLA is expected by the LIS community to provide trusted, neutral frameworks for many aspects of its daily work[10]. It is no wonder, then, that information professionals converge towards IFLA to find a place for international discussions and consensus towards shared and strengthened practices. IFLA standards go beyond a single community's interests to meet global challenges facing libraries.

Thus far, we have been using the word "standard" in a broad sense, but, as the Committee on Standards writes, "each IFLA standard reflects current consensus on *rules, principles, guidelines, best practice or models for a particular activity or service*"[11]. "[R]ules, principles, guidelines, best practice or models" represent a wide range of document types, which arguably belong to different categories. In our opinion, what the Committee on Standards currently oversees is a mix between three distinct things:

- declarative documents such as statements and conceptual models;
- prescriptive documents such as standards;
- implemental documents such as guidelines, best practice, and professional reports.

While there is no question that declarative and prescriptive documents fall within the scope of the Committee on Standards, "implemental documents" is a broader category. It is less obvious that the types of publications it encompasses should all be considered standards. In practice, the Committee on Standards is not the only IFLA unit responsible for such documents: professional reports are also a publication type in their own right with their own review policy and hierarchical positioning, "published under the guidance of the Professional Committee"[12], which describes them as follows: "Professional Reports should be relevant to IFLA's global audience, and seek to drive forward excellence in library and information services. The scope of the series includes, but is not limited to:

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[8] www.iso.org/standards.html.
[9] *IFLA Standards Procedures Manual*, 2.7.
[10] Cf. Boulet et al., p.8.
[11] www.ifla.org/node/8750. The italics are ours.
[12] www.ifla.org/publications/ifla-professional-reports.

- Guidance and case studies on implementing IFLA standards and guidelines;
- Reports and articles on emerging trends in areas of professional practice;
- Substantial project reports, for instance reports from section projects."

The distinction between declarative, prescriptive and implemental documents is not set in stone, and some of these documents might come to switch from one category into another. Such a switch often occurs when a document is being revised. For instance, the publication of LRM made it necessary for MulDiCat to evolve, thus igniting the debate about its scope and purpose. However, the recent release of IFLA standards is not the only reason for revising an already existing reference document. IFLA changed the way it defines a standard, which might be another reason for a change. A change in expectations may also lead to a change in perspective, including the fact that a professional project is or is not considered a standard. It might not seem obvious for a dictionary to be identified as a standard, but it makes sense for one that purports to be a reference glossary for all IFLA bibliographic standards. On the other hand, evolving professional expectations and the variety of local contexts mean that, in the case of national bibliographies, library professionals are looking for a picture of all available options, with practical cases, rather than a monolithic set of rules setting down one single way of doing things properly.

3. THE CHALLENGES OF STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT

MulDiCat and the Best Practice are taking different paths to adapt to the needs of the professional community as well as the moving landscape of bibliographic standardisation. Their differences and similarities explain why they chose different solutions among those available within IFLA to establish reference.

The nature of IFLA itself and the way individuals get involved in its activities play a role in the way projects develop. Both projects were impacted by the regular renewal of section members and the scattering of members across the globe. The ten members of MEG come from all over the world. While the Common Practice working group has fewer members, they are scattered across continents and time-zones as well. This can prove a challenge when it comes to working collaboratively and exchanging ideas, especially in a context were membership is regularly renewed: members generally have only one yearly opportunity to meet in person, get to know each other and establish ways of working together. It takes time for newcomers in a section to take in that section's activities and acquaint themselves with its publications. Regrettably, sections are often unable to afford that time to their new members. This can lead to projects progressing by fits and starts rather that in smooth continuity. The volunteer nature of IFLA work also plays results in varying degrees of individual involvement, agendas and deadlines sometimes proving difficult to manage. Psychological and practical barriers to collaboration, such as language, cultural differences, time zones, access to tools and ability to use them, also come into play. Lowering the logistical barriers as much as possible helps with the psychological ones.

Both groups experienced these difficulties, with work seemingly stalled for a while, and for both, the solution came in the shape of a physical meeting. For the Best Practice, support from IFLA made it possible to have an in-person meeting in March 2017 in Paris, where significant headway was made. Being in the same room on days set aside especially for the purpose enabled the working group, with help from other members of the Bibliography Section's Standing Committee, to achieve the revision of half the resource. Besides the scheduled work on specific chapters, participants were able to look at the publication as a whole, have in-depth discussion as to its form and purpose, in a far smoother and quicker way than would have been possible remotely. The physical meeting proved a boon in terms of efficiency and quality of the discussions.

Practical matters that would have taken weeks to resolve in a string of emails were resolved at once. With freer minds on that aspect of things, the group was able to study the form of the document and the requirements for its publication. The website-like form had proved difficult to manage. With information scattered on a great number of pages, most of them very short, users could not get a sense of the general structure. The fragmented form also brought a risk that updates that impacted several sections would be overlooked. While having the resource available online was a definite improvement, it was decided to revert to a more book-like form, a single PDF file that could be accessed as a whole[13]. Quest for the form most adapted to the time and purpose met with questions on the nature of the resource. IFLA has a framework for this type of professional resource, with a distinction between standards and professional reports. The Best Practice was considered to be under the remit of the Committee on Standards. Looking at the requirements laid out by the committee on Standards, the group found them difficult to reconcile with their conception of the resource and its future life-cycle. A more in-depth look at the definition of standards by the Committee on Standards, and of professional reports by the Professional Committee, convinced them that the publication they had in mind was not a standard anymore. Here is how the group expressed this conviction: "This resource is not intended to be prescriptive since bibliographic control varies widely from country to country and local requirements may be influenced by financial, legal or practical constraints. A number of potential options are therefore presented to enable their application to be tailored according to circumstances, with examples and use cases given to illustrate the possible range of approaches"[14]. The change in format and nature will come with a change in name, as the new document is expected to be published under the title *Common Practice for National Bibliographies*.

Likewise, the revision of MulDiCat that had been pending for a while was initiated when an *ad-hoc* working group was appointed to the project by the Cataloguing Section during its second Standing Committee at the WLIC in Wrocław in August 2017[15]. Instead of putting off the initial meeting, the members present at the WLIC decided to have an in-person meeting then and there, so as to get things started as soon as possible. Too often are those initial meetings delayed, when they are so instrumental in standards development. The importance of being in the same room to discuss methodology and the distribution of work between group members cannot be stressed enough. Such seemingly trivial matters are actually very important as far as strategic orientations are concerned, and indeed in the case of MulDiCat it was only when tackling those issues together that the group realised that MulDiCat was taking a dramatic turn.

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[13] Cf. proposal form for the IFLA Professional Reports series.
[14] Proposal form for the IFLA Professional Reports series.
[15] www.ifla.org/files/assets/cataloguing/reports/minutes_2017.pdf, p.8.

Methodology played a great role in orienting MulDiCat towards a full-fledged IFLA standard. The first task the group undertook was to compile all the definitions in IFLA bibliographic standards in a spreadsheet. This led to the realisation that, in some cases, the same word had conflicting definitions. To resolve those conflicts, discussion with other review groups was necessary, and the decision was made to align on LRM.

MulDiCat does not seem to fit in one of the categories in the Standards Manual, which mentions dictionaries in a generic way: "Complex terms should be defined using the appropriate dictionaries[16]." Although it is but a dictionary in scope, it is indeed a standard in purpose, since it is prescriptive. Indeed, MulDiCat's place as the common glossary for all bibliographic standards was reasserted at the midterm meeting of the Cataloguing Section in Copenhagen in March 2018. The fact that other standards are the source of MulDiCat definitions is a strong argument in favour of making it a standard as well.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of IFLA standards is to transform or to have an impact on professional practice, and sometimes the greatest impact is achieved by moving away from being a formal standard, or on the contrary, by moving towards one. Both our subjects of interest come from the same background but have taken opposite paths to fulfil similar objectives.

On the one hand, increased interest for less prescriptive documents and "toolbox" resources could be a reflection of the general trend towards collaborative methods; on the other hand, being able to rely on a standardising body such as the Committee on Standards can be decisive for a project. In the bibliographic domain, standards don't exist in a vacuum: these past few years have made clear that we are increasingly dealing with a suite of interdependent standards. In that context, a resource that aims to provide a map of the available normative options is essential and needs to assume an external position.

Shifts in the status of a resource may be prompted by practical considerations, such as IFLA's procedures and normative environment, but it is not easy to measure how heavily they weigh on the final decision compared with the needs of the profession. The fact that our thinking about standard development can be challenged by practical issues (either "do we have the means to produce and maintain a standard *within* these constraints?" or "do we have the means to produce and maintain a standard *without* these constraints?") is not a bad thing in itself, as long as practical issues are only the starting point for further reflection. And indeed material constraint leading to intellectual creativity is often a cause for celebration. If practical considerations outweighed intellectual ones, there would be cause to call for a re-examination of IFLA's standardising procedures.

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[16] *IFLA Standards Procedures Manual*, 2.7.

Acknowledgments

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