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*.[1] *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 electronic 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 physical 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?

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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 revision 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.[2] 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,

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2   Tom Nesmith, "The Missing Piece: Towards New Partnerships with Users of Archives," *Canadian Issues/Thèmes canadiennes: Towards a New Blueprint for Canada's Recorded Memory*, special edition (Spring 2014): 54–58.

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.