Communications

Archival Information Exchange in the U.S.

We would like to report to Canadian archivists on the state of planning for national information systems in the United States since the completion of a study of archival description practices conducted by Elaine Engst for the National Information Systems Task Force (NISTF) of the Society of American Archivists in 1980.[1] No better rationale for the current activity of the NISTF exists than Engst's findings that archives and manuscript repositories' in-house information systems and inter-institutional data exchanges all employ similar descriptive elements for reporting records holdings but that these elements are neither defined in a standard terminology nor employed in an interchangeable fashion.

NISTF was created by SAA Council in 1977 in response to concern that the profession had been insufficiently involved in the planning of the National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections and National Historical Publications and Records Commission data base and that such developments were having an increasing effect on archival practice. Council asked the NISTF to consider how the profession could evaluate and influence automated national information systems. Since its first report to Council in March 1978, NISTF has stressed that national information systems must be coherent and rational, that is, planned. It has also emphasized that information systems need not be automated, indeed that the image of a gigantic national computerized information resource has at times been a barrier to systematic consideration of the role of the profession in the evolution of national information systems.

Engst's study was a product of the NISTF's research program on existing information systems. It convinced us that existing systems could be woven together in information networks without imposing rigid, externally dictated systems on individual repositories if only common definitions could be accepted in building in-house systems. National, regional and local information exchange networks could *evolve,* they need not be created out of whole cloth.

The NISTF has undertaken three tasks. The first task is to organize a process which will enable the profession to move from similar descriptive practices to a standard language without requiring every institution to adopt uniform methods of operation unsuited to their needs. This process involves developing common definitions of descriptive elements and submitting them to the SAA for adoption as professional standards. The second task is to design a format which will facilitate the exchange of machine readable data concerning archival and manuscript holdings. The third task is to study what role, if any, the Society ought to play to encourage the evolution of archival information networks.

For networks and information systems to come about, a degree of standardization in descriptive practices will be necessary. This standardization could either be achieved by each system imposing requirements on participants, thus leading to separate standards for

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1 Engst, Elaine: "Standard Elements for the Description of Archives and Manuscript Collections: A Report to the SAA Task Force of National Information Systems," September 1980, unpublished, available from the NISTF.

NUCMC, NHPRC, and other related library oriented systems, or by the involvement of the profession. NISTF recommended and SAA Council approved the principle that SAA should establish a standard and NISTF expressed this position in a paper adopted by Council in January and published in the May 1981 *SAA Newsletter.*

Once we decided that the profession could not afford to abdicate to libraries or bibliographic utilities the determination of standards for describing archives and manuscript collections, we needed to seize the initiative and establish both a mechanism for defining standards and maintaining the profession's control over future changes. We invited representatives of the Library of Congress, which was considering a revision of its long-neglected MARC format for manuscripts, the Research Libraries Group, which was undertaking the design of a standard format for archives and manuscript records, the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) and the NHPRC data base participants to join in a NISTF-sponsored working group. These organizations accepted our invitation and the working group is currently drafting a standard format for SAA's consideration.

The working group's first task is to compile a dictionary of the data elements used in archival and manuscript repositories for the control of records holdings. Like any dictionary, the purpose of the data element dictionary will be to facilitate communication while recognizing the diversities of archival descriptive practices. The dictionary does not impose a standard pattern on in-house descriptive practices but rather ensures that when common descriptive elements are used they will be standardized and exchangeable.

The second task of the working group was to design a format for the data elements in the dictionary. This format is an empty container, with space provided for data about archival and manuscript holdings of any repository employing any combination of data elements provided in the dictionary. The container is almost infinitely flexible and is therefore extremely difficult to imagine. Like a balloon it can expand to hold any quantity of information. Like a battery of cubby-holes, the location of any one type of data is fixed in respect to all other data. The secret to achieving both this degree of flexibility and of specificity is that every data element is identified and a table of contents accompanies each container.

Let us emphasize the rather modest objectives represented by the dictionary of data elements/format project. At this point, we aim to *make it possible* for any holder of data about archives to exchange that data with other holders of data about archives. The standard will include any reasonable descriptive element used by any repository; conversely, the standard will not *require or prohibit* use of any descriptive element. The standard will establish a consensus about the universe of descriptive elements and how to record them, and thereby make possible one or more exchanges between institutions based on a single translation to the standard format. Please note that at this point we have not even established the criteria for a national information system.

What impact will standard data element definitions and a common format have upon the administration of archival and manuscript repositories? The most important immediate effect will be a much enlarged possibility of data exchange among and between library based systems and the NHPRC data base projects. Probably the existence of a standard will have little impact on the internal information systems of a repository. On the other hand, the standard provides the basis for further rationalization of archival descriptive practice and could make possible a range of data exchange which would be impossible in the absence of such standards. Standards themselves cannot lead to an increase in the exchange of data between institutions, but they can remove some barriers to information exchange within networks of archival agencies and might encourage experimentation in the use of shared data bases for appraisal and reference activities.

What kind of future is there for multi-institutional archival information exchanges? Frankly, we do not really know. NISTF has completed a study of possible scenarios for the

emergence of information exchange networks and meetings like the National Conference on Regional Archival Networks held in Wisconsin in July 1981 suggest that archival networks are here to stay.

One conclusion which can be drawn from both the NISTF study and exploratory meeting on archival networks is that there are many more potential uses for archival information exchange than the user-oriented bibliographic systems which most of us assume to be the major reason for data exchange. Some examples are:

- Exchanges of information about public records at all levels of government within a single state;
- Exchanges of information about records disposition between state archives and NARS;
- Exchanges of information concerning unoccupied temperature/humidity controlled shelf space between archives within a city, or of emergency deep-freeze capacity between rare book and manuscript repositories in a region.

All these are potentially valuable, and none are user-oriented bibliographic information systems. For years we limited ourselves to thinking about users and how they could possibly support an elaborate and expensive information exchange system. Should we not begin to ask ourselves how our institutions can afford to be without local, regional and even national exchanges of information which will assist us do our jobs?

NISTF has two assignments for individual members of the profession. First, NISTF will be receiving a draft of data definitions and a standard format from its working group. We want to involve as many archivists as possible in reviewing the document to make certain that the data elements which are proposed meet their information needs. We will be distributing draft documents to everyone who requests them in the hope that the response will help NISTF design the best possible format. Second, NISTF needs assistance in thinking through the potential values of inter-institutional data exchange. When librarians first began planning the MARC cataloguing system, they did not consider the usefulness of that format for shared cataloguing. Inter-library lending systems based on this data have emerged only in the last few years. No one imagined the numerous commercial products which have since resulted, nor the strong networks which have emerged with information exchange functions at their core. We believe that archivists are similarly limited today in their visions for the uses of information exchange. NISTF is systematically examining all the models for information exchange which it can imagine in order to explore possible benefits to the profession and to repositories. A draft of scenarios for realizing the most promising of these models is being circulated. We encourage archivists interested in our work to write David Bearman, Project Director, SAA Task Force on National Information Systems, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Arts & Industries Bldg. 2135, Washington, DC 20560.

David Bearman
and
Richard H. Lytle

Inuit in Church—Once More

My article entitled "'Inuit in Church': Clearing Photographic Misattribution,' *Archivaria*, 12 (Summer 1981): 59-62 attempted to clarify some of the facts pertaining to a photograph wrongly attributed to Robert Flaherty. It was suggested that the photograph in question was probably made by another photographer, A.A. Chesterfield, and its relation to other similar photographs was discussed. One of the unsolved puzzles remaining was why the lantern slide housed in the photographic archives of the Robert and Frances Flaherty Study Center at the School of Theology in Claremont, California represented a cropped version of the original