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Green Bag Cataloging Trivia

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GREEN BAG

CATALOGING TRIVIA

Aaron S. Kirschenfeld[†]

AS AN ACADEMIC LAW LIBRARIAN, it is infrequently my job to make suggestions about how a unique library resource should be described so that it is most accessible to patrons, who generally search for it in an online, web-based catalog. While doing this recently, I was reviewing the Library of Congress’s documentation for how best to handle descriptions of titles, when my eye passed over the characters you see below.

*245 0 4 \$aThe Green Bag \$h[microform] : \$ba useless but
entertaining magazine for lawyers.*

The first iteration of this humble publication, it turns out, serves the field of librarianship as a chief example of correct cataloging, and has done so for at least 30 years.

For the uninitiated, what I saw, and what you now see, is an example of a part of what is known as a MARC bibliographic record.¹ It is read left to right, but is not really for us to look at after all, since MARC is an acronym for “MACHINE-READABLE CATALOGING,” and as such, is meant to be read by automated systems. MARC, or more properly MARC 21, is a stand-

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¹ NETWORK DEVELOPMENT AND MARC STANDARDS OFFICE, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, 245 – Title Statement (NR) in MARC 21 FORMAT FOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC DATA (Dec. 18, 2017), www.loc.gov/marc/bibliographic/bd245.html [perma.cc/F5LJ-VM59].

ardized format for encoding information about library materials, and is maintained by the Library of Congress and Library and Archives Canada. And despite being more than 50 years old, MARC remains very much alive as a standard notwithstanding the howls for its demise.² MARC records are what make those great engines of organized knowledge known as integrated library systems run, and the data contained within them is used to populate the public-facing catalogs.

But enough about that – how would a machine actually read the characters we’re interested in? Begin with the three-character group on the left, “245.” This is a MARC field or tag, and is meant to notify us that what follows is a discrete data element, in this case a statement of the resource’s title. Next we find two characters, the first of which indicates whether the resource will mainly be accessed by its title or by its author and the second of which tells us to count four spaces over before beginning to display text, skipping the display of the title’s initial article (and its trailing space).

Now the true fun begins. In a MARC record, individual fields like 245 contain subfields, which further subdivide the data so that it may be more easily used or extracted. The subfields are designated by a delimiter character – typically a dollar sign (\$), double-dagger (‡), or vertical bar (|) – followed by a code character. In this case, we have three subfields: \$a, \$b, and \$h. \$a is a required subfield, and is the place for the title itself. \$b represents the “remainder” of a title, a subject of some complexity which I will avoid here.³

I have left subfield \$h for last because it is wicked, and I want to give you the chance to cover your eyes or skip to the end or do whatever it is you need to do to avoid an encounter with uncomfortable things. Indeed, one notable cataloging cooperative sees fit to use boldface (boldface!) in warning unsuspecting librarians away from the willing or accidental use of subfield \$h.⁴ As I said, it is certainly wicked, and here is why.

² For the classic polemic, see Roy Tennant, *MARC Must Die*, LIBR. J., Oct. 15, 2002, at 26. For a brief and mostly non-technical history, see Michele Seikel & Thomas Steele, *How MARC Has Changed: The History of the Format and Its Forthcoming Relationship to RDA*, 28 TECH. SERVS. Q. 322 (2011).

³ For a thorough discussion of this subfield’s use in legal works, see MELODY BUSSE LEMBKE & MELISSA BECK, *CATALOGING LEGAL LITERATURE* 79 (4th ed. 2016).

⁴ OCLC, *245 Title Statement (NR)* in *BIBLIOGRAPHIC FORMATS AND STANDARDS* (Jan. 29, 2018) www.oclc.org/bibformats/en/2xx/245.html [perma.cc/4Q4W-4QXL].

Green Bag Cataloging Trivia

Subfield \$h is used to designate the medium of a resource, which, in this era of networked information, smacks of the *ancien régime* of AACR2, or the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules 2nd Edition. You see, there is a revolution underway in cataloging formats, and libraries are beginning to move to a more suitable method of recording information about resources that is not entwined with, and limited by, the legacy of print publication.⁵ This method is known as RDA, or “Research Description & Access,” and one of a few major encroachments it has made into the practice of cataloging so far is to phase out the general material designations represented by subfield \$h.⁶ In this case, we have a microform item, copies of which are held by fewer than two dozen libraries. Many more libraries, however, have the print issues in bound volumes while HeinOnline makes digitized page images for the entire run available.

The maintainers of the MARC specification provide, along with detailed descriptions of data elements, extensive guidelines for formatting bibliographic records as well as examples of properly formatted fields.⁷ But how did the original *Bag* make it into these guidelines as an example of how to encode soon-to-be-obsolete information in an arcane, specialized standard for encoding information about library materials? A review of the documentation reveals that it has been there since at least 1988, in the era prior to the harmonization of MARC standards.⁸ Who was responsible for putting it there, and for what reason, is a mystery.



⁵ For a law librarian’s perspective and explanation of the migration, see Ashley Moye, *Conversations of Context: Communicating about RDA to Non-Catalogers*, TECH. SERVS. L. LIBR., June 2012, at 15.

⁶ See, e.g., Lembke & Beck, *supra* note 3, at 54.

⁷ For a pleasantly self-aware, if ironic, example of this that may be more familiar to those trained in law, see *THE BLUEBOOK: A UNIFORM SYSTEM OF CITATION* 510 tbl.T.13 (Columbia Law Review Ass’n et al., eds., 20th ed. 2015).

⁸ Seikel & Steele, *supra* note 2, at 327.