

Archival Context as Archival Authority Record: The ISAAR(CPF)

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Résumé

Peu de temps après avoir terminé l'élaboration de critères généraux de description des documents archivistiques connus sous le nom de ISAD(G) la Commission ad hoc des normes de description du Comité international des archives (CIA) a dirigé son attention vers un concept connexe fondamental: la description des origines contextuelles (provenance) des documents. Ce travail constitue la plus récente contribution au débat déjà long d'une décennie au sujet des questions entourant la représentation de l'information contextuelle. ISAAR(CPF) est un ensemble de critères proposés pour la compilation d'informations à propos des personnes, des familles, et des organisations créatrices de documents archivistiques et résulte des efforts de la commission dans ce domaine et constitue l'objet du présent article.

Abstract

Soon after completing a general standard for description of archival material, known as ISAD(G), the ICA's Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards turned its attention to a key related concept: description of the contextual origins of the physical material. Their work is the most recent contribution to a decades long discussion of issues relating to representation of contextual information. The ISAAR(CPF), a draft standard for the compilation of data about persons, families, and organizations that create archival records, is the result of the Commission's efforts in this area and the subject of this paper.

On 5 April 1995, the Secretariat of the International Council on Archives' Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards circulated for world-wide review¹ a proposal for a new international standard, one rather mysteriously entitled:

ISAAR(CPF): International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families.

The Commission introduced this new standard as an important accompaniment to the sole existing international archival descriptive standard, the ISAD(G), or International Standard for Archival Description (The General). The ISAD(G) establishes expectations for the description of the *archival material*; the ISAAR(CPF)--among other things--provides guidance in describing the *records-creating context*.

The Commission, consisting of experts from Canada, France, Great Britain, Malaysia, Spain, Sweden, and the United States,² expects a mix of reactions to its latest standardization effort. Some will say it is a standard that is long overdue--that, in fact, it should have inaugurated the international standardization effort. Others will say that it attempts to do too much, that it misguidedly links contextual information with vocabulary control. Still others will say it does not do enough, that it focuses too narrowly on the records creator and neglects other equally valid contextual data. Some will not know what to say at all, very likely because they are unfamiliar with the concept of authority records and quite content to continue to embed contextual information within descriptions of the records.

Just what is this subject of potentially mixed reviews? And what is the context of its creation?

The ISAAR(CPF) is--as its mysterious name implies--a standard for the formulation of a hybrid entity: an authority record that meets the specialized requirements of archival description, an *archival* authority record. As Elizabeth Black has so clearly explained to her Canadian colleagues,³ traditional authority records have long played a role in information systems that describe published works. In this world of librarians, such a record *registers the agreed upon standard form of a name* or subject term and *associates with that standard form, any variant names* for the entity. The record also *provides information sufficient to distinguish the entity* it covers from entities covered by other authority records in the same information system. Finally, the librarian's authority record *incorporates information about the circumstances of registration*, such as the date of registration and the conventions used to formulate the registration entry. (See **Figure 1** for an example of an authority record for a corporate name, taken from Black's Manual [her Example 4, covering Pullman Company].)

The ICA's Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards had in its earliest discussions emphasized the relevance of authority records for archivists. The Commission's thinking proceeded from a recognition

- that archival descriptions must facilitate retrieval of information,
- that information retrieval is enhanced by the use of access points (or index terms), and
- that access points function best when they are standardized by means of authority records.⁴

Soon after circulation of its initial issuance--a Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description--the Commission was encouraged to expand its initial understanding of the relevance of authority records for archivists. In commenting on the Principles, reviewers in Australia and the United States⁵ pointed out that, just as

access points can serve to co-locate related records, so too can the circumstances of records creation. It followed that authority records might play a useful role in establishing these circumstances. The “administrative context” (or information about the record-keeper) could be maintained as a separate authoritative entity, to be linked as appropriate to descriptions of records.

Although such views about the treatment of “administrative context” may have been unfamiliar to many archivists, they would have come as no surprise to those who had been exposed to the writings of Peter J. Scott. Some thirty years ago, Scott had described for North American readers⁶ the practices of the Commonwealth Archives Office in Canberra, Australia. That archival repository was said to maintain “registers” of organizations, agencies, families, and persons to which record series might be linked. Each entry in the “register” included a name that was coupled with identifying information and linked to names of controlling, component, previous, and subsequent entities. In the Australian system, each description of a record series included access-point-like references to as many of these registered names as necessary to establish the origins and custodial history of the records.

Scott’s account of Australian practice made little impression on the American audience to which it was directed in 1966. The concept it introduced might have languished in obscurity were it not for a combination of circumstances that led and are still leading to world-wide familiarity.

A decade after Scott described Australian practice in *The American Archivist*, archivists in the United States began to consider the prospects for development of a national system of information about archival materials. A task force was established by the Society of American Archivists to carry out this assessment. By 1982 this group had concluded that the prospects were good, in particular because they could build upon the firm foundations for information exchange existing within the library community. Librarians in the United States had long participated in national information systems and they seemed willing to adapt the techniques adopted for exchange of information about books to accommodate information about archival materials. In the mid-1980s many archival repositories in the United States began applying cataloguing formats and rules to the description of archives. Terms like “MARC,” “data element,” “heading,” “access point,” and--most importantly for the topic of this article--“authority records” crept into archival vocabularies.

In 1986, Max Evans, who with Lisa Weber compiled *MARC for Archives and Manuscripts: A Compendium of Practice* (1985), made an important connection between the techniques US archivists had begun to borrow from librarians and the Australian archival concepts introduced decades earlier by Scott. Building on an idea articulated by David Bearman⁷ in a paper circulated to members of the SAA’s National Information Systems Task Force, Evans recognized in Scott’s registers of organization, agencies, persons, and families many of the characteristics of conventional library authority control files⁸. Scott’s registers were as effective in the intellectual co-location of records having the same provenance as library authority files were in co-locating works by the same author.

Almost as quickly as archivists recognized the potential of authority files for exchange and retrieval of information about archives, they expressed frustration at the inability of accepted library formats for such files to accommodate the full range

of contextual data that could usefully be associated with an authorized form of name⁹. With a view to enhancing existing formats for authority records, US participants in a project designed to exchange descriptions of government records began to discuss the standardized presentation of "agency history" information as distinct from information about the records created by those agencies.¹⁰ Lessons learned from this Government Records Project led to research into the nature and composition of "archival authority information." At the fall 1993 meeting of the Society of American Archivists, participants in this research--Jim Bower, Marion Matters, Kathleen Roe, and Richard Szary--reported on their work and expressed the hope that it might influence international thinking on the subject.¹¹

In 1986 David Bearman and Richard Lytle had challenged readers of *Archivaria* to consider harnessing the power of the principle of provenance by treating description of organizations as authority records in their archival information systems.¹² Six years later, Terry Cook embraced this concept as the solution to the problems that can arise when archivists attempt to define the fonds in modern record-keeping environments. In Cook's words, "The creator is described, and all the records in all media ... are described, and then the two are linked. The result of this global or holistic linkage--ultimately, one hopes, across archival institutions--is the fonds, physically and conceptually."¹³ Inspired by Cook's ideas, Hugo Stibbe set out to explain how a holistically linked fonds might be described through the use of multilevel description, access points, and authority control.¹⁴

The idea planted by Scott, and trimmed and cultivated by Bearman, Cook, Evans, Lytle, Roe, Stibbe, and Szary (among others), was introduced into the international landscape in November 1993, when a subgroup of the Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards met in Liverpool, England, to consider issues relating to access points.¹⁵ This group recognized the name of the records creator as an *essential* access point for retrieval of information about archival materials and began to explore ways in which international standardization might ensure its effective incorporation in archival information systems. The group concluded that such a standard should provide not only for adequate control over the form of the name that was intended to provide access but also for adequate appreciation of the record-keeping potential of the entity represented by the controlled name. The standard should ensure through a variety of means that the name can succeed in retrieving all the descriptions of records for which it serves as an appropriate access point. With this requirement in view, the group proposed a standard for the creation and maintenance of a particular type of authority file, one comprising archival authority records. Each archival authority record covered by the standard would incorporate the preferred name of an entity, variant names for the entity, an archivally relevant description of the entity, and information needed for responsible maintenance of the record.

The aspect of the *archival* authority record that distinguishes it from a traditional authority record is the inclusion of an "archivally-relevant description of the entity" covered by the record. The archivally-relevant information to be included goes well beyond that needed to distinguish entities having similar names. It is much more than the provision of dates to distinguish the first "Government Efficiency Commission" from the many subsequent commissions of the same name. Ideally, the archivally-relevant description of the entity incorporates any references to mandate,

function, sphere of activity, structure, and relationships that contribute to understanding the significance of the entity and of the archival material that may be linked to the entity by means of an access point.

The standard drafted by the Liverpool group and revised by the full Commission for circulation to the international community consists of three parts: an authority control area, an information area, and a note area. (See **Figure 2** for an outline of the structure of the draft standard.)

The AUTHORITY CONTROL AREA establishes the authority entry and provides links to other entries in the authority file. It is the part of the archival authority record that accomplishes the same purposes as traditional authority records: that is, standardization of vocabulary and establishment of relationships among authority records. Information elements within this area include:

1. Identity Code (A code that serves to identify the authority entry for a corporate body, person, or family.)
2. Authority Entry (The standardized name of a corporate body, person, or family.)
3. Parallel Entry (A standardized name of a corporate body, person, or family that has equal status with the standardized form recorded as the authority entry. A parallel entry accommodates the need to standardize names in countries, like Canada, with more than one official language.)
4. Non-preferred Terms (Variant names or forms of name by which a corporate body, person, or family may be known.)
5. Related Authority Entry (A reference to another authority entry, such as one for a corporate body that is superior or subordinate to the corporate body that is the subject of the archival authority record.)

The INFORMATION AREA provides relevant information about the corporate body, person, or family named in the authority entry. It is the archival contribution to the authority record concept; it is the locus of the contextual information considered to be so important to understanding the importance or relevance of archival materials. When the subject of the archival authority record is a corporate body, the Information Area may be used to capture: the body's legal number; variant names; dates of existence; geographic setting; legal status; mandate or functions and sphere of activity; administrative structure; relationships with other corporate bodies, persons, or families; and any other significant information not covered by these elements. If the subject of the archival authority is a person, the Information Area may be used to capture: the person's legal number, where applicable; variant names and prenominal or postnominal titles; dates of existence; geographic association; legal status (e.g., nationality); occupation or sphere of activity; relationships with other persons, families, or corporate bodies; or any other significant information. If the subject of the archival authority record is a family, the Information Area may be used to capture: the family's variant names and prenominal or postnominal titles; dates of existence; geographic association; legal status (e.g., nobility); sphere of activity; family structure (e.g., family tree); relationships with other families, persons, or corporate bodies; or other significant information. In specifying the content of this area of the

ISAAR(CPF), the Ad Hoc Commission drew, in general, upon existing standards for preparation of an administrative history or biographical note¹⁶ and, in particular, upon the results of the Bentley-Library-sponsored Archival Authority Information Project.¹⁷

The NOTE AREA documents the creation and maintenance of the archival authority record. It comprises:

1. Archivist's Note (A note on the sources consulted in establishing the authority record.)
2. Rules or Conventions (A reference to the rules or conventions followed in formulating the authority entry and recording other data in the archival authority record.)
3. Date (The date of creation or revision of the archival authority record.)

An archival authority record compliant with the ISAAR(CPF) would include at a minimum an identity code and an authority entry in the authority control area, at least one element of the information area, and all elements of the Note Area (the archivist's note, rules or conventions, and a date). The extent to which other elements are used would depend on the authority entity. In any case, the format in which the elements are recorded would depend on the archival information system in which the archival authority record plays a role. (See **Figure 3** for an example of a full archival authority record for a corporate body. The example includes field names, but use of these is not required by the standard.)

The Ad Hoc Commission expects that an ISAAR(CPF)-compliant record can play a variety of roles in information systems, particularly if those systems are automated. For example, in one simple implementation involving an authority file of ISAAR(CPF)-compliant records describing corporate bodies, each authority record may be linked to one or more descriptions of record units (whether fonds, series, or items) and depending on the nature of the linkage establish the context of creation or some other contextual relationship, such as temporary custody or use. In an implementation in which relationships among authority records referring to corporate entities are carefully established, it would be possible for a user to follow a record-keeping thread through an entity's predecessors or successors or through the "chain of command" in a large organization.

The Ad Hoc Commission is hopeful that international support for the concept of an archival authority record will lead not only to successful implementation of the ISAAR(CPF) but also to development of ISAARs that capture authoritative information about other components of archival context. The Commission foresees standardization of authority records for government functions or business activities that lead to records creation and of authority records for form of material (diaries, log books, registers, etc.). These future ISAARs will differ from ISAAR(CPF) only in the content of the Information Area; it is expected that the composition of the Authority Control and Note Areas will be consistent across ISAARs.

The future of ISAARs in general, and the ISAAR(CPF) in particular, will be decided at a plenary session of the Ad Hoc Commission planned for November 1995. At this meeting the Commission will consider the comments it has received from the relevant

organizational units and regional branches of the ICA, and from professional organizations, such as the Association of Canadian Archivists. The Commission believes that, thanks to its progress "toward descriptive standards," the Canadian archival audience is particularly well-prepared to accept the ISAAR concept. The Commission hopes that such positive prospects for acceptance extend to the rest of the archival world.

Notes

- * This article is based on a presentation to the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists held in Regina, Saskatchewan, 17 June 1995.
- 1 Letter, dated 5 April 1995, with attachments, from Hugo L.P. Stibbe, Project Director and Secretary, to professional association members, organization units, and regional branches of the International Council on Archives.
- 2 Current Commission members are: Christopher Kitching, United Kingdom (Chair); Hugo Stibbe, Canada (Project Director); Michael Cook, United Kingdom; Jan Dahlin, Sweden; Wendy Duff, Canada; Ana Franqueria, European Community; Victoria Arias, Spain; Chris Hurley, Australia; Christine Nougaret, France; Sharon Thibodeau, United States; and Habibah Zon Yahaya, Malaysia.
- 3 Elizabeth Black, *Authority Control: A Manual for Archivists* (Ottawa, 1991), pp. 1-6.
- 4 Ideas expressed in a draft Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description discussed by the Ad Hoc Commission at its first plenary session, in October 1990, at Hohn-Grenzhausen, near Koblenz, Germany.
- 5 Society of American Archivists, Committee on Archival Information Exchange, "Comments on ICA Statement of Principles for Archival Arrangement and Description," June 1991; Australian Society of Archivists, Incorporated, "Comments on ICA Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description," October 1992.
- 6 Peter J. Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment," *American Archivist* 29, no. 4 (October 1966), pp. 493-504.
- 7 David Bearman, "Towards National Information Systems for Archives and Manuscripts: Opportunities & Requirements" (Second NISTF working paper on information exchange and its implications for the profession, 1982) (Unpublished paper available from the Society of American Archivists.)
- 8 Max J. Evans, "Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept," *American Archivist* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1986), pp. 249-61.
- 9 Lisa Weber, "The 'Other' MARC Formats: Authorities and Holdings. Do we care to be partners in this dance, too?" *American Archivist* 53, no. 1 (Winter 1990), pp. 44-51.
- 10 Archival institutions participating in the Government Records Project, sponsored by the Research Libraries Group, included: the Alabama Department of Archives and History, the District of Columbia Office of Public Records, the Georgia Department of Archives and History, the Kentucky Department for Library and Archives, the Massachusetts Archives, the Minnesota Historical Society Division of Library and Archives, the National Archives and Records Administration, the New York City Department of Records and Information Services, the New York State Archives and Records Administration, the Nevada State Library and Archives, the Oregon State Archives and Records Center, the Division of Archives and Manuscripts of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the Utah State Archives and Records Service, and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Some results of the project, including examples of agency history records, are presented in *Government Records in the RLIN Database: An Introduction and Guide* (RLG, June 1990).
- 11 The Archival Authority Information Project was carried out as part of the Bentley Library Fellowship Program with funding from the Mellon Foundation. In August 1993, participants in the project summarized their work in a report circulated to members of the Committee on Archival Information Exchange of the Society of American Archivists. Excerpts from this report were circulated to participants in a work-in-progress session hosted by the project members at the Society's 1993 annual meeting in New Orleans.
- 12 David Bearman and Richard Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985-86), pp. 14-27.
- 13 Terry Cook, "The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era," in Terry Eastwood, ed., *The Archival Fonds: from Theory to Practice* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 71.

- 14 Hugo Stibbe, "Implementing the Concept of the Fonds: Primary Access Point, Multilevel Description and Authority Control," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992), pp. 109-137.
- 15 Members of this subgroup were Michael Cook, United Kingdom; Jan Dahlin, Sweden; Wendy Duff and Hugo Stibbe, Canada; and Christine Nougaret, France.
- 16 As it had in developing ISAD(G), the Ad Hoc Commission based its standardization effort on the content of three existing national standards considered to be particularly pertinent, robust, and convergent: 1) *Rules for Archival Description*, developed by the Bureau of Canadian Archivists; 2) *Archives, Personal Papers and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries*, adopted as a descriptive standard by the Society of American Archivists; and 3) *Manual of Archival Description*, the result of a standardization project funded by the British Library. Each of these standards provides guidance concerning the composition of an administrative history or biographical note.
- 17 The Mellon-funded research (carried out in mid-summer 1993 and reported upon at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in September of that year) led to the identification of "areas of information" about persons or organizations. For persons, the information areas were: identification, personal characteristics (physical attributes), cultural classification, personal or organizational relationships, scope of activities, life events, related documentation, and synthesis and commentary. For organizations, the information areas were: identification, classification, structure and administration, organizational scope (function and activities), resources, external relationships, related documentation, and synthesis and commentary.

FIGURE 1: Example of a Traditional Authority Record for a Corporate Name
(Taken from Elizabeth Black, *Authority Control: A Manual for Archivists*, p.65.)

APPENDIX	
MARC FORMAT FOR AUTHORITIES	
EXAMPLE 4 Corporate name, variant form in 'see from' field: earlier form in 'see also from' field	
001	17504681
005	19900116095645.9
008	801231 acannaabn a aaa
010	\$an 50075638
040	\$aDLC\$cDLC\$dDLC
110	20 \$aPullman Company
410	20 \$aPullman Incorporated.\$bPullman Company
510	20 \$wa\$aPullman's Palace Car Company
670	\$aLC manual auth.cd.\$bPullman Company; inc., 1867 as Pullman's Palace Car Company; name changed to Pullman Company, 1889)
670	\$aLC manual auth.cd.\$b(hdg.: Pullman Incorporated; formed 1927 with Pullman Company and Pullman Car & Manufacturing Corporation as its principal subsidiaries; Pullman Company sold to a group of railroads in 1947)
675	\$aNUCMC data from Pa. Hist. & Mus. Comm. for Pullman Incorporated. Pullman-Standard Division. Records of Butler, Pa., plant, 1902-1970
678	\$aIncorporated 1867

FIGURE 2: ISAAR(CPF): International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families

1. AUTHORITY CONTROL AREA

- 1.1 Identity Code
- 1.2 Authority Entry
- 1.3 Parallel Entry
- 1.4 Non-preferred Terms
- 1.5 Related Authority Entry

2. INFORMATION AREA

2.1 Corporate Body	2.2 Person	2.3 Family
2.1.1 Legal Number(s)	2.2.1 Legal Numbers	
2.1.2 Variant Names	2.2.2 Variant names, prenomial and postnomial titles	2.3.1 Variant names, prenomial and postnomial titles
2.1.3 Date(s) of existence	2.2.3 Date(s) of existence	2.3.2 Date(s) of existence
2.1.4 Places and/or geographical areas	2.2.4 Places and/or geographical areas	2.3.3 Places and/or geographical areas
2.1.5 Legal Status	2.2.5 Legal status	2.3.4 Legal status
2.1.6 Mandate, functions and sphere of activity	2.2.6 Occupation, sphere of activity	2.3.5 Sphere of activity
2.1.7 Administrative Structure		2.3.6 Family Structure
2.1.8 Relationships	2.2.7 Personal relationships	2.3.7 Relationships with other families, persons or corporate bodies
2.1.9 Other significant information	2.2.8 Other significant information	2.3.8 Other significant information

3. NOTE AREA

- 3.1 Archivist's Note
- 3.2 Rules or Conventions
- 3.3 Date

FIGURE 3: Example of an Archival Authority Record for a Corporate Body**AUTHORITY CONTROL AREA**

Identity Code: US NA ORG54321
 Authority Entry: President's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile Island
 Non-Preferred Terms: Three Mile Island Commission
 Related Authority Entry: US NA ORG50032; Office of the Director of Technical Staff

INFORMATION AREA

Legal Number: [none]
 Variant Names: Three Mile Island Commission (popular name)
 Dates of Existence: Established: 11 April 1979
 Abolished: 15 November 1979
 Places and/or geographical areas: Operated in Washington, DC
 Legal status: Public
 Mandate, functions, sphere of activity: At 4:00 a.m. on Wednesday, March 28, 1979, the turbine generator at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant shut down due to a valve failure in the reactor's cooling system. At 6:58 a.m., because of numerous alarms and the indications of area radiation monitors, Metropolitan Edison, owner of the plant, declared a site emergency. The President's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile Island was established on April 11, 1979, by executive order 12130, "to investigate and explain [this] . . . accident at the nuclear power facility at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania."
 Administrative Structure: The Commission comprised twelve persons appointed by the President from among citizens who were not full time officers or employees in the Executive Branch. Commission members were: Bruce Babbitt, Patrick E. Haggerty, John G. Kemeny (who served as chairman), Carolyn Lewis, Paul A. Marks, Cora B. Marrett, Lloyd McBride, Harry C. McPherson, Russell W. Peterson, Thomas H. Pigford, Theodore B. Taylor, and Anne D. Trunk. The commission held 6 open meetings and 10 meetings in executive session. Its work was supported by a staff organized in three offices: the Office of the

- Chief Counsel, the Office of the Director of Technical Staff, and the Office of Public Information. Staff members and consultants deposed witnesses, collected reference materials, analyzed data, and prepared reports and issued press releases.
- Relationships: The Chairman of the Commission reported to the President of the United States.
- Other Information: The Commission's work ended on November 15, 1979, one month after the issuance of its final report, *The Need for Change: The Legacy of TMI, Report of the President's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile Island* (Washington, October 1979). The report included recommendations that led to changes in the Federal Government's activities relating to oversight of nuclear power plants.

NOTE AREA

- Archivist's Note: The source used to establish this authority record was *The Need for Change: The Legacy of TMI, Report of the President's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile Island* (Washington, October 1979).
- Rules or Conventions: Instructions for Preparation of Format Y, National Archives Staff Guidance
- Date: May 29, 1995