

NATIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND NATIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHIC METADATA IN THE AGE OF MASS INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This is a report on the Bibliography Section of IFLA: its scope, activities, and role in promoting national bibliographies and national bibliographic metadata in this era of mass online information.

National bibliographies, as comprehensive, standardized, and authoritative sources of information about the intellectual and cultural output of a country, have an important role to play today. This paper outlines the tools that the Bibliography Section of IFLA makes available to agencies that wish to build or maintain strong national bibliographies that can contribute to access, selection, and assessment of information.

The IFLA Bibliography Section

IFLA is the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions; it is the international body representing the interests of library and information services and their users. IFLA is an independent, international, non-governmental, not-for-profit organization, whose aims are to:

- Promote high standards of provision and delivery of library and information services,
- Encourage widespread understanding of the value of good library & information services, and
- Represent the interests of its members throughout the world.

The Bibliography Section is an international group of practitioners focusing on national bibliographies. We are interested in techniques for the identification of content, arrangement, production, dissemination, and preservation of bibliographic information in national bibliographies, in particular through national bibliographic services in all contexts.

National bibliographic services are often interrelated with the legal deposit, ISBN and ISSN assignment, cataloging-in-publication, national authority files, and similar services. The Bibliography Section collaborates with related IFLA sections, in particular, National Libraries, Cataloging, and Subject Analysis and Access.

It is a place for fostering discussion and sharing reflections at an international level. By nature, national bibliographic services are unique in their territory. For this reason, practitioners need to exchange with colleagues worldwide. This is done through sessions at the World Library and Information Congress (WLIC), business meetings or working groups on a specific matter, among others. We address current trends and topics, share

experiences, and build knowledge. I wish to stress that you don't have to be an expert to come and share in the discussions and knowledge building. The aim is to be a community of practitioners who can share ideas and find help to develop national bibliographic services.

The Bibliography section publishes the IFLA Metadata Newsletter jointly with the Cataloging and Subject Analysis and Access Sections. It is a twice-yearly round-up of news from working groups, programs and activities related to metadata, from member libraries and organizations. It is available online on the IFLA website.

The Section also maintains a blog, which is being reactivated after being dormant for a few years, and stays in touch with members and interested parties through a mailing list. One can subscribe on the Bibliography web page; where calls for papers, announcements of new publications, meetings, etc. can be found.

Its composition, like that of any IFLA section, is up to 20 standing committee members, nominated and elected by IFLA members (individuals or institutions), and up to five co-opted members. We strive for a truly international, diverse make-up, to represent the various situations, priorities, and production ecosystems. Some of our business meetings are open to observers, where interested parties could take part in our other activities, and become co-opted members. The next election is in two years.

The Section maintains two main resources, the *Common Practices for National Bibliographies* and the National Bibliographic Register. The former is a reference work for the production of national bibliographies. It is a revised version of the web publication *Best Practice for National Bibliographic Agencies in a Digital Age*, which was based on the original printed *National Bibliographies in the Digital Age: Guidance and New Directions* (2009). Note the shift from the original guidelines, to best, then to common practices. That is because there is no single right way to produce a national bibliography. Therefore, the aim is to provide an overview of international formats, standards, knowledge organization systems, and so on, to provide guidance for national bibliographic agencies that aim at creating, maintaining or transforming their national bibliographies. This resource covers the essential aspects of organization, purpose and value, scoping and selection, resource description standards, and service delivery for a national bibliographic service, illustrated with examples from different countries, mostly drawn from the National Bibliographic Register.

The register is a collection of forms submitted by national bibliographic agencies that give a detailed description of their national bibliographies, their organization, services, and standards used, complemented by tables and graphs for comparative analysis.

It is a source of examples and inspiration, and I invite interested parties to check if your national bibliography is represented, and to submit a contribution if it is not.

National Bibliographies Today

From this experience, of hearing colleagues at IFLA, of working on the register and Common practices, of my own practice as Head of the Books Section of the French National Bibliography, I'm drawing these observations about national bibliographies today.

The most recent definition in the common practices states that:

“National bibliography in the modern sense is defined as an accumulation of the

authoritative and comprehensive records of the national output of a country (i.e., products of the national publishing industry-commercial and non-commercial sector, including government and official publications), published regularly, and with the least possible delay. It is produced in accordance with international standards by the national bibliographic agency. Publication details and authorship are investigated and verified in detail.”

The framework of the “national output of a country” reminds us that the modern concept for national bibliographies is inscribed in the framework of Universal bibliographic control, that was originally developed jointly by IFLA and UNESCO, with the idea of sharing the workload of bibliographic data production between countries and pooling the various national bibliographic data to form the universal.

This “output” is the cultural and intellectual production, as witnessed by what is published. These are not just books, printed and electronic, but also serials, maps, printed music, audio visual material, and so on, as new media develop and are added to the scope of legal deposit.

The element of time is important: we talk about *current* national bibliographies that gather the bibliographic information of current publications: because we need to know what is available now. “In a timely manner”, so that this material can be bought and given access to. Then, the “accumulation of records” forms a permanent record that has to be preserved and provided ongoing access to. Because this is also a record of what was available *then*, and what was available *when*. This is one of the differences between a catalog and a bibliography.

The scope is determined by rules and also by practice: there’s always a gap between what should be deposited and what actually is, but we try to make that gap as small as possible. For this, we rely on legislation, but also relations with the industries: book publishing, music and audiovisual industry, and so on, while monitoring the output.

It is also determined by available resources: is the agency able to catalog everything that comes in, at the same level of description? There is a permanent tension between timeliness and comprehensiveness, and each agency has to find its balance.

Note that the definition does not say anything about form. Form here is secondary; the purpose of the common practices is to help national bibliographic agencies find the form that most suits their context. But general recommendations are to have national bibliographic metadata that is available online, retrievable, shareable (the importance of interoperability cannot be overstressed), that can be processed both by humans and machines.

Especially as the production and dissemination of national bibliographic metadata has to take place in a system that is not limited to the national bibliographic agency or the world of libraries. “National bibliographies are an important link in the chain of dissemination and are at the centre of a system that involves libraries of all types (not just national libraries), along with publishers, distributors, researchers, and ultimately end-users.”

To complement this definition and talk about the role of national bibliographies, I want to turn to Barbara L. Bell’s words, in *An annotated guide to current national bibliographies* (1998):

«A current national bibliography is a mirror that reflects the culture of a country. By looking at the current national bibliography, one is able to learn

about the uniqueness of a country. The emphasis on agriculture and technology, the make-up of its society through its various language publications, particular customs and ceremonies important in the life of the nation, the importance of education, literature and science, prominent literary authors of the time and political, social and religious trends within a country are all discernible. A current national bibliography should reflect the interests and unique characteristics of a country much as a mirror reflects the uniqueness of an individual.» (Bell, B. L. (1998). An annotated guide to current national bibliographies (2nd completely rev. ed.). München: K.G. Saur)

As we wrote in the common practices, “Bell’s definition is more general”. Not so much what is a national bibliography, factually, in its form, scope, content, but what is it for?

It is a way to give access to information that is organised, comprehensive, trusted. This is important because citizens in a democratic society need to know that resources exist and need to access them. Be it a book by a favorite author, that entertains, helps develop qualities like empathy, or any other human or practical skill; or knowing what the political, moral, ethical debate is, or the state of scientific research, etc.

This is important because it is not governed by the market: a national bibliography is not a retailer’s database, organised by algorithms that pursue engagement and sales, which gives a disproportionate weight to some resources over others, and doesn’t encompass some of them at all (remember the first definition from the common practices: it’s general, but it goes into the detail of “commercial and non-commercial sector, including government and official publications”). This is a scope that you won’t find anywhere else in a single place).

It is not a catalog either: a bibliography is selected and organised information. In a national bibliography, the selection is “the national output”, generally as defined by legal deposit legislation. The organization can be by form, topic, coverage, etc., through grouping of records and indexes. This helps guarantee a plurality of modes of access, serving different cognitive profiles, and that the entire content can be gone through, if a user wants to make sure of a comprehensive analysis.

National bibliographies can play this role and bring this value, complementing other databases, like those from the publishing and other sectors, because they are created in the way I outlined earlier: by national bibliographic agencies, based on international standards, and so on. It relies on the role of libraries as third parties, that are seen as neutral (in the sense that they are not dependent on commercial or industrial interests). Those international standards have been created by consensus. They do not represent the immediate interests of a given community but respond to the challenges facing libraries at the international level. All of this is particularly important in a context of mass information, where information is numerous and difficult to verify and prioritise, and you need information that is organised, comprehensive, trusted.

I hope this short introduction to national bibliographies today, seen from the vantage point of IFLA’s Bibliography section, will prove useful. I invite you to make use of the various resources I described, which you can find on the section’s webpage, and join in the section’s discussions and activities.