

RAD and the Researcher

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In 1987 *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)* was at the theoretical stage, just being contemplated by the newly-created Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards. Four years ago it started to become a reality as the first chapters were completed and distributed for comment. Archivists tentatively began to use it, trying to understand how the rules related to archival principles and practices, and speculating on how it would serve both us, the archivists who would write the descriptions, and equally importantly the public who use our archival holdings.

In practice, *RAD*, although not yet complete, has already become our standard. At Glenbow we adopted *RAD* at the exact time we installed a computer, so it has been inextricably linked with automation in my institution. Our public access computer, using Inmagic software and complete with 2300 fonds level descriptions, has been up and running since January 1993. We have had several months to observe how the public reacts to and uses these *RAD* descriptions. We have crossed the line from theory to practice, and the question now is whether or not *RAD* is successful. The ICA Commission on Descriptive Standards in its "Statement of Principles" states that "the purpose of archival description is to identify and explain the context and content of archival material in order to promote its accessibility."¹ Does *RAD* improve access to archival holdings? Does it enable researchers to identify effectively and efficiently the records they would like to see?

Much discussion has taken place about access in archives, or more to the point, the apparent lack of access. We, as archivists, have inevitably been compared with librarians who, as a profession, have turned access into a fine art. A lively debate has ensued between the library and archival communities related to this topic, the former impatient with our backwardness, the latter trying to defend themselves by pointing out the difficulty of describing complex archival holdings as compared with straight-forward published materials.

One of the most recent contributions to this debate is an award-winning student essay published by the *Canadian Library Journal* last October.² In the article, the author identified several problems with the way archivists provide access to their

holdings. She stated that visitors to archives rarely ask for records by specific provenance, instead requesting records by subject. She concluded from this that researchers do not care about provenance and that archivists should pay more attention to subject access. The author blames much of the apparent inability to provide adequate subject access on our adherence to the principle of provenance. She questions whether those researchers who do ask for records by provenance have “simply been trained to do so from years of experience wrestling with inadequate archival descriptive systems?” She states that “archivists should seriously rethink their crippling dependence on provenance.” This attack on provenance is disturbing to hear in light of the fact that the International Council on Archives has reaffirmed the principles of provenance and *respect des fonds* as the basis for descriptive standards, and that *Rules for Archival Description* define the descriptive unit itself according to provenance.³ Closer to home, it is particularly disturbing to me since I now have 2300 provenance-based descriptions in my database. Thus, I feel compelled to refute this argument.

To suggest that requesting information by subject or provenance are two mutually exclusive methods, and that the former is done naturally while the latter is done under duress, is simplistic and misleading, as well as an insult to our users. In the first place, subjects and provenance are frequently one and the same. Proper names of people and organizations are as valid subjects as are strictly topical subject headings.⁴

Secondly, it is simply not true that researchers are indifferent to provenance. They often do not know the specific names of the creators they are seeking. This is largely a result of recent research trends which have emphasized study of the masses and social history rather than the history of named, prominent individuals and elites. Nevertheless, users do know attributes of the creators they are looking for and phrase their requests in these terms. A researcher might say “I am researching women suffrage in Alberta. Do you have any records of women or women’s groups active in the fight?” Or “I am studying irrigation in southern Alberta. Do you have any records of Mormon farmers near Raymond at the turn of the century?” They are looking not just for a specific subject but for specific kinds of records creators as well. And they are doing so because it is a natural and logical way to do research.

Historians care a great deal about provenance because it is an essential part of their craft, and not because archivists force them to use it as a point of access. Modern, critical, documentary history—a development of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—transformed history from being a branch of the literary field into a highly respected academic discipline. In Canada the movement grew hand in hand with the development of Canada’s archives, and out of the dynamic and creative relationships of people like historian Adam Shortt and Arthur Doughty, Dominion Archivist from 1904 to 1935.⁵ Historians judge the sources they use in their work. They must determine if their sources are first hand, reliable, and unbiased. They need to know from which point of view the records were created. They must choose the most accurate and appropriate records to argue their cases. Their writings and conclusions are judged on the quality of their sources, and thus knowledge of the creator and circumstances of creation is vital—in other words, provenance is vital.

There is nothing elitist or purely academic about this passion for provenance. A high percentage of non-academic users also share it. Our other major group of users, genealogists, are equally particular about their sources. Unlike many academics, they can usually name the precise records creators and type of records they need, i.e., "I am working on the Romanuk family tree and I need attendance records of Coleman High School and employee records for the Bellevue Mine."

The reaction of our users to *RAD* descriptions reaffirms this desire and need to know and judge their sources. It is extremely informative, and even inspirational, to watch researchers use the *RAD* descriptions in our on-line system. When reading the fonds level descriptions, it is the administrative history/biographical sketch field that they zero in on. They read this field avidly, tell us how wonderful it is, then beg for printouts. They discover creators who they had not even contemplated but who are perfect for their particular research project. They usually skip over the scope and content field and other fields altogether when the activities and relationships of the creator do not interest them. What is more, their most basic decisions about whether or not to use the fonds are based on provenance. The *RAD* fonds level description is fulfilling an obvious need of the user.

The perceived access problem clearly is not, as the previously cited *Canadian Library Journal* article argues, that archivists have blindly adhered to a principle of no interest to users. It is true, as the article asserts, that many archives have neglected in comprehensive subject indexing of their holdings and that this has undoubtedly hindered researchers. Subject indexing itself, however, is not the wonderful panacea to our access problems that librarians would have us believe.

Glenbow has always maintained a card catalogue with extensive subject indexing. Our problem has been that researchers could not find sufficient information about the records creators, at an appropriate point in the research process for them to make informed decisions about which records to use. This was due almost entirely to the lack of descriptive standards, and the confusing variety, inconsistency, and format of available finding aids. All the subject indexing in the world will not improve access if it is not linked to well written, informative descriptions.

Let me give you an example from our pre-*RAD*, pre-automation days. A researcher looks up the subject heading "ranches" in the card catalogue. There are 12 cm of cards with brief descriptions such as:

Edwards and Gardiner families.

Correspondence, diaries, newsclippings, etc., 1795-1988.

4 document boxes.

Yes, it does say that the records were created by the Edwards and Gardiner families. The crucial link from subject to provenance has been made. But who were these people? Were they ranchers? Were they store-keepers who sold supplies to local ranches? Were they good friends of the Prince of Wales and regular visitors to the Prince's southern Alberta ranch? If they ranched, when and where? Are the diaries related to ranch life? You can see the problems encountered by researchers, especially when faced with dozens of cards of similarly terse descriptions under one subject heading. How did one decide which records to use?

The more detailed information needed by the researcher to answer these questions is—at least for some of the fonds—found in the inventory which is a separate finding aid at Glenbow. About one third of the fonds accessed through the card catalogue have inventories that give file level descriptions of the records themselves, as well as detailed administrative histories/biographical sketches and scope and content notes. The irony is that the researcher was expected to decide from the card whether or not to ask for the inventory. It was a classic vicious circle. The information needed to decide if one wanted to see the inventory was in the inventory. Furthermore, two thirds of the fonds were without inventories and the card was the sole source of information readily available to the user before asking for the records themselves.

Users responded to this system of finding aids in two ways. The careful researcher simply looked at every single inventory, just to make sure, or if there was no inventory, looked at all the records. One regular Glenbow researcher estimates that he made one positive hit out of every five tries with this method. He also confided that he would have preferred a higher ratio of hits.⁶

The second response is to make one's decisions based on the meagre information presented on the catalogue card. Such results are rarely rational. One could make decisions based on extent, for example: "I won't bother with this one because there are five metres and I don't have time," or "I'll look at this one because there are five metres, so it must have the most information."

I do not believe that we, as archivists, have intentionally tried to make things difficult for our researchers. On a very practical level the problem has been physical. We tried to emulate libraries, which kept catalogues of tidy 3 x 5 cards in alphabetically-arranged drawers. Unfortunately, we could not fit all the information we wanted to share with our researchers within the confines of a 3 x 5 card. Hence the variety of other finding aids in which to record a wide range of information, some necessary to provide access, some to describe donors, creators, and content.

Automation has provided a solution to the physical constraints of archival description. The description can be as long as necessary, bringing together all the information needed to accurately represent the fonds, and can be easily scrolled through by the researcher. As an added bonus, appropriate software can provide endless access points.

Why even bother with descriptive standards when there are software programs with powerful text searching capabilities? Why not simply scan in all your current finding aids in all their variety? It is a temptation to look to computer magic as a solution to archival access problems. The unfortunate thing is that software, while it can provide limitless access, does nothing to improve the quality of the descriptions it finds. The search results will be only as good as the existing finding aids, and, as pointed out in an excellent article on archival access written over ten years ago, "Inventories, which should be the major intellectual accomplishment of our profession, are too often merely lists of container and file headings."⁷ If, for example, you plan to use key word indexing for name and subject access, the words simply have to be there. There are no useful key words in inventory descriptions such as "Correspondence, A - F", or "Secretary's reports." Another major problem

with file and item level inventories is that they may not make it clear whose records are being described or why they were created. There may be no logical link with the fonds as a whole.

Computers are remarkably indiscriminate as well. In manual subject cataloguing, the cataloguer judges the records to have research value related to the index heading used. The computer is not that clever. It will find you all occurrences of the search term, even if it is used only in passing or completely out of context. This is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength if the description it leads to is a tightly written one whose content allows the researcher to recognize quickly if the records suits his/her needs. It is a hindrance if the description found is too vague or fails to link the record to its creator and to place it in its proper context.

Providing computer access to finding aids not meeting *RAD* standards would be a step backwards in our work to provide better access. If twelve centimetres of insufficiently informative catalogue cards under the heading "ranches" is enough to daunt many eager researchers, think how much more daunting 500 computer hits on variations of the word "ranch" will be, if the descriptions found leave them guessing. This was fully recognized in *Developing Descriptive Standards : A Call to Action*. In the words of an American colleague, "So much time and money has been wasted by archivists on automated systems in the hope that their cataloguing problems will be solved. The history of our experience with them has been a perfect example of the familiar adage: 'garbage in/garbage out'."⁷

Let me illustrate the advantages of a *RAD* description. In the card catalogue there are 139 entries under the subject heading "Social Credit." Three of them read:

Blackmore, John.

Personal and parliamentary papers, 1921-1964.

32 document boxes.

Hugill, John W.

Papers, 1897-1956.

4 document boxes.

Stewart, Fred.

Papers re Social Credit movement, 1930-1968.

6 document boxes.

I challenge anyone to make sensible research decisions based on these descriptions. How is one to tell if it is worth pursuing the matter further? In the on-line system, on the other hand, the very first finding aid the user encounters—the *RAD* descriptions—reveals that John Blackmore was a Social Credit MP who was strongly anti-communist, that John Hugill was a Social Credit MLA who was appointed Attorney General in the first Aberhart Government, but resigned within two years and became an Independent due to differences with the party, and that Fred Stewart was the legislative reporter for the *Calgary Herald* who so angered

Premier Aberhart with his columns that he was often banned from the press gallery. If you were a researcher, which descriptions would you prefer?

Glenbow was very fortunate in implementing *RAD* at the same time as automating. Automation is almost essential to making full use of *RAD*. The obvious physical characteristic of a *RAD* description is its length. A fonds level description is long; if linked to descriptions at the series, file, or item level, it will be longer still. A computer screen allows one to scroll through large quantities of information as painlessly as possible. Appropriate software, such as Inmagic, can provide levels of access not possible in a manual system, such as keyword searching and multiple-criteria searches. *RAD* and automation together make a very powerful team.

One can search for things never contemplated by a manual subject index, or if contemplated, rarely indexed. As an excellent article in a recent issue of *American Archivist* points out,

... other aspects of archival materials that traditionally have not been considered subjects also provide important clues to subject content and form strong links between provenance and subject content without being one or the other. For example, given the evidentiary nature of archives and manuscripts, the time and place in which they were created are often, in a very real way, their subjects. Time and place are particularly potent access points for the papers of little-known or anonymous persons. Form of material also can be a powerful indicator of subject content, particularly when combined with time or place.⁹

At Glenbow we have had great successes using our automated system to search for specific attributes of creators or forms of records, for records created during certain periods of time, in specific geographic areas, or under special circumstances, and for complex combinations of these things. Some examples of searches made possible by *RAD* and automation which would be extremely difficult or impossible to perform with a manual subject-based system include: widow's diaries; membership records of urban women's groups; records of people who settled in certain geographic areas at specific times; and letters written home from World War I trenches. It is the rich content of the *RAD* descriptions that makes these kinds of searches possible.

RAD descriptions themselves are remarkably self-explanatory and need very little interpretation for users. The one question which inevitably comes up, once the user has decided that it is not a typo, is "What does the word 'fonds' mean?" The reaction to an explanation is generally positive. People appreciate what it stands for and that we do have defined archival principles. It reassures them of what they have unconsciously assumed—that the Smith papers were genuinely created by the Smiths. However, they still do not like the word. In a recent review article a well-known historian proclaimed Glenbow's work "invaluable," then lamented, "I just wish they hadn't used the buzzword 'fonds'... It may sound nice in the archives profession but I've never heard anyone use it in real life."¹⁰

RAD and computers are not perfect partners. *RAD* dates, for example, are highly informative, but complex in format. They do not lend themselves to being searched by a computer. A date such as "1910-1982; (predominant 1932-1938)" cannot be searched on-line in a meaningful way. To compensate for this problem at Glenbow

we have two dates fields in our database: one unindexed field to record the dates of creation as specified by *RAD*, and a separate indexed field for the sole purpose of access. In the latter we record the outside dates as exact values, or in the case of a reproduction being described, the dates when the original was created.

As we use the automated system more, another thing is becoming clear. Public use of the system is not likely to become totally self-serve. We spend fifteen or twenty minutes with regular users, introducing them to the computer, explaining the *RAD* format, and showing them how to do basic searches. It is time well invested. Our regular researchers visit an average of twenty-two times per year. Even this, however, is not sufficient time for them to become experts at doing complex, multi-criteria searches. They recognize the enormous potential of the system, but must ask the archivists to do the complicated searches. With occasional users, it is simpler for the reference archivist to do all the searches, teaching the user only how to scroll through the descriptions and print out the results.

In conclusion, the public reaction to *RAD* fonds level descriptions available online at Glenbow has been almost totally positive. The rich content of the descriptions is meeting the needs of our researchers in ways that pre-*RAD* finding aids did not. Our users do care about provenance and the context in which the records were created, and are delighted with the administrative histories/biographical sketches that we provide. The automated system gives a sophisticated level of access, beyond that available through a traditional subject index, and the descriptions allow users to make informed and rational decisions about which records to use. They frequently ask for copies of the descriptions so they can plan their research in the most efficient way, spending more time on the sources they judge to be the best for their projects. *RAD* and automation together have enabled Glenbow to provide our users with a quality of access which had previously eluded us.

Notes

- * An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1993 Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, St. John's, Newfoundland, July 1993.
- 1 International Council on Archives, "Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992), p. 13.
- 2 Carolyn A. Heald, "Reference Service in Archives : Whither a Professional Ethos?" *Canadian Library Journal* 49 (October 1992), pp. 353-59.
- 3 International Council on Archives, "Statement of Principles," pp. 12-13; Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa), 1990, pp. xiv, O-7. See also Michael Roper, "Archival Standards : Constraint or Catalyst," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 13, no. 2 (Autumn 1992), p. 110, for another reaffirmation of provenance and *respect des fonds*.
- 4 Jackie M. Dooley, "Subject Indexing in Context," *American Archivist* 55 (Spring 1992), p. 351.
- 5 Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History* (Toronto, 1976). See the chapter entitled "The Founders of Critical History: George M. Wrong and Adam Shortt," especially pages 8, 26-30.
- 6 Parts of this paper are based on discussions with researchers who are regular users of the Glenbow Archives and who have used both the manual and automated systems of finding aids. These discussions were on a casual basis and not by any means a controlled study.
- 7 Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982), p. 42.
- 8 Jean E. Dryden and Kent M. Haworth, *Developing Descriptive Standards : A Call to Action* (Ottawa, 1987), p. 3.
- 9 Jackie M. Dooley, "Subject Indexing in Context," *American Archivist* 55 (Spring 1992), p. 348.
- 10 Hugh Dempsey, "Glenbow Archives; A Guide to the Holdings," *Alberta History* 42 (Winter 1994), p. 27.