Developing Archival Standards

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My topic is developing archival standards, and in Canada that means saying something about RAD, the Rules for Archival Description. The first chapters of RAD were published in 1990, almost twenty-five years ago. What has our standard become, and where should we be going with it?

For Canadian archivists, RAD is more than just a manual of description. RAD was not the work of one or two individuals, institutions, or committees. Drafting RAD, and then learning, teaching, and implementing it, was truly a national collaborative venture that engaged the archival community from top to bottom, sometimes traumatically. RAD was itself the product of a new national archival network, and in turn it invigorated the network, giving it a common language and sparking a kind of missionary zeal. If today the network is in crisis, it is also the case that the descriptive standard that provided its intellectual sinews has been languishing for some time. And if we are now looking to renovate the one, we should also be looking to renew the other.

What has changed since RAD first appeared twenty-five years ago? First, international archival descriptive standards now exist. The archival world was inspired by RAD; the community followed Canada’s lead, but it chose not to adopt RAD. Instead, it used our experience as a springboard to launch something else: the standards developed in the 1990s under the leadership of the International Council on Archives (ICA). This extensive international effort resulted in ISAD(G) for describing records and ISAAR(CFP) for describing records creators. Canadian archivists were involved and played a key role. They ensured that the best elements of RAD found their way into the ICA standards, but much was jettisoned and the whole structure was transformed. Are the differences significant? Do they really matter? I think the answer must be yes. In virtually every other archival jurisdiction, including the United States since 2004, the ICA standards have become the basis for description; they form the starting point for discussion, for new ideas, practices, and software tools. But in Canada we have never made the transition. We are talking only to ourselves, and the result is that our standard is stagnating. Renewal means, first and foremost, alignment with the international standards. That
may not be as daunting a task as it sounds because a great deal of work was
done along these lines between 2001 and 2004 with the project to rewrite
RAD as RAD2. RAD2 was never finalized or implemented, but we could and
we should pick up that work again.

Second, the world has gone digital. Everyone knew in the 1980s that elec-
tronic records were coming; now they’re here. One of the good things about
RAD is its wealth of categories for physical description at the item level for
non-textual media, such as sound recordings, moving images, and so on. But in RAD, these are very much rooted in a world of analog objects. What
does physical description mean in a digital world? The same intellectual item
will exist in the archives in multiple physical and digital formats – perhaps
an analog original, multiple digitized access copies, and, over time, multiple
digital preservation formats. It is time to take a step back and rethink physi-
cal description in the digital age and to take a fresh look at RAD’s so-called
media chapters in that light.

It is interesting to note that it was largely this very issue that motivated
librarians to overhaul their own descriptive standard, the Anglo-American
Cataloguing Rules (AACR2) – which were also RAD’s starting point and still
inform its overall structure. In 2010, librarians replaced AACR2 with a new
standard, Resource Description and Access (RDA). One of the things we can
learn from the librarians’ revision is that before plunging into the minutiae
of the rules, it is best to take a step back and develop an abstract data model.
This would address a number of key questions:

- What exactly are we trying to describe and why?
- What are the logically distinct entities that make up
  the descriptive field?
- What are their significant attributes in light of the purposes
  of description?
- What are their relationships?

1 In 2001, the Canada–U.S. Task Force on Archival Description (CUSTARD) began work to
develop a single North American standard within the framework of the ICA standards. In the
end, divergences between Canadians and Americans led to the production of two separate
(but closely related) drafts. The American version was adopted by the Society of American
Archivists (SAA) in 2004 as Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS), with a
revised second edition subsequently published in 2013. In Canada, the Canadian Committee
on Archival Description (CCAD) circulated its own version as RAD2 in 2004. Based on the
feedback it received, CCAD determined that there was not sufficient consensus to proceed
with RAD2 and the draft was shelved; CCAD opted instead for a much more limited revi-
sion of the existing standard, completed in 2008. Documentation relating to RAD2 (the draft
itself, a background paper, and CCAD’s final report) was at one time available on the CCAD
web page but is no longer. Readers wishing to consult copies should contact the author of this
paper at radancy@sfu.ca.
For archives, the ICA standards have suggested the path, but there is still work to be done, particularly if we want to bring physical description into the picture. With a data model in place, we can decide what we want RAD (or its successor) to become. Where does it fit within this scheme and what should be its scope? How does it relate to other standards, such as those pertaining to preservation metadata? Can we integrate standards from elsewhere?

A third key development is the growing recognition that there are many descriptive communities. In his background paper for this summit, Tom Nesmith writes about the fact that the archival agenda of the past forty years has been mainly inward-looking: building the profession, building institutions. This is also true of archival standards, in which the focus has largely been driven by our professional concerns for access, preservation, physical and administrative control of holdings, and legal compliance with respect to privacy protection and copyright. There is nothing wrong with that. But we can and should recognize that the archival representation of archival material is just one way of looking at things, namely our own, and that there are other descriptive communities that approach archival materials with different purposes in mind, and they bring to bear different concerns and different knowledge. As archivists, we should continue to build our descriptive systems and our control systems according to our own professional standards, and improve those standards. But rather than think of those systems as the final goal, could we instead think of them as just one step in building more comprehensive, overarching communication systems around archives? These would be spaces where all descriptive communities – records creators, records subjects, records preservers, and records users – would have tools to circulate and exchange their own ideas and representations of the records. Ideally, all would benefit, and it might go some way to forging a sense of common purpose between the keepers of archives and the users of archives, something we all agree is vital if we are to strengthen the position of archives in our society. I am not sure exactly what those systems might look like or how we would build them. We need to experiment and reach out to others seeking access to the record.

In summary, then, it is time for Canadian archivists to take stock of our descriptive standard and determine where it should be going. Alignment with international archival descriptive standards is a priority, but we also have an opportunity to advance the field through development of an abstract data model for archives that better meets the realities of description in a digital world and can serve as the foundation for the standard. Looking farther afield,
it is possible to start envisioning communication systems that bring together all the descriptive communities that have an interest in archival materials and in which professional, standards-based archival description is but one of many nodes.