The Development of Common Descriptive Standards: Lessons from the Archival Community

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Archives now join library bibliographic networks—while libraries explore "nonbiblio-graphic" databases. When the culture wants integrated cultural information systems, neither archives nor museums (nor libraries) can afford to be information isolationists.

In this environment, it is critical that each curatorial discipline maintain compatibil-ity, or at least predictable relationships, between internal information standards that apply within the community and the external or common standards that will make cross-disciplinary data communication possible. More simply, we must have consistent ways of describing cultural artifacts in order to be able to move that information, especially among computer and telecommunications systems, to whoever needs it.

During the last decade the archival community has struggled with the meaning—not to mention the development and application—of standards for the structure and content of archival description.[1] The experience of archivists in developing standards for descrip-tion of one class of cultural artifact may be helpful to the museum community, where such activity is just beginning.[2]

The development of an information communications format, especially a MARC for-mat, was not exactly what the Society of American Archivists (SAA) had in mind when it appointed the National Information Systems Task Force (NISTF) in 1977. The soci-ety was worried about whose national archival information system was going to be the national archival information system. Should it be the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)? This was (and is) a published guide to manuscript collections held in repositories across the country. Participation was voluntary. Reposi-tories described their collections on NUCMC entry forms and sent them to NUCMC, headquartered at the Library of Congress, where the staff revised them to conform to their own standards for description, indexed them, and published them in biennial issues. But NUCMC policy excluded government archives.

So, should the NHPRC database, instead, become the core of a national archival infor-mation system? The National Historical Publications and Records Commission had an

interesting idea. It was compiling a directory of archives and manuscripts repositories using software called SPINDEX, and it was promoting (and supporting through grant funds) the use of SPINDEX by individual repositories, and by a group of repositories in the Midwest Archives Guide Project. NHPRC envisioned a database of repository data at one level (its directory), a collection data at the next level, and within individual repositories, data on subunits of collections, even items—all using the same software. (It was a dinosaur even then and has since become extinct.) The question of "whose national information system" reflected a long-standing division in the profession between the "manuscript curators" and the "archivists," each claiming some measure of non-transferable theory and practice. But NISTF soon came back to SAA with some bad news: you've given us the wrong mandate. Any kind of national archival information system has to be acceptable to all, and there are some basic questions we haven't even answered. Why should archives and manuscripts repositories want to exchange information? What are the benefits? What kind of information do they want to exchange? How? In what form? How can the task force facilitate such exchange?

The task force took some time to find the answer to the last question—by finessing the others! It redefined its mission: to facilitate exchange by establishing standards of practice, not be designing and building information systems, although I am sure that is what many archivists expected it to do, and were disappointed when it failed to do it. What it did do, then, was first to compile a data element dictionary, based on an exhaustive census of data elements used in any type of archival description. These data elements would become the fields or subfields in a common communications format that could exchange anything that archivists had to exchange, for any reason they needed to exchange it, in any system they built to do it.

And, rather than devise an independent archival interchange format, NISTF chose to work within existing standards. It negotiated with the Library of Congress (LC) and the MARBI (Machine-Readable Bibliographic Information) advisory committee, ostensibly, to adapt the USMARC format for archival needs, but actually (if we believe David Bearman) to revolutionize it.[3] The USMARC AMC (Archival and Manuscripts Control) format was approved by both SAA and the Library of Congress in 1983 and published by LC in 1984. The SAA has a unique co-ownership agreement with LC regarding the AMC format, and has a position as liaison (nonvoting member) on MARBI.

Meanwhile, librarians were putting the final touches on the second (and much revised) edition of their cataloguing manual, Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2nd edition (AACR2). Since AACR2 was to serve general library collections, it contained rules for cataloguing the various kinds of things libraries hold, including manuscripts. But, since archivists and librarians didn't talk much in those days, at least not about cataloguing, the manuscripts chapter of AACR 2 was written without significant input from archivists and manuscripts curators. Manuscripts cataloguers at the Library of Congress, who would have been bound to use the new rules, were dumbfounded. Few other archivists even knew about AACR2, or cared much if they did. If librarians chose to be ignorant and bibliocentric, that was their problem. But LC manuscripts cataloguers cared, and so, too, did LC's cataloguers of graphic materials and motion pictures, and enough other colleagues so that a group constituted as the Joint Committee on Specialized Cataloguing was able to get a grant to prepare AACR2-compatible cataloguing manuals in these three areas: archives and manuscripts, graphic materials and moving images.

Initial drafts were prepared by LC staff, circulated within LC and then among con-
cerned professionals. I was then one of a group of archivists at the Minnesota Historical
Society who believed in the power of the pre-emptive strike. If there was going to be
a manual for archival description, then we were going to make sure it was a product
of right-thinking (ours). We did not want a manual imposed on us, but could live with
one we had helped to shape. *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Catalog-
ing Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries*
was published by the Library of Congress in 1983. It is a *de facto* standard. The new
manual was approved by the Library of Congress and by the editorial committee that
worked on it, but by no more authoritative standards-making body. There was none.
And there were no real provisions for continuous revision and interpretation, as there
have been for *AACR2*, and as active, viable standards require.

From 1977 to 1983, standards for archival description developed along two separate
lines, with rules for the content of description on one hand, and a format for the struc-
ture of description on the other. The content line was represented by *Archives, Personal
Papers, and Manuscripts*. The structure line was represented by the USMARC AMC
(Archival and Manuscripts Control) format. Both were adaptations or reinterpretations
of existing standards developed in the library community. Each embodied the response
"Archives are not books!" But neither would exist without the acknowledgement of
commonalities in the description of a range of materials (cultural artifacts, if you wish).
Serial publications are not books, musical scores are not books, maps are not books,
computer files are not books—but information about them can be recorded and struc-
tured in similar ways, and so can information about archives. Archivists, too, could have
"bibliographic" records. Now, at the end of the 1980s, these lines of development (con-
tent and structure) have more or less converged. The Society of American Archivists
will soon publish a second edition of *APPM*, made possible in part by a grant to SAA
from the National Endowment for the Humanities. It was prepared with one eye on the
USMARC format that will often be used to carry the descriptive elements covered in
the rules. At the same time, I think more archivists are beginning to take more seriously
SAA's liaison relationship with MARBI.

But of course, just as these lines of development are converging, and just as the body
of the archival profession is beginning to catch up with the "early adapters," the inno-
vators have left them behind again. Actually, the innovators left them behind at least
five years ago, but they've been too busy getting their descriptions into the nearest avail-
able computer. And that was only natural. Had it not been for the early development
of RLIN's implementation of the USMARC AMC format—and for NHPRC funds to
support conversion of the old SPINDEX databases and entry of new records—the AMC
format might have languished. (RLIN is the bibliographic utility started by the Research
Libraries Group; its union database contains data on the holdings of many of the nation's
large research libraries, and now also the holdings of a number of archives and manuscripts
repositories—over 200,000 individual collections or archival "series.") But I think there
has been an unfortunate consequence of what at first looked like the happy coincidence
that gave us *APPM* along with the USMARC format and its implementation in RLIN.
It has created the impression among many that this Trinity is inseparable—three in one
and one in three—and is all there is to archival information exchange. This, in turn,
has led to misplaced praise and blame for the good or bad features of each. Very often,
in fact, the format takes the heat. The format, is not "user-friendly," some say, when

it is the system implementation that users see. We hear that "MARC records" can't accommodate some kind of description or don't serve users, when the real culprit is collection-level catalogue records suitable for integration with records for other types of materials in a national union catalogue maintained by a bibliographic utility. (We need to get rid of the term "MARC record"—-it shouldn't convey any particular image if the definition and intent of USMARC is correct.) And we now have a couple of microcomputer implementations of the USMARC AMC format, each partially modeled on RLIN, each designed to overcome one or more of RLIN's search or display or data entry deficiencies—but of course without the underlying union database that represents RLIN's real contribution to archival information exchange. Now that there is a critical mass of archivists who know USMARC and *APPM*, and have survived the initial stress of retrospective conversion and data entry, it is time to look harder at what our friends in NISTF left unfinished when the task force disbanded five years ago. (Within SAA, the responsibility for continued work on archival information exchange rests with the Committee on Archival Information Exchange, CAIE.) And I think we can also explore some museum and archival parallels.

As David Bearman has pointed out time after time, archives and museums share many common functions as curators of cultural artifacts and managers of cultural information. We also share common concerns as relative novices in the areas of automation and standards development. But we have approached these problems at different times, in different ways. And since archivists now have considerable experience working with librarians, who have been dealing with such issues much longer, we can perhaps share what we have learned in the process. (At some point you might be interested in reading about what librarians have learned from archivists; I refer you again to David Bearman's article, "Archives and Manuscript Control in Bibliographic Utilities: Challenges and Opportunities," which appeared in the Winter 1989 issue of *American Archivist*.

Here are a few of my own observations about the archives experience with standards for description.

1. Living comfortably with standards requires that users continue to evaluate their utility, which means simultaneous re-evaluation of practice.

As we return to consideration of NISTF's unanswered questions, we begin to realize again that the "why" and the "what" of information exchange are organically linked. Confident that MARC's empty containers for data will be there when we need them, we can again concentrate on the content of archival description—that is, what it is we really do when wo do archival description. Reexamination of that descriptive practice is likely to result in the evolution of new conventions (standards). The real substance of archival description is the information about people, organizations, places, events— and archival management actions—that have shaped the historical record. You in the museum field can perhaps recognize here a close parallel with your concept of "associations." This isn't bibliographic data; people are not books (or archives)! Information about the nature of relationships between people and the artifacts or archives they create or use is likewise not "bibliographic" data. Existing standards for the content and structure of bibliographic data don't apply. There is an "authority format" in the USMARC family, and it is used for information about personal names and corporate names, but neither the structure of the format nor the conventions for content are adequate for the kind of bibliographical or historical information about people and organizations that we

(archives and museums) need. Not all librarians know it yet, but it isn't sufficient for them either. We may need standards for structure and content of information about each of the "entities" that David Bearman has talked about in his description of AMIS. Right now we have rules and structures for only some of them (i.e., the "archival collection" entity).

2. Living with standards requires the investment of time and money.

MARBI meetings are held across four days of each American Library Association (ALA) meeting, and require many hours of preliminary preparation. SAA has a liaison, but to be most effective, she or he must have the support of dozens of others willing to look out for the interests of archivists in many different institutional environments. And SAA is going to have to introduce some formal procedure to provide for continuing revision and interpretation of *APPM*. So, for all that, it had better be worthwhile.

3. A communication standard exists to serve the needs of information exchange, not vice versa.

Librarians experienced in the standards development process will assert that archivists worked backwards when they developed the USMARC AMC format. Without agreement on standards for the content of descriptive data (what they wanted to exchange), they proceeded to agree on a structure for exchanging it—empty containers for chaos, perhaps. But in fact it was not so capriciously designed. It was based on a thorough census of all the kinds of data archivists recorded in anything they called "description." The results of that census became the "data elements dictionary" that was then mapped into or around fields in the existing USMARC format.

4. Likewise, information systems exist to serve the functional needs of their users, not merely to hold data.

In the area of automated systems development, we have been so preoccupied with the format for information exchange that we have forgotten to let systems designers know that we need systems to help us do our work, not just empty containers for data. So what we have, in Kathleen Roe's term, is "fast paper."[4] Even though "fast paper" is a whole lot better than "slow paper," I would agree with Bearman that "until archivists encourage software designers to focus more attention on archival procedures and lavish less on data entry, we will continue to automate in order to exchange MARC data, rather than exchanging MARC data in order to improve archival practice and research access."[5]

5. Awareness of information standards in general is a "good thing." Adopting or adapting existing standards for our own purposes saves us time and money.

In the 1990s, we will continue to develop standards for description, but within a broader universe, as bibliographic data and nonbibliographic data are linked in cultural information systems.

Notes

1   Archival description is the process of gathering and recording information about historical documentary materials (archives) in the context of their creation and subsequent management. It is similar in some ways to the process of museum documentation, with similar components of management, descriptive, and historical data.

2   In preparing for this presentation, I drew heavily on two sources. First, an article by Steven Hensen, "Squaring the Circle: The Reformation of Archival Description in AACR2," which appeared in the winter 1988 issue of *Library Trends*. Second, "Towards National Information Systems for Archives and Manuscript Repositories: The NISTF Papers, 1981-1984," a collection of four papers prepared by David Bearman, with a 1987 introduction.

3   David Bearman, "Archives and Manuscript Control with Bibliographic Utilities: Opportunities and Challenges," *American Archivist* 52 (Winter, 1989), pp. 26-39.

4   I don't know if she invented it, but I heard the term first from Kathleen Roe of the New York State Archives.

5   David Bearman, "Archival Applications and Software," *Archives and Museums Informatics* 3 (Summer, 1989), p. 1.