"Depth vs. Breadth: Enhancement and Retrospective Conversion"
by Walt Crawford

'Way back in 1987, I wrote: "Most patrons will use only one catalog, particularly if they find any results. Adding more material to the online catalog is more important than adding more information to existing records. Budgetary realities suggest that libraries can either include more items in online catalogs or enhance the contents of some items, but probably not both" [1].

I don't believe the budgetary realities have changed all that much since 1987; if anything, they've grown worse. The miracle cure for retrospective conversion has proved as elusive as other miracle cures: doing it right takes time and money, period. The same goes for any miraculous means of enhancing access (e.g., adding chapter titles, tables of contents, or back-of-book index entries to OPAC records).

Thus, the easy answer to the question, "if we knew 20 years ago what we needed to do to improve subject access, why haven't we done it" is that it doesn't--and shouldn't--have first priority.

If It Isn't in the Catalog, It Isn't in the Collection

That's the simplest statement of one problem, but it's at most a very slight exaggeration. If you don't agree with that premise, then there's nothing more to say: we're living in different worlds.
worthless—but the effect is the same: they're proposing something akin to discarding older materials in the interest of better access to the new.

I'm a bit suspicious of the idea that every discipline (or, for that matter, any discipline) reinvents itself every decade. Perhaps that's because my degree is in rhetoric, but even cellular physicists might be a tad uncomfortable with the idea that nothing published prior to 1981 is worth reading. Let's not talk about where that leaves librarianship; at least all those who have never read Ranganathan, Cutter, or Dewey would no longer be bashful about it.

If we're not willing to off the old books, then we must grant them the respect they're due, which means inclusion in the online catalog. Once that's completed, and once we're sure that new materials will get into the online catalog promptly, then we can and should spend more time enhancing certain categories of records. The USMARC format already provides good storage mechanisms for some such enhancements; all it takes is time and money. Meanwhile, I find it hard to fault real-world libraries for their current priorities: putting it all into the online catalog at current levels of access, rather than giving some material (who chooses?) special treatment while leaving other material out altogether. That's responsible librarianship.

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