

The Music Library Association Statement on Authority Control

The amount of information readily available today is enormous and continues to grow at a staggering rate. The need for describing and ordering the universe of knowledge has never been greater. Libraries have traditionally been leaders in this task, using the principles of collocation to bring related things together and disambiguation to identify differences. Increasingly others outside libraries have realized the values of these fundamentals.

In music especially, commercial Web sites such as sound recording dealer ArkivMusic.com and the music reference site Allmusic make use of these precepts to streamline access to products or information. Outside of music, the wildly successful non-profit Internet encyclopedia Wikipedia uses a disambiguation page that allows users to choose which work, person, concept, etc. is most appropriate to their needs. While the specific methods used by these sites may vary from traditional library models, the underlying principles, which allow users to find and identify specific entities, are strikingly similar.

The Music Library Association's Bibliographic Control Committee asserts that authority control, the thorough and accurate identification of:

- works
- expressions of works
- persons
- families
- corporate bodies
- concepts
- and other unique entities

allows for the efficient retrieval of information related to these entities, both in library catalogs and other databases, commercial and non-commercial alike.

Specifically, authority control allows users to:

- Find all resources containing or related to a specific instance of an entity (e.g., a specific work contained in an MP3 file)
- Identify an entity via attributes that allow for the disambiguation of similar entities (e.g., two persons sharing the same or similar names or two works with generic titles such as "concerto" or "quartet")
- Move between their own ideas concerning certain entities and the use of such entities in a database (e.g., access provided through alternate terms that describe a specific subject)
- See pathways and relationships among related entities in the database (e.g., exploring other resources containing information about a specific person)

Providing access to such entities can be a time-consuming and expensive task. Because libraries have recognized the values and costs of producing this information, programs such as the Name Authority Cooperative Program (NACO) have been established to help defray the costs of authority control. But the benefits of such programs can only be realized when large numbers of

libraries and institutions are willing to participate. A commitment on the part of individual libraries to cooperative authority control is essential in order to hold down costs and ultimately to realize the enormous benefits of authority data and the access they provide, both to the institution and the user.

The evolving nature of resource description in libraries, especially as regards emerging metadata standards which emphasize the relationships among works, persons, families, corporate bodies, and concepts, makes the need for authority control greater than ever. As the rest of the information world realizes the benefits of authority control, libraries must continue to lead the way.

Authors:

Richard Burbank, Michi Hoban, Nancy Sack, and Robert Sherrane (2007-2008)

Neil R. Hughes, Damian Iseminger, Casey A. Mullin, and Thomas H. Pease (2009)