# National retrospective bibliographies

**Claudia Fabian**
Bayerische Staatsbibliothek
Munich, Germany

## Abstract

*In the past decades a number of huge national initiatives have been launched, dedicated to the establishment of national retrospective bibliographies. In Italy, Germany, France, Great-Britain, the description of books published in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century is conducted by libraries (Germany), national agencies (Italy), or Universities (Saint-Andrews). It's time now to reconsider the impact of these programs, with the growing corpus of digital copies. This paper advocates some steps to a form of cooperation : define the scopes and identify interferences, the reliability of records, and create a unique identity number for each book published in the past, etc.*

In the past decades a number of huge national initiatives were dedicated to the establishment of national retrospective bibliographies. Since more than twenty years, these are available in machine readable form and accessible through the internet. Since its establishment in the 1990es the Consortium of European Research Libraries (CERL) promoted the contribution of these files into one common database, called the Heritage of the printed book database, maintaining as much of the content of the records as possible and reuniting these bibliographic records with catalogue records of different origins again describing printed books from 1450 to ca. 1830.

In the last years, work on description and cataloguing of early printed books is supplemented by a number of digitization projects giving access to a full digital copy of an early printed book, and thus allowing fuller insights into a copy than any catalogue record. This digitized copy may then be considered a "master-copy" for an edition.

With a large availability of national bibliographic descriptions and a slowly, but steadily growing corpus of digital copies, with the increasing demand for availability of linked open data and the use of these data for the semantic web, the time has come to give a fresh look at national retrospective bibliographies to reconsider their impact and value for increased cooperation among research libraries in order to share in the expensive business of building digital libraries, of good quality cataloguing of holdings, but also in further developing the national bibliographic census and in attracting interest to the individual copies whose value goes beyond what is described in a bibliographic record.

This paper advocates some steps to this form of cooperation, well aware that all this is with a cost, but building on investments of the past, well aware that it is not a short term accomplishment but a longer term development to which we can only start contributing by raising awareness and starting practice. This cooperation has its value within a country, establishing and developing a national census, but also cross borders in order to develop a national census by listing documents which do no longer exist within a country or to describe foreign holdings to a better bibliographic level and to link them to the existing national bibliography.

**Step one:**
Define the national retrospective bibliographies, their availability on the internet and in portals or common databases like CERL's HPB, the CERL portal or WorldCat. Clearly define their scope, the years of publication, the materials included and excluded, and for those excluded name other, supplementing bibliographies or online catalogues.
This list will also allow to identify all interferences and intersections between existing national retrospective bibliographies.

If a national retrospective bibliography is only available in its original setting, some consideration should be given to the benefits to see it included into a larger international context.

**Step two:**
In the description of the national retrospective bibliography, some consideration must be given to the quality and reliability of the records. Which authority files are used or built up? Is the bibliography relying on existing copies or printed earlier bibliographic sources? Which is the extent of the bibliographic description? Are subject headings, language codes, places of publication codes or other applied? Which terms are standardized and in which language? Is copy specific information clearly separated from bibliographic information? What determines the creation of a new record if the main bibliographic information (author, title, edition, year) are identical (how is dealt with slightly differing pagination, especially unnumbered pages, title page structure and layout, etc)?

**Step three:**
By which identity number can this record be clearly, unambiguously and – in principle – permanently be defined? A number of retrospective national bibliographies assign an authoritative national bibliographic number. This goes back to the tradition of the incunabula catalogues and their standard numbers. The German national bibliographies do: the VD16, VD17 and VD18 have a fix numbering mechanism. Nowadays the URI assigned to an entity in the context of linked open data makes us aware of the importance of such an identifier to uniquely and clearly identify an entity and then allowing for its further connection in the semantic web environment.

Searching the HPB looking into the question of unique identifiers, quite a variety of dealing can be observed. Each agency responsible for the creation of a retrospective national bibliography should be urged to clearly define such an authority number, its syntax for reuse and to make it a persistent identifier. In most cases this can certainly be done in relying on already existing numbers. Best would be to integrate this authority number into a well-defined field for standard numbers, the next step is then to index this field and make it searchable and to make sure that it is well displayed and labelled in the online access. This field must in principle be repeatable in order to take into account and list parallel (synonyme) authority numbers from other –overlapping – national bibliographies.

Nowadays those agencies who have not yet defined such a number can define a PURL – again it should be clear that this relates to the authoritative national description of an edition.

**Step four**
As soon as these definitions and authority numbers are available in a clearly defined approach in the national systems as well as in all systems to which records are transferred, like HPB, the CERL portal, TEL, WorldCat, and especially those showing digital copies like Europeana, all libraries cataloguing early printed books are invited to use these authority numbers and to include them into their catalogue records. It is up to the individual library quoting the national authority numbers whether to update the own record reusing the information found in the national bibliography or whether to leave it as it stands – correcting nevertheless evident errors – pointing and maybe even physically linking to the full record provided by the relevant national agency, sitting on another system, accessible e.g. via a URL from the record.

**Step five**
The benefits of this authority number – as soon as it is widely enough spread – are evident. It does not only allow linking to a fuller, better bibliographical information provided by the source which - being the national agency - may know best about the edition. It allows to group together in cooperative databases of all kinds records looking differently but describing the same edition. It may allow taking as a starting point the national bibliography to identify a number of copies in all kinds of libraries, by searching with this number in portals or databases like CERL's HPB, Worldcat etc. It may also allow to provide holding information for integration into the national retrospective bibliographic database.

It allows easy sharing of already existing digital copies and the concentration of the own digitization exercise on yet digitally unavailable material – if this is wished, or on documents carrying important copy specific features.

**Step six**
Last but not least trying to identify the authority number serves the growing of national retrospective bibliographies – which should not be considered as closed projects but ongoing census. Libraries will identify editions not present on the relevant national bibliography but for which there is an item in their collection. This information should be contributed to the national agency, edited there, provided with a new authority number.
The national retrospective bibliographies would profit from converting into information nodes: allowing linking to all copies worldwide showing this authority number, gathering URNs und URLs from all digital copies available, which can easily be provided by a simple file containing the authority number, the URN and URL of the digital copy, the name of the providing library and the shelf mark of the digitized copy.

The national retrospective bibliography can also be the backbone of cooperative digitization as is the case in Germany. VD 16 and VD 17 not only register links to digital copies, they also structure the to be done digitization, listing digitization plans for those libraries whose copies are listed in the bibliography or providing lists of editions printed in this or that place or written by this or that author for subject oriented digitization projects. The digitization or digitization plan is recorded on the bibliographic record which allows to provide lists of not yet done or not yet planned for records or copies to other libraries defining a digitization project.

The availability of a digital copy linked to the bibliographic description will undoubtedly increase the bibliographic evidence and make comparisons easier. It will also allow to detect further differences to be described on the existing record or leading to the establishment of a new record.

\*\*\*

Let us start with the beginning – and that is why I propose this to all international agencies, IFLA, LIBER, CERL:

Let us work on the lists, let us work on the definition of the standard authority numbers. If there is a hope for a shared European project or a binational undertaking to investigate further into the reuse of records, the retrospective allocation of authority numbers, let us share our experiences on this in the established international networks. This sharing is not for free – but it is an investment building on already achieved investments and grounds, thus more cost effective and of much broader impact than an own isolated starting from zero. It helps to consolidate in the most effective way our knowledge about the European cultural heritage, to effectively and ultimately completely transfer it into the digital availability and to make it perceived as high level primary data to be shared in the semantic web and in virtual research environments.

As far as goes my experience today this does not take away interest from existing physical copies and collections, on the contrary, they gain in interest as far as their materiality and copy specific information is  concerned. The interest diverts from text only oriented research – which is cared for by the national bibliographies – to a broader analysis of materiality and cultural impact. Again the national retrospective bibliography is a funding element on which further research can be effectively based.