

Asmita Gupta

University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

COMMON ISSUES AND UNCOMMON SOLUTIONS TO CATALOGUING COMIC BOOKS IN LIBRARIES

Abstract

Comic books have gained popularity in recent years and as such libraries (academic or public) have been making efforts to maintain comic book collection to serve the patron needs. Since comic books are different than traditional resources in nature, cataloguing them have been a pain for most librarians. This paper aims to highlight the common issues faced by libraries in cataloguing comics because of a lack standardized metadata schema and explores a variety of solutions/projects proposed in effort to organize and maintain the collection in brief with the care it deserves.

Introduction

Many metadata schemas, standards and practices were designed in accordance with traditional books, meaning these standards and practices prioritized the author and title of the work as the major access points. This held true for almost all traditional resources, but failed when it came to comics. Comics are unique. “They are not traditional books, and, perhaps, shoe-horning them into systems designed for traditional books is doing them and their audience a disservice” (Phoenix, 2020).

Up until now, no has brought together all these disparate issues and compared attempts to remedy these in library catalogues. This paper can be useful to those wanting a starting point for experimental work in the field or to advocate for particular approaches in their own libraries.

As of this writing there are eleven different types of comics but this paper mainly deals with issues associated with serials, i.e. on-going comic issues published in magazines and/or other resource materials. Serchay (1998) has highlighted the nuances of all different comic types for more understanding.

Issues in Cataloguing comics

“Cataloguing single-issue comic books has always proven difficult as there is not a broad consensus among librarians regarding best practices” (Holloway et al., 2022).

One of the primary issues is that the current bibliographic standards, namely RDA or AACR2, prioritize author and title of the resource/work as the primary access point. This might not cause troubles while cataloguing graphic novels (because graphic novels are standalone novels and usually do not have subtitle or story arcs) but fails for most comics because of its eccentric nature of being an on-going series, or limited series or are reprinted in the form of trade paperbacks. “Bibliographic record standards, whether AACR2 or RDA, say that a trade's Subtitle Cataloguing, not series title, should be placed in the prime slot so it shows up dominantly in the catalogue. The problem is, with comics, the subtitle is rarely the most important element” (Phoenix, 2020.).

Librarians lean towards cataloguing comics as serials. The nature of comics is that it is brought to life by a creative team. Comics also tend to have the quirky nature of changing titles and/or having story arc or subtitles embedded within a series. As Holloway et al. (2022) states

Serials records typically do not contain story arcs or titles, comprehensive lists of characters, or comic book creators, so the patrons bear the research burden of bringing to their search which issues have the specific characteristics they seek. Item-level records that include all comic book creators, story titles, and major characters are game-changers. (p.904)

For example, *Daredevil* comics have multiple relaunches with same title and issue number. The original run was *Daredevil* launched under Marvel Comics imprint in April 1964 with issue #1 which ran for 380 issues and ended in 1998. With the shift to Marvel Knights imprint, *Daredevil* volume 2 was relaunched in 1998 with issue #1. Fast forward to 2011, *Daredevil* volume 3 was relaunched with issue #1. This relaunch was due to change in creative team. Another relaunch of *Daredevil* volume 4 issue #1 happened in 2014 because of the main character's city change. Marking the new character introduction and change in creative team, relaunch of *Daredevil* volume 5 issue #1 in 2015, followed by yet another change in creative team and relaunching of *Daredevil* volume 6 issue #1 in 2019. In 2022, there was yet another relaunch of *Daredevil* volume 7 issue #1. 2023 relaunch of *Daredevil* volume 8 issue #1 marks the change in creative team and a shift in the storyline. Given these relaunches, any library who hold *Daredevil* comics, it is possible that there will be a total of 8 *Daredevil* with issue #1.

The above example demonstrates what Fee (2008) highlights as the nature of comic books which includes illustration, their serial nature of publication, irregular publication (relaunches as demonstrated above) and frequent changes in title, character, creator and publisher. Creative team works to create comics which includes but not limited to writer, artist, colourist, cover artist, penciller, inker. Serchay (1998) rightly notes difficulty of tracking comic writers, pencillers, inkers and other creator roles in traditional serials cataloguing. All these characteristics makes comics unique and different from traditional resources or material for which libraries were built. Because of their nature, "Many of the typical standard cataloguing practices that librarians use simply don't fit comics perfectly, leaving gaps in the bibliographic records or creating misleading author responsibility statements or main entries" (Phoenix, 2020).

Lack of a standardized schema leads to a disordered approach to cataloguing comics specially when dealing with single issues. Holloway et al. (2022) notes that when James Madison University, a public research university located in Harrisonburg, Virginia, received a donation of approximately 1900 single-issue comics by the university's Humanitarian Librarian, Brian Flota, in January 2015. Not knowing the best course of action for cataloguing comics, JMU Libraries Special Collection ended up treating the donation as an archival collection.

Array of ideas

"Bibliographic records for comics do not prioritize the information that comics seekers are looking for when they search for their comics, causing catalogues to be cumbersome and confusing. To most comic seekers, three pieces of information are most important: series title, volume/Issue number, and publisher" (Phoenix 2015). Keeping in mind these access points, various strategies have been adopted in multiple institutions. I highlight few of them below.

GNCRT

Taking into account the issues highlighted in the previous section, the American Library Association's interest group, Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table created a document titled *Best Practices for Cataloguing Comics and Graphic Novels using RDA and MARC21*.

For libraries which are reluctant to be breaking any rules or adopting new schemas when it comes to cataloguing comic books, this guide will serve as their best course of action. The document highlights the nuances to be taken into consideration while cataloguing “on-going series” as the publishers refer or “series” and “serials” in terms of cataloguing terminology. Comics are created by a team of writers, illustrators and artists at the minimum. The document explains the usage of the terms from the publisher’s perspective and how they are to be treated in cataloguing convention for bibliographic records.

Comics needing cataloguing fall into two rough categories: stand-alone titles (including graphic novels, one-shots, some floppies, and individual webcomics) and continuing titles (including most manga, trade paperbacks, collected editions, serialized comics including floppies/single issues, graphic novel monographic series, and ongoing webcomics) (*Best Practices for Cataloging Comics and Graphic Novels Using RDA and MARC21*, 2022). The document provides a detailed account on various approaches along with each of their strengths and challenges. According to *Best Practices for Cataloging Comics and Graphic Novels Using RDA and MARC21* (2022), the primary differences in approach to comics cataloguing revolve around how to treat continuing titles: cataloging all volumes/issues individually; cataloging some or all continuing titles on multi-volume bibliographic records; or cataloging some or all continuing titles on serial bibliographic records (p. 3).

James Madison University’s metadata schema project

JMU has an ever-growing collection of comic books because of the multitude of donations and its continued purchases of single issues which has led to certain individual comic books having full catalogue records while others were assigned as serials. “This approach to cataloguing the comic books in collection was making it decidedly difficult to find them for patrons as well as for student staff in Special Collections who lacked familiarity with the nuances of the collection” (Holloway et al., 2022). This mess gave a reason for JMU’s Director of Metadata Strategies, Steven Holloway to develop a large-scale metadata project. An intern was hired to input the metadata of 1400 comic book into spreadsheet. The collection was primarily Black comic book collection and two other donations. While the original intention of this catalogue was to populate Omeka (an open-source platform for publishing digital libraries), the decision was made to create a metadata schema that is familiar to comic book collectors and researchers. The schema defined all the contributor roles involved in comic book creation, i.e. writer, inker, penciller, letter, colourist, cover artist and editor. For maintaining consistency, contributor names were recorded using authorised Library of Congress Name Authority File in a separate spreadsheet. Free text Note fields was used to record story arcs, table of contents, list of characters, historical notes like first appearances of characters and other miscellaneous general notes.

Metadata Framework for Manga

“The model is primarily designed for access and use of manga in a networked digital environment” (Ayako et al., 2009). The model integrates multiple metadata schemas in order to define digital comics in various online platforms for access and resource discoverability. These metadata schemas include IFLA’s Functional Requirement for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) for bibliographic descriptions, TV-Anytime, based on MPEG7 for structural description, the description framework of Wikipedia as a base model for description scheme for intellectual entities. The model focuses on a set of elements for description of intellectual content. They recommended the following elements for description of intellectual content—bibliographic information, overall description, story description, characters, evaluation/ratings, reviews, derived works, references, and notes (Ayako et al., 2009).

As of writing of this paper, Ayako et al. (2009) stated that “development of the full metadata scheme is left as our future work” (p. 69).

Central Library Consortium’s standard for cataloguing comics

According to Phoenix (2020), this standard actually calls for breaking the traditional cataloguing rules. The traditional standards are to use what is available on the title page as the main entry in 245 field. However, under CLC guidelines, the 245 field should be populated with Series title instead along with additional information. The MARC 245 field would look something like below:

245 10 \$aSeries title. \$nVolume number, \$pSubtitle

So, if a cataloguer wishes to catalogue Jujutsu Kaisen Vol 1 Ryomen Sukuna manga as per CLC guidelines, it will take below form:

245 10 \$aJujutsu Kaisen. \$n1, \$pRyomen Sukuna /\$cstory and art by Gege Akutami ; translation, Stefan Koza ; touch-up art & lettering, Snir Aharon.

Conclusion

While libraries have found ways to work around to cataloguing comic books and maintain a collection that might prove to be useful for resource discovery but these solutions are in the form of projects undertaken or in-house guidelines. The lack of a standardized metadata clearly led to a variety of creative solutions adopted by libraries. The guidelines like GNCRT, in-house projects like James Madison University’s metadata schema project to organise the increasing collection of black comics in its library are the projects were developed while keeping in mind that there are libraries which do not wish to break the age-old rules or are willing to adopt new schemas just for a particular collection or in my opinion, do not wish to leave their comfort zone.

The libraries that adopted Central Library Consortium’s standard for cataloguing comics are the ones who actually broke the traditional cataloguing rules to enhance the resource discovery and serve the patrons better.

My personal favourite is the Metadata Framework for Manga project by Ayako’s team at the University of Tsukuba. This project makes use of the FRBR model which rightly justifies the distinctive nature of comics. Given the fluctuating nature of comics in terms of production team and companies, this model is efficient in highlighting the entity-relationship of various elements and is also proficient in tracking the changes in the lifecycle of comic production simultaneously.

References

- Ayako, M., Satomi, N., Mitsuharu, N., & Shigeo, S. (2009, September 30). Metadata Framework for Manga: A Multi-paradigm Metadata Description Framework for Digital Comics. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Dublin Core and Metadata Applications*. <https://doi.org/10.23106/DCMI.952109571>
- Bailund, A., Holloway, S. W., Kuni, K., & Tomaras, D. (2023). Reprints, reboots and retcons: Standardizing comics cataloging with the Best practices guide from the GNCRT. *Art Libraries Journal*, 48(3), 62–68. <https://doi.org/10.1017/alj.2023.11>
- Best Practices for Cataloging Comics and Graphic Novels Using RDA and MARC21*. (2022). <http://hdl.handle.net/11213/18623>
- Falk, P., & Hunker, S. D. (2010). 4—Comics and graphic novels. In P. Falk & S. D. Hunker (Eds.), *Cataloguing Outside the Box* (pp. 35–48). Chandos Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-1-84334-553-4.50004-4>
- Fee, W. T. (2008). Do You Have Any Ditko?: Comic Books, MARC, FRBR and Findability. *Serials Review*, 34(3), 175–189. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.serrev.2008.06.003>
- Holloway, S. W., Kaiser, J., & Flota, B. (2022). Re-imagining (black) comic book cataloging: Increasing accessibility through metadata at one university library. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 13(6), 884–914. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2021.1971273>
- Phoenix, J. (2020). Making Comics Accessible. In *Maximizing the Impact of Comics in Your Library: Graphic Novels, Manga, and More* (pp. 93–128). Libraries Unlimited. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400683817.ch-004>
- Serchay, D. S. (1998). Comic book collectors: The serials librarians of the home. *Serials Review*, 24(1), 57–70. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0098-7913\(99\)80103-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0098-7913(99)80103-8)