

# The Bib Record in the Age of Digital Reproduction

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**ABSTRACT:** Taking both structural and thematic inspiration from Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” this article posits that the movement from physical card catalogs to ALSs [Automated library systems] and ILSs [Integrated library systems] was not solely the result of technological progress. Rather, this transition had its genesis in a process Marx called primitive accumulation—in this case a form specific to the library profession. In other words, this article seeks to recast the history of digitized catalogs within libraries, seeing them, first and foremost, as harbingers of disenfranchisement and dispossession, specifically of catalogers. The article then turns towards a broad critique of the scientifically progressive tilt within the field before ending with a call for a more skeptical form of librarianship, one that privileges the well-being of library workers over technological advancement.

**Keywords:** cataloging, bibliographic records, automated library systems, integrated library systems, AI



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## I

There is something about the pure physicality of a card catalog—its bulky wooden excess, its polished sheen, its well-worn handles. We banished it to a dusty back room, shortly after R. retired, or, more accurately, was forced to retire. Once a nostalgic reminder of the pre-digital era, the sight of its unwieldy mass began to trigger unsettling memories of a person now forever associated with that vague moniker: “no longer with the college.” When opening a drawer at random, I am met with hundreds of 3x5 index cards, most of them yellowing at the edges. R. chose the subject headings herself, typed them out in a clunky 10-point slab serif. Machine-tools. Machinery. Machinery in the workplace. This is an educated guess. The headings could have just as easily been chosen by her assistant, who retired in the same year. There is no one left to ask.

The cards are a piece of local history. I would not go as far as to call them art, but they inevitably bear the traces of the individuals who—painstakingly, and with one eye on tradition—transformed pieces of unassuming paper into bib records.

## II

A brief, depoliticized history of library catalogs might look something like this:

Even after the widespread adoption of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, library catalogs continued to take the form of book-length lists. A patron would browse an institution’s contents, usually by alphabetized entries like title and author. The limitations of this practice were obvious; only one person could use the catalog at a time, unless the library could afford a second or third copy. Not much changed until the French Revolution, when the National Constituent Assembly, facing bankruptcy, began seizing church assets, including religious tomes inlaid with gold. They found that the easiest way to organize their loot was to place its bibliographic information on the backs of playing cards, a resource that, for whatever reason, remained readily available in republican France (Library of Congress 2017). This new system proved to be much more flexible, as these freestanding records could be moved, replaced, or thrown away, all without incurring the additional cost of printing updated book-length lists. Harvard would go on to standardize the practice beginning in 1840, and the ALA would make it official policy in 1877 (ALA, n.d.). In terms of the legibility, uniform typeface was preferred. But if typewriters were unavailable, bib records were often written in librarian hand, a style of script created by Thomas Edison and Melvil Dewey. It was intended to be “as near to type as possible” (Jensen 2021, para. 7).

## III

ALSs (automated library systems) were a product of yet another revolution: the so-called computer revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Coming into their own in the 1940s, most famously as military assets during World War II, digitized computers—or more specifically, the automation they promised—quickly altered the ways in which information was organized (Borgman 1997; Buckland 1992; Horny 1987; Lynch 2000). This is perhaps most readily apparent in the case of library catalogs, which transitioned from paper records to digital records, in most instances,

before the turn of the century—an astoundingly quick transition in a notoriously recalcitrant profession (Shera 1967). What was once admittedly labor and space intensive (creating records by hand and storing them in a centralized location) became much more manageable precisely because everything required for patrons to search was now, for the most part, immaterial.<sup>1</sup> The success of this transition was, needless to say, largely dependent on whether an institution had the manpower (or the money) to convert their paper records into machine-readable formats.<sup>2</sup> The important point, however, was that profession was trending away from preservation as its motivating force; the question of access—how to steer patrons towards resources as quickly and effortlessly as possible—soon took center stage in the professional literature (Borgman 1997; Buckland 1992; Horny 1987).

#### IV

The ALSs of the mid to late-20<sup>th</sup> century became the ILSs (integrated library systems) of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the rise of the Internet, libraries found themselves as institutions with a potentially global reach (Borgman 1997; Kinner and Rigda 2009). Naturally, this meant that patrons—a designation that until this point had been, for the most part, geographically limited—no longer quite made sense as a byword by which to orient services; patrons could be anyone, anywhere, and the collections, vast portions of which were now digitized themselves, needed uniform records in order to foster maximum discoverability (Borgman 1997; Horny 1987). Accessibility, in short, was no longer directed towards a specific population (with specific concerns), but rather towards an undifferentiated mass of “users,” who, as one could imagine, have an almost limitless number of potential interests. And because they could never quite be sure what a user might want at any given moment, libraries had to offer a diverse range of resources, which led to an increase in expenditure, which, in turn, led to an increase in the amount of original cataloging (Dyer, Fossey, and McKee 1993). Enter OCLC/WorldCat, a global union catalog that allowed library workers to instantly copy bib records from other participating members. This drastically changed the nature of cataloging work—most would say for the better. It was especially helpful in institutions where hiring trained catalogers was deemed cost prohibitive (Borgman 1997; Dyer, Fossey, and McKee 1993). This is more or less where the profession finds itself today.

#### V

I did not have to try very hard to depoliticize this history. It comes to us mostly unquestioned and unexamined, as the inevitable outcome of “progress.” If anything, the digitization of the catalog

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<sup>1</sup> This is an oversimplification; automated systems obviously require hardware (computers, screens, keyboards). I am speaking here purely from the perspective of patrons, who would have experienced a radically smaller material footprint when searching the catalog via computer terminals.

<sup>2</sup> As an aside, I have long suspected that my small community college never fully transitioned from paper to digital records. An interesting thought experiment: If it were possible to find them, what would the millions of books without digital records that nonetheless sit on our shelves tell us about the profession and its biases?

was viewed as a necessary corrective for what many believed to be an overly suspicious and technophobic subset of the profession. Shera (1967) put it most plainly:

There is a certain irony in the fact that a culture, such as ours [librarianship], which places such great emphasis upon science and extending to the frontiers of knowledge, should view with such indifference the importance of organizing and servicing that knowledge in the most effective and efficient ways possible (748).

Catalogers, in the opinion of Shera, were always too concerned with the “how” of the profession and never with the “why.” Digitization is, in her mind, was an obvious “how”; it is the most efficient method by which librarians are able to disseminate information. The only thing stopping its full implementation was that catalogers stubbornly refused to recognize this transition—from preservation to efficient distribution—had even occurred.

Others preferred to underscore the economic dimensions of digitization. For example, Kilgour (1969) argued that a “steadily increasing rate of productivity should be the economic goal of library automation” (1). ALSs and ILSs were the proof, in his opinion, that this “increasing rate of productivity” could be realistically achieved via a transition to computers. Alternatively, Kinner and Rigda (2009) asserted that “[l]ibraries also have to deal with staffing limitations and how that [impacts] workflow. Libraries need systems that will do more and do it more efficiently” (407). That staffing limitations exist (and will continue to exist) is accepted as an inevitable fact.

To get to the point, few scholars seem interested in questioning why librarians, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, needed to become “economically productive” or work towards improving the “efficiency” of their institutions.<sup>3</sup> It is almost as if broader socio-economic trends (Reaganomics, rapid globalization, the cheapened cost of labor they released upon the world) had no real bearing on the *idea* of the library, which remained beyond the profit motive, even in the minds of those most slavishly devoted to the corporatization of the profession. These same scholars, however, never extended the same grace to library workers, who were very much subjected to the real-world effects of the neoliberal discourse that was quickly becoming de rigueur within the professional literature: partitioned tasks, disinvestment, and, in the final instance, “targeted” downsizing (Prince and Burton 1988).<sup>4</sup> The underlying irony—that an institution predicated on the idea that non-productive spaces are essential to the flourishing of democracy would so

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<sup>3</sup> To put it another way, I partially agree with Shera’s (1967) diagnosis. Even today, the “why” of librarianship is rarely discussed within the professional literature. This makes some sense because “library science,” as the name suggests, self-admittedly strives for the certainty of scientific knowledge. We have hundreds of examples of how scientists have ruthlessly ignored moral and ethical norms (“whys”) in the pursuit of “hows” (Oppenheimer, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the Stanford Prison Experiment). Some might even say this enforced ignorance around the question of “why” is part and parcel of the modern scientific process (Latour 1984; Matthews and Miley 2020). Despite operating at a much lower level of risk, why would “library science” operate any differently? This article poses other questions, however: When alternative “whys” are formulated, as in the case of Shera’s essay, why do they so often utilize technical phrases like “efficiency”? What is it about mechanical modes of thinking that so entices the library profession, even in discussions of its purpose and aim?

<sup>4</sup> Over the past decade alone, “academic library staffing has declined by almost 20 percent (15,856 employees) (Petrowski 2023, para. 5). Numbers remain scarce for the cataloging profession specifically, but one comprehensive study published in the mid-1980s found that cataloging departments were indeed shrinking (Hafter 1986). Until recently, my own department was composed of five employees. It now has two.

ruthlessly subject its workforce to the whims and fancies of productive discourse—was rarely addressed.

## VI

There was some dissent, of course. Every generation their Luddites.<sup>5</sup> Ellsworth Mason, in his colorfully titled essay, “The Great Gas Bubble Prick’t; or, Computers Revealed—by a Gentleman of Quality” argues that the savings often invoked to justify the purchase of computers never really materialized:

But the central fact is that the overwhelming costs in computerization are labor costs (machine costs run about 20 percent of the total), and the salaries systems analysts and programmers go up even faster than library staff salaries... Since the costs of computerized libraries operations are far higher than manual alternatives now, and the costs of computer labor are increasing faster than library labor costs, computerization will become increasingly expensive in the future” (190).

This line of thinking seems antiquated in retrospect, but one cannot blame Mason for being unable to foresee the across-the-board reduction in prices that globalization and technological innovation would provide for (Western) employers looking to automate workflows. Under the current economic regime, the cost of a computer or annualized subscriptions will always be cheaper than the cost of a librarian—salaried or, if some members of management would have their way, unsalaried.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Mason was unable to see that the highly complex tasks that had previously been done by systems administrators and programmers would be significantly deskilled, packaged into easy-to-use software, and then simply passed to librarians *with no corresponding increase in their wages*.<sup>7</sup>

I would be remiss not mention the numerous automated catalogs built in house during the early years of digitization.<sup>8</sup> Aligned with the open source movement in a general sense, they were

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<sup>5</sup> While beyond the scope of this article, I would like to put in a positive word for Luddites (both the 19<sup>th</sup> century English workers and contemporaries who might be tempted to follow in their footsteps). In his book, *Breaking Things at Work: The Luddites are Right About Why You Hate Your Job*, Gavin Mueller (2021) writes that “[scientific] management, for all its pretensions, was less about determining ideal working methods and more about shattering... worker power. By breaking apart each work process into carefully scrutinized component tasks, [Frederick] Taylor had cracked the secret of labor’s advantage, thereby giving management complete mastery over the productive process” (33). Destroying the machines that help to facilitate this transition to “component tasks” could therefore constitute a genuinely radical political act.

<sup>6</sup> The state of becoming “unsalaried” usually carries with it has the additional effect of further job segmentation, a phenomenon we have seen play out in higher education for decades at this point. What is adjunct labor but the total separation of the “productive” part of the profession (teaching) from the “non-productive” parts (scholarship, a living wage, healthcare)?

<sup>7</sup> The average annual salary for academic librarians in 2019 was \$73,147 (ALA-APA 2019). After adjusting for inflation, “salaries have remained static for... the past twenty years” (Comanda et al. 2021, para. 9). Public librarians fared even worse, with an average annual salary of \$65,339. In comparison, the average annual salary for computer programmers was \$92,610 (Bureau of Labor Statics 2019). There is a marked sexism to this disparity, which will be more thoroughly explored in Section IX.

<sup>8</sup> The most famous example being the automatic catalog created at Ohio State University, which would go on to form the basis for OCLC/WorldCat.

quickly outflanked by commercial vendors.<sup>9</sup> Scholars have typically identified two reasons for their failure: poor design choices and their complete inability to “incorporate sufficient understanding of searching behavior” (Borgman 1996, 11). In short, patrons found them frustrating to use. But this offers an incomplete view of the situation; it ignores the fact that there were significant strategic advantages to be gained by library managers who partnered with vendors: “[l]icensing a product from a firm removes many of the variables, provides stability, and does not require hiring...people...whose skill sets the typical librarian does not understand and cannot assess” (Askey 2008, para. 29). By transferring the responsibility for front and back-end design to corporations (under the guise of “user-friendliness”), library management was able to assert control over an emerging domain of knowledge—knowledge that, in the context of something like collective bargaining, would have acted as powerful leverage in the hands of library workers.

## VII

It is tempting to ponder what a normal workday would have looked like for R. A quick perusal of the books she left behind produces W. C. Berwek Sayer’s (1913) *The Card Catalogue; A Practical Manual for Public and Private Libraries; Including Other Uses of Cards in Libraries*. The section titled “Rules for Author Cards” includes the following instructions:

27. Enter all the works under the names of their authors (when known) whether individual or corporate.

28. Authors’ names, used as headings, to be given their full vernacular form. An exception to this rule should be made in the case of forenames not used by authors ; e.g. :—

**Dickens, Charles**

not **Dickens, Charles John Huffam.**

If thought desirable the full name in these cases can be added in brackets ; e.g. :—  
**Dickens, Charles** (*i.e.*, Charles John Huffam Dickens) (27).

“If thought desirable...” I highlight this phrase because it injects some degree of autonomy into the cataloging process. This is to say, at the time in which Sayer was writing his book, *one could still reasonably expect catalogers to desire something*. And if this is indeed the case, it begs some further questions: What did R. desire? Did she bracket any names?

Naturally, I return to the card catalog to search for *Bleak House*, then *A Tale of Two Cities*. I end up finding several different author entries: **Dickens, Charles**; **Dickens, Charles John Huffman**;

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<sup>9</sup> By calling attention to these past failures, I do not mean to imply that the movement should be abandoned *in toto*; any alternative to the vendor-dominated system will have to draw on open-source software. For a thorough exploration of where open source is poised to make serious inroads, see *Using Open Source Systems for Digital Libraries* (Rhyno 2004).

a **Dickens** with the **Charles** barely legible, splotched ink concealing the second half of the book's title. But no brackets.

## VIII

A typical morning as a cataloger at a mid-sized community college in a major metropolitan area in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century:

Log into Alma©. Browse the list of updated titles. Convert the Rialto© cart into an excel sheet for J., who will import the records from OCLC/WorldCat©, giving special consideration to titles with completed Library of Congress call numbers (less work for you later). Wait 25 minutes. A vague thought in the back of your mind as you scroll TikTok©: a monkey could do this. The corollary thought: I'm a monkey. Switch to reading about Trump, executive orders, the impending collapse of the Republic. A much more productive use of your time. *Bing*. Check the records for errors. There are several. Overlay better records. Reattach the orders. Link what needs to be linked.

## IX

At this point, I could plausibly be accused of inventing an idyllic past for analog cataloging that never existed—all the better to emphasize the dejected state of modern cataloging. But as Allison-Cassin (2020) reminds us,

the transition from handwriting to the typewriter [is] a crucial moment of a division of gender roles in office work...men were reluctant to take up the typewriter because the signs of the body inscribed through handwriting would be removed with the typewriter. "Library hand" [similarly] forced the removal of individual signs of the body—women could not leave the marks of their bodies in the library catalog or on books" (417).

The male-intensive professions, to borrow from the language of Allison-Cassin, are *embodied* professions. This is another way of saying that they produce visible markers of individuality, like, for example, a case file or a medical chart. The female-intensive professions, in contrast, are *disembodied*; their relationship with what they produce is obscured, as is the case with typewritten bib records. Mechanization, in Allison-Cassin's estimation, is the process through which these fields came to be marked as "feminine," opening the door, in due course, to further alienation in the Marxist sense.<sup>10</sup>

It is inevitably true, in other words, that by the time R. began her career, cataloging had already gone through an intense period of "feminization" that was signaled, in part, by the arrival of the typewriter. One could nonetheless describe her workday as occupying an imagined halfway point between the "masculine" embodiment of analog cataloging and the "feminine" disembodiment

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<sup>10</sup> As Harris (1992) illustrates in her book, *Librarianship: The Erosion of a Women's Profession*, most of these "feminized" forms of labor earn significantly less on average. The way I have framed this transition—from mechanized labor to feminized labor to alienated labor—gives rise to some interesting questions, too technical, perhaps, for this article. In any case, I pose them here: Is mechanization inherently "feminizing"? Does "feminization," in turn, necessarily proceed alienation, or are they two isolated phenomena that are situationally coextensive, depending on the pre-existing material conditions of a given profession?

of digital cataloging. Her labor was not yet totally alienated. The artifacts she produced, after all, still carried some markers of individuality: handwritten corrections, erratic naming conventions, smudged ink. The workday of the contemporary cataloger, on the other hand, relies primarily on software developed by international conglomerates. Their tools, for the most part, are immaterial, and in every instance proprietary; there is no occasion in which a marker of their individuality *could* remain; they are the alienated laborer par excellence.

Those who defend ALSs and ILSs might maintain that analog catalogers worked within a system that carried its own prejudices and antipathies.<sup>11</sup> This is a point well-taken. Undeniably, the pre-digitization cataloging profession was racist and queerphobic, but this is not the same as saying that it provided comparatively worse working conditions for catalogers, or even that it offered subpar service to patrons.<sup>12</sup> In fact, this article argues that there existed a distinct advantage for those who labored with material objects: Both physical and digital card catalogs have as their purpose, their telos some might say, in helping patrons find resources. Unlike digital catalogs, however, analog card catalogs inevitably leave traces of the people who worked with them—the wooden behemoths I mentioned at the beginning of this article, yellowing index cards, etc. An alternative way to understand physical bib records: mementos of a professional life.

To further underline the argument I am attempting to make here: Where will future generations find the sum of *my* professional life? On the proprietary software of major corporations?

## X

The uniqueness of a bib record is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition...A paper record for, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the catalogers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who made it an object of professional expertise, than the corporate vendors of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, who viewed it as a resource to be exploited and, ultimately, replaced. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura. Originally the contextual integration of the bib record in tradition found its expression in the subset of the profession we have come to know as “cataloger”...It is significant that the existence of the bib record with reference to its aura has been entirely separated from this professional context and, thus, from tradition.<sup>13</sup>

## XI

This separation of bib records from the tradition in which they were first produced is not without historical precedent. It resembles what Marx, writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, called the process of primitive accumulation.<sup>14</sup> Ruskola (2025) provides us with a summary of the prototypical

<sup>11</sup> See, of course, *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People* (Berman 1971).

<sup>12</sup> At any rate, racism and queerphobia persist in post-digitization cataloging. See Fox and Gross (2024) and Stahl (2024).

<sup>13</sup> This is, for the most part, a direct quote from Walter Benjamin’s (1969) seminal piece “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” I have simply exchanged a few words: “bib record” for “work of art,” “artist” for “cataloger,” etc.

<sup>14</sup> I use “primitive accumulation” here in the same sense as Rosa Luxemburg, who “interpreted [it] not just as the early, violent stage of capitalism, but as an ongoing process” (Fuchs 2018, 460). Popowich (2018) prefers to use the terms *formal* and *real subsumption* when discussing the transition from physical to digital bib records. We are effectively discussing the same concept, however, and I am indebted to his substantial research on this topic.

example:

Until the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries English farming was conducted largely in manorial estates organized as common fields. This was a system of subsistence agriculture with overlapping individual and collective elements. Tenants of various kinds possessed strips of land they held individually, but fields were worked both individually and collectively. There were also additional village lands subject to collective use, encompassing a wide range of customary rights, many of which were available to landless commoners as well: pasturing domestic animals, gathering firewood, cutting peat and so on (60).

However, this feudal division—between landowner and tenant—was supplanted with the advent of an entirely new economic paradigm:

Markets for agricultural products grew over time, and with accelerating rates of urbanization their process rose accordingly—first for wool and soon for grain. In order to produce for sale, lords began to expel their tenants and to enclose the commons. Enclosure was accomplished through legal measures as well as extra-legal violence, transforming lands encumbered with customary rights and overlapping tenures into exclusive forms of modern property that could be bought and sold at will by a single owner.

Dispossessed of any land and subsequently denied the (relative) stability of subsistence farming, former tenants moved to rapidly industrializing urban centers, where they were forced to sell their only remaining possession: labor-power. The result of this historical transition, in other words, was mass proletarianization.

## XII

I want to propose that the movement from physical bib records to digital bib records, from card catalogs to ALSs and then ILSs, followed a similar trajectory: Just as landowners found it necessary to deprive their tenants of land in order to usher in the age of industrialized agriculture, library vendors found it necessary to deprive catalogers of the authority they had previously exerted over bib records in order to usher in the age of industrialized information dissemination. The method through which this was achieved, especially in the case of cataloging, was technologically-mediated; it was ALSs and ILSs, both unquestionably more efficient than card catalogs, that laid the material foundation. The tools of cataloging, which up until recently had been under the sole tutelage of catalogers themselves, were sold back to them as commodities embedded within a larger framework of capitalist relations.<sup>15</sup> This fits the definition of proletarianization, *tout court*.

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<sup>15</sup> For newly urbanized farmers, this is essentially what happened vis-à-vis their access to food. Having previously been able to grow what they needed for sustenance, they now had to purchase items at a grocer. For a worthwhile and engaging discussion of the “commodification” of the agricultural industry in the American context, see Berry (2004).

### XIII

The theoretical framework that facilitated this transition—what has been called in various places technological progressivism or efficiency discourse—was fed to administrators and sympathetic librarians. They went on to reproduce it in their scholarship, transforming what was once a single narrative among many *into an all-encompassing ideology*. This is to say, innovation itself became (and remains) the lingua franca of librarianship. Any person that questions this progressive tilt within the profession risks outing themselves as a neo-Luddite or, perhaps more insidiously, an enemy of the profession itself. And unlike the farmers of the pre-capitalist order, we have mostly accepted this state of affairs with little complaint and without the vendors (ha!) having to resort to extra-legal violence.

### XIV

In his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin (1969) writes that

for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual...the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics (6).

Mechanical reproduction leads to the emergence of a system based on the “universal equality of things,” where objects are manufactured in bulk and subsequently devoid of individuality. Or, to put it in Benjaminian terms, devoid of aura. One might be reminded of bib records, whose history, as we have highlighted again and again throughout this article, began with a unique physical object: a piece of cardboard on which apposite words were printed (either in library hand or typeface), carrying mysterious stains, some minor corrections, the occasional spelling mistake. But post-mechanization, what was once inimitable took on the cold uniformity of the .mrc file. In the case of artistic production, Benjamin sees this evolution as innately radical<sup>16</sup> in that it frees the art object from its role in cementing existing social orders, allowing for it to become, in short, a potential source of critique. What he leaves mostly unexamined, however, is how this movement drastically alters the status of the person who *produces* the art object. What happens to the artist in the age of mechanical production?

While I make no claims about what happened to the artist, what happened to the cataloger in the age of digital production has been the animating question of this article. I have found, ultimately, that the universal equality of the bib record reigns supreme over the profession, and that this has brought about drastic changes in the nature of our work; it has severed us from tradition and the protections that tradition usually affords—job security being only one example. Like the bib records whose circulation we oversee (but no longer control), the profession has lost its aura. One could even plausibly maintain that this loss of aura presages an entirely new historical epoch within cataloging, one defined by *the universal equality of catalogers*. This is a polite way of

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<sup>16</sup> The scholarship on Benjamin reminds divided on this point. Is “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” meant to be read as triumphalist and technophilic, akin to the professional literature we’ve been actively critiquing throughout this article? Or, rather, does it contain the seeds of an argument against technological progress? See Mueller (2021) and Rose (2024) for more thorough treatments of these questions.

saying that digitized cataloging has deskilled our labor entirely, which, when paired with the hostile environment in which higher education finds itself (Bender, Blinder, and Swan 2025), is a recipe for extinction.

## XV

Have we fallen into the Luddite trap? Like Benjamin, I am interested in technology's radical potential. However, and as I have argued throughout this article, what is often sold as "radical" and good for consumers is often, upon closer examination, bad for workers. This alone does not warrant a total rejection of progress, but in an age of ramped up AI usage—both inside and outside academia—it is high time librarians start critically examining the collective principles we have come to accept as beyond critique.

I end with a brief sketch on how we might begin to resist the tides of efficiency. What is obvious is that some degree of reskilling is in order, whether in terms of a renewed commitment to open-source software or, more controversially, the resuscitation of practices less prone to automation and monetization. More importantly, I call for the creation of new professional ethos, one that is derived from what I call *soft-Luddism*, a willingness to let cataloging, if need be, slide into *radical irrelevance*. Oftentimes, we have been overeager in styling ourselves as experts, in asserting an imagined dominance over emerging technologies. What if we resisted this impulse? A sincere attempt at doing so would require us to brush away the stale ideologies of progress and efficiency, revealing, in due turn, that the hitherto history of cataloging has been a history of struggle.

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