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The Dire Straits of Bibliographic Families

Abstract: This paper applies Smiraglia's concept of bibliographic families to the controversial Canadian ban on the use of offensive words in a Dire Straits song. It envisages a set of FRBR relationships in which works receive repeated and multiple expressions and manifestations in the face of changing standards of appropriate language.
Résumé : Cette communication applique le concept de famille bibliographique de Smiraglia à l'interdiction canadienne controversée d'utiliser des mots offensants dans une chanson de Dire Straits. Elle repose sur une série de relations SFNB pour lesquelles les œuvres se voient attribuer des expressions et des manifestions répétées et multiples en raison d'un changement des normes de langage approprié.

1. Introduction

This paper will use the entities defined by the IFLA Report on the Functional Requirements of Bibliographic Records (FRBR), together with Richard Smiraglia's work on bibliographic families and Paul Ricoeur's work on documentary trace, to examine a recent manifestation of a familiar problem: the need to alter documents in the face of changing standards of behaviour.

2. The Controversy

In 2010, a listener complained to Newfoundland's OZ FM Radio Station, after it had broadcast the 1985 Dire Straits hit song, "Money for Nothing." The listener objected to the word "faggot," which appears three times in the lyrics, and in January 2011, the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council responded by prohibiting stations from allowing the offensive word to appear in any aired song.

If we examine the verdict and its consequences from a FRBR perspective, we discover that the work that we define as "Money for Nothing" has now spawned a series of different expressions:

- The original recorded version of 1985, with all the lyrics intact;
- A version altered by the composer, Mark Knopfler, which replaces the word with different words;
- The version in the Dire Straits's Greatest Hits album, which removes the entire verse.

The controversy resonates at the manifestation level as well: the verdict applies only to versions of the song broadcast on Canadian radio, and not on versions available on CD or in MP3 format

on the Internet. Even the Item level can be affected, if the radio station adheres to the regulation by using the original recorded version and masking the word.

3. Background

The controversy surrounding the CBSC decision is nothing new; racial terms and characterizations have created similar problems for Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and the musical *Showboat*. Enduringly popular authors such as Agatha Christie and Enid Blyton, and long-running series such as the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew Mystery Stories, have had their works quietly revised to remove words and sentiments that are now perceived as inappropriate or hurtful. But the Dire Straits controversy has revealed how rapidly bibliographic entities can fracture and replicate, and how difficult it can be for any information provider to keep track of which expressions of a work it's making available. Libraries and archives are particularly concerned with these issues because they are often charged with maintaining a cultural record in the face of changes in rule and taste. As such, they often find themselves in the incongruous position of trying to preserve the record of what many want to forget: Enid Blyton's conventionally xenophobic characterizations of non-British people; the harsh lyrics of "Old Man River" in *Showboat*; Agatha Christie's occasional use of anti-Semitic stereotypes in her characterizations.

4. Theoretical Framework

Richard Smiraglia (2007) has used FRBR as a basis for articulating the concept of bibliographic families, arguing that there are recurrent and exploitable patterns in the evolutions of a work through its various expressions that the FRBR paradigm can help us to articulate. This paper will use the concept of trace, as defined by Paul Ricoeur, to suggest the possible pattern of evolving expressions based on changing standards of acceptable language.

In *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2006), Paul Ricoeur offers a phenomenological interpretation of memory that distinguishes between three distinct kinds of memory trace: the written or documentary trace, in which a thought, event or experience is inscribed in some durable form; the psychical trace, in which a vivid experience leaves an affective impression upon us; and the cerebral or cortical trace that is defined and explored within the domain of neuroscience (415). Libraries, archives and other information organizations have traditionally focused on the documentary trace. Conventional cataloguing procedures group together all documents belonging to an edition, and provide a looser collocation of all editions of a work, and all works by a particular author. Conventional collection development and maintenance procedures emphasize the importance of maintaining information that is current and up-to-date, replacing information artifacts that are no longer accurate. And museums and archives provide ample annotations to historical materials that help users to understand outdated references, and to

comprehend expressions and sentiments—particularly in the case of offensive language and racial stereotypes—as products of a particular time and place. In carrying out these procedures, information organizations have typically relied on scholarly consensus and educational warrant to guide them in the maintenance of both catalogues and collections.

5. Applying the Concept

If we apply the concept of documentary trace to the problem of controversial language, we can tentatively suggest a bibliographic family of expressions that emanate from a work or a superwork in either chronological or simultaneous patterns:

- A "current original": a new work receiving a fresh and original expression and presumably needing no intermediating explanation, being embedded in its current social and cultural context;
- A "reconstructed original": a facsimile version of the original edition, but published long afterwards, using the now-anachronistic designs and illustrations to signal that it comes from a different time and context;
- An "annotated original": in which the original text or recording is enhanced by explanatory notes and introductions which warn users of a potentially offensive phrase or characterization and explain the reasons for its existence;
- A "silent correction": in which the original text or recording has been altered, generally without commentary or fanfare, to bring it in line with current sensibilities;
- An "altered version": in which the original text or recording is revised overtly as an alternative to the original;
- A "reimagined version" in which an artist engages critically with the original work and creates an entirely new work which re-imagines the original scenario, but presumably without the prejudicial or offensive elements.

Defining a bibliographic family based on such documentary trace has more than theoretical interest. Libraries and archives may emerge with an efficient and workable tool for representing to scholars, teachers, parents and administrators an accurate spectrum of the various expressions that developed according to pressures of provocation and response to changing standards of acceptability. As media convergence, third-party editing and captioning functionalities make it all the easier for different expressions, manifestations and items to proliferate, such a paradigm could serve the immediate purpose of enabling libraries to assemble a coherent inventory of all the expressions of a work that has been frequently revised. In the longer term, such a paradigm could exert a stabilizing influence, allowing scholars, and other communities of use, to build on common texts in the face of proliferating diversity.

References

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