New approaches to archival description

Geoffrey Yeo
School of Library, Archive and Information Studies
University College London

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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

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
This part of The British Postal Museum & Archive website is a wiki. Wikis are interactive websites; that means YOU can add pages, change text or add images, as you want. See what other people have been "Wiki-ing" about using the Recently Edited Pages link on the right.

By working together, we can make these pages a really valuable resource relating to the history of the post. It's a collective effort, and we need your help to make it work! If you're interested in becoming part of our community of Wiki users, keeping up to date with new pages on the Wiki, and discussing the topics on here, why not join our BPMA Wiki group email.

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:
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 Egialak (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
rgglblb.doc
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.
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”?

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!

Geoffrey Yeo

g.yeo@ucl.ac.uk