



New approaches to archival description

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Standards for archival description

“The need for descriptive standards
is no longer a subject for debate”

US/Canadian CUSTARD Project,
Statement of Principles 2002

Descriptive standards

“Agreed-upon standards are highly beneficial in all areas of civilized life”

Developments in Museum and Cultural Heritage Standards, 1995

Descriptive standards

- *ISAD(G)*: General International Standard Archival Description
- *MAD*: Manual of Archival Description
- *RAD*: Rules for Archival Description
- *APPM*: Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts
- *DACS*: Describing Archives: a Content Standard

Some more standards ...

- Describing Archives in Context: a Guide to Australasian Practice
- *ISAAR(CPF)*: International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families
- *ISDF*: International Standard for Describing Functions
- *EAD*: Encoded Archival Description
- *EAC*: Encoded Archival Context

And some more ...

- Australian Recordkeeping Metadata Schema
- Government of Canada Records Management Metadata Standard
- New South Wales Recordkeeping Metadata Standard
- Recordkeeping Metadata Standard for Commonwealth Agencies
- South Australian Recordkeeping Metadata Standard
- TNA/PRO Requirements for Electronic Records Management Systems: Metadata Standard
- VERS Metadata Scheme

Descriptive standards

“The good thing about standards
is that there are so many
to choose from”

Descriptive standards

- Wide acceptance (*ISAD(G)* 92%)
- Consistency in descriptive practice
- Finding aids easier to construct, use and understand
- Basis for computerisation and systems development
- Data exchange and collaborative online networks
- Quality assurance benchmarks and (perhaps) a common professional language
- An indicator of professionalism

Definitive description

“If our descriptive systems are based on archival principles ... we will be representing accurately for users the very materials we seek to make available”

Haworth, in *The Archival Imagination*, 1992

Application of *RAD* “will ensure the accurate representation of a fonds”

Duff and Haworth, *Archivaria* 1991

Can description be definitive?

Questions about:

- cultural assumptions ?
- categorising information ?
- privileging the perceptions of the describer ?
- imposing a semblance of uniformity ?

Standardised description in
a non-standardised world?

Can description be definitive?

“Archival descriptions reflect the values of the archivists who create them”

Duff and Harris, *Archival Science* 2002

Can description be definitive?

- Description is necessarily selective
- Archivists have the power to decide what to include and what to exclude, what to emphasise and what to ignore
- Such decisions inevitably privilege some aspects of archival materials above others

How far does description privilege ...

- ... the value systems of records creators, of those in positions of power and authority – governments, corporate businesses, organisations, families and individuals with influence in the world?
- ... the value systems of archivists, who may have very little influence in the world but whose perspectives may not be representative of all segments of society?

We are “among the characters in the story”
told by our descriptions

MacNeil, *American Archivist* 2005

So what should we do?

- Acknowledge our role?
- Open up archival description and seek to increase its “hospitality”?
- Allow space for other voices to be heard?
 - voices of people mentioned in or connected with the records
 - people interested in the activities the records represent
 - people who have used the records over time

User participation

- Revisiting collections (MLA London)
- Social software; “Web 2.0”

Online user participation

- TNA
- British Postal Museum and Archive
- Tyne and Wear Archive Service
- Archives Départementales des Yvelines
- Haags Gemeentearchief
- Library and Archives Canada
- “Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections” project

http://www.postalheritage.org.uk/wiki/

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Wiki ideas

We'd like to suggest you start off with one of our nine themes. Click on one of the images to get started:

Philatelic Glossary

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PROJECT

NAMING

SEARCH THE DATABASE • THE NAMING CONTINUES

introduction
voices from Nunavut
the Inuktitut language
photo collections
educational resources
further research
comments
acknowledgements

naming
THE NAMING CONTINUES

Project Naming Photograph Information Form

Photograph Reference Number:
(the reference number is found at the bottom of the caption below the photograph and also in the source link, which provides a descriptive record of the image; here are examples of reference numbers: PA-123456, C-012345 or e002213323)

Can you name the person(s) in the photograph?

If the photograph contains more than one person, please name the person(s) that you can, and indicate where each one is positioned in the image (left, right, or centre, top or bottom row, etc.). For example, Mary Ekalukpiak (bottom, left) and Edith Eglialak (top, right).

Opening the descriptive process to user participation

- moves beyond assumptions that archivists are the sole or best mediators
- encourages additional perspectives and differing opinions
- gives a voice to minority groups and marginalised communities
- recognises that descriptions are “always beta”

Next challenge: the digital era

How do we describe digitised images
and born-digital records?

Contents of a digital folder?

John's memo.doc

draft.doc

my ideas.doc

draft 2.doc

today's meeting.doc

do not delete this one.doc

rglblb.doc

Contents of a digital folder?

North Carolina Promise is supporting the goals of the Unified State Plan through its expansion into new communities across the state to become Communities of Promise and through its commitment to increase the focus on the five goals of America.doc

With acknowledgements to Cal Lee

Contents of a digital folder?

this is the one you are looking for.whx

Digital records

- often need more detailed description than records in traditional media
- often require description at item level

Item-level description

- “The creation of ... item-level metadata is likely to prove prohibitively expensive”

Gilliland-Swetland, *Journal of Internet Cataloging* 2001

- “Repositories no longer have the resources to do item-level description”

Kiesling, ICA Conference 2004

Where will archival metadata come from?

- Supplied by record creators?
- Generated automatically?

Two elusive messages

From: VH

To: PUB

Message: “?”

From: PUB

To: VH

Message: “!”

Where will archival metadata come from?

- “Archival systems that use the eyes and the intellect of thousands of volunteers ... throughout the world”?

Evans, *American Archivist* 2007

Is this a viable way forward? Some key questions ...

- Identifying and reaching potential contributors
- Relating user contributions to institutionally-authored descriptions and descriptive standards
- Ownership, reliability and traceability
- The role of professionalism in archive work

Thank you!

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