This session, the brainchild of Chair Rebecca Dean (OCLC), explored the ways in which authority control has become a pie with many fingers in it. While some constituencies find themselves in up to their wrist, others seem to wish to keep hands off. Each speaker was presented with the question "Who 'owns' authority control?"

The first speaker was Martha Conway, the Catalog Management Librarian at Yale University. She identified her viewpoint as one coming from a large academic library, using a NOTIS system, that is in the midst of retrospective conversion. Conway pointed out one distinction between authority work and authority control - the latter can be automated to some degree, and she spoke to some of the decisions needed in light of that fact, and the context in which the decisions were being made. In dealing with the headings coming into the catalog from recon - a set of headings constructed by national, local, or no standards - accompanying decisions had to be made about what practices to continue, to add (e.g. join NACO), or eliminate (many local headings practices). These decisions are being applied to a catalog containing full catalog records, provisional and order records, and residing in a ILS with "features" and "bugs," and which must serve "catalog users" (i.e. patrons) and "other users of the catalog (e.g. library staff). Conway concluded by giving two definitions of ownership: 1) to have power over; 2) to acknowledge something to be true, valid, or as claimed. In the first sense, she is the principal "owner" at Yale; in the second sense, she identified the entire community as the owners.

Barbara Allen (Director, CIC Center for Library Initiatives; Assistant Director, CIC) broadened the canvas to that of a "distributed environment" - the CIC VEL (Virtual Electronic Library), software that links the OPACs of the members of the CIC (the Big Ten universities plus the University of Chicago) for searching and for patron-initiated ILL. The institutions in the CIC use different OPAC software packages, and a big problem has been disparities in search results across institutions - an authority-control issue that is not driven by the content of the headings themselves, but rather how they are indexed and stored. Allen concluded that this was not necessarily a disaster, as long as patrons knew to expect oddities, and that is was sometimes necessary to settle for "good enough," while continuing to push for standards development.

The "front-room" perspective came from Bonnie MacEwan (Assistant Dean for Collections, Penn State Univ.), who described the landscape from the view of public-service and collection-development librarians. Her title, "Who owns authority control? Not us!", was not to be interpreted as a sign that these constituencies did not care about authority control, but signified her belief that responsibility has become a shared thing (she offered the 856 field and the creation of subject-guide HTML pages as examples). In their role as translators of users' queries into search results in the catalog, public-service librarians do care about authority control; MacEwan acknowledged that those same librarians sometimes ask for special entries or other local practices without understanding the larger impact. For MacEwan, users should be the owners of authority control, since they are the reason for what we do.

Sonya Oliver (Senior Marketing Specialist, Reference and Resource Sharing, OCLC) continued the public-service theme by mentioning the trends in library service - less context for users, no card catalogs, fewer browsable shelves and more remote access - that make authority control more important than ever. Authority control's salient features (consistent indexing, controlled vocabulary) are the keys to more powerful searches for novices and pros, for increased relevancy in retrieval sets, and for successful cross-database and cross-system searches. Oliver made specific reference to OCLC FirstSearch and how OCLC lobbies for database producers to make their products more "authority-friendly."

MLA's own Linda Barnhart (Head, Catalog Dept., Univ. of California-San Diego) carried the topic outside the library walls. The concepts behind authority control are of interest in many quarters, whatever the specific terminology used. She cited some "extra-library" projects - the vCard, an
electronic business card that is a "structured means of describing a living person with a controlled form of name" (www.imc.org/pdi/); the development of "pocket vocabularies" that pertain to special interest groups (Autospec) (www.cruzio.com/~autospec); the Conceptual Indexing Project, meant to match users' vocabularies to concepts in Web documents www.sunlabs.com/research/knowledge/index.html; Gerry McKiernan's work with Cyberstacks http://www.iastate.edu/~CYBERSTACKS/; metadata projects, such as the OCLC CORC project, that utilize the Resource Description Framework (www.w3.org/RDF); and a study that identified "magic" as one of the top five things that people want from information retrieval (in this context, authority control is the agent that produces the "magic" of a successful retrieval even if the user's terms don't match up with those in the documents). In the library world, the two most significant trends now are the internationalization of authority control and the consideration of "access control records" as a means to facilitate authority control for names and titles of works (www.ala.org/alcts/alcts_news/v10n1/gateway.html).

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