# Finding Aids: A Multi-Media, Systems Perspective

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THE 1974 SAA *GLOSSARY* defines a finding aid as "the descriptive media, published and unpublished, created by an originating office, an archival agency, or manuscript repository, to establish physical or administrative and intellectual control over records and other holdings."[1] The definition's focus on products prepared by the individual repository is no accident and represents a pattern of insular thinking too often encountered in the profession: the assumption that finding aid preparation is solely the responsibility of the individual custodial unit and that as long as this unit is doing its job, finding aids needs are being met.

But is this really true? Seen from a national perspective, finding aids problems extend far beyond institutional boundaries and relate to many more questions than an individual repository's capacity to provide adequate descriptions of its holdings. First, a comprehensive discussion of finding aids should deal not only with those materials generated primarily for in-house use, but also with the myriad descriptions of archives and manuscripts which appear in accession notices; subject guides such as Richards Davis's *North American Forest History*; union lists such as the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*; more general directories such as the National Historical Publications and Records Commission's *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories*; and even footnotes in scholarly publications.[2] In short, any information which serves to direct users to a particular institution's holdings, or provides intellectual control over records, can and should be regarded as a finding aid.

Similarly, in discussing finding aids, our perspective must expand beyond finding aids relating to traditional paper records to include the accumulations of photographs, machine-readable files, oral history tapes and transcripts, motion pictures, and similar media that form an increasingly large portion of our holdings. Can we develop finding aids systems unified not only within an institution but throughout an entire country, that are capable of intermingling various types of media in the same basic

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[1] "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974): 415-33.

[2] Richard C. Davis, *North American Forest History: A Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States and Canada* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: CLIO Books, 1977); Library of Congress, *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections 1959-61* (Ann Arbor: J. W. Edwards, 1962), *1962,* and *Index 1959-62* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1964), and *1963* –(Washington: Library of Congress, various dates); *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States* (Washington: National Historical Publications and Records Commission, 1978).

descriptive format? Should we even attempt to? What problems will we encounter, and what possible benefits will we derive from making the attempt?

Let's not underestimate the extent of the problem. Archival description is a cornerstone activity of our profession, for without adequate user access to materials there is little sense in saving them. And yet, when we examine repositories closely, what do we see? We see a general lack of finding aids at all levels. Far too few institutions have reported to *NUCMC*. Only a handful have produced institutional guides. Chaotic internal finding aids systems, if they can be called that, abound. Unprocessed backlogs certainly don't help solve the problem, nor do acquisition policies that permit repositories to acquire more materials than they can adequately process. Too often, regardless of the level, description takes a back seat, although one isn't always sure to what.

If this situation is not to be, then our thinking about finding aids and archival description must take a radical turn for the better, especially as users seek access to more kinds of materials. Standardization of finding aids and integration of descriptive approaches to various types of archival media should be a goal of the profession, leading to development of information systems facilitating administrative control and research use of archival materials. Certain key questions need to be resolved before archivists can begin to develop such systems.

First, *should certain key information elements and formats for description be common to all finding aids, regardless of the type of material described?* Although the 1969-70 survey of existing finding aids, undertaken by the SAA's Subcommittee on Automation, indicated great diversity in finding aids *systems* among the institutions canvassed, it demonstrated that certain categories of information, such as title, date span, and volume, were common denominators. The 1975 report of the SAA Finding Aids Committee, entitled *Inventories and Registers: A Handbook of Techniques and Examples,* builds on these conclusions. A subsequent analysis by the National Historical Publications and

Records Commission, in 1977, of twenty-one institutional guides to manuscript collections, four published guides to state archives, and two state archives inventory systems, yielded results similar to those of the 1969–70 SAA study, and formed the basis for data-base design for the collection/record group/series portion of NHPRC's national data base on archives and manuscripts. Currently, another study of descriptive elements is being undertaken by the SAA's Task Force on National Information Systems.

A common weakness, however, of such analyses is their failure to ask two important questions. What descriptive information is actually needed by users to facilitate their access to archival holdings? And what, if any, special provisions should be made for the description of such materials as photographs, machine-readable records, architectural drawings, and the like? Do users or custodians of these materials have special requirements or needs that are not being met by existing finding aids? Common information elements are the essential first step in the production of unified finding aids. But in order for such unity to exist, all possible cases must be considered and attempts made at the outset to accommodate them. Provision of common information elements need not preclude other data relevant to particular types of materials or specialized subject areas. The key idea is that certain common, minimum descriptive standards can and should be applied, regardless of the types of material or subject matter involved.

Second, *can or should the concept of hierarchy in arrangement and description be applied uniformly to all types of archival materials?* Frequently, questions about hierarchical placement are ignored both in analytical studies and in actual finding aids preparation. Too often, document custodians assume that because certain types of materials, such as photographs, are ideally described at a particular hierarchical level, such as the item level, this precludes the necessity for even considering description at other levels. Many custodians of non-traditional materials don't think in terms of hierarchies at all; or they fail to see how

descriptions of materials in their custody might be incorporated into a general institution-wide or even nationwide hierarchical descriptive structure. They may even believe that description at the most detailed (i.e., item) level for their particular medium is the only type of description they should attempt, and as a result they do absolutely nothing since it would take far too many staff hours to achieve this impossible goal.

Compilers of finding aids should consider those finding aids in relation to an overall institutional and national archival hierarchy. Such a hierarchy has been incorporated in the data base design for the NHPRC's national data base. At the present time, six levels of description are included, in descending order: state, city, repository, record group or collection, subgroup, and series. An institution could add box, folder, or item level descriptions, or could vary the basic format to accommodate types of materials not readily fitted into the traditional hierarchical mold.[3] For example, working with the Colorado Center for Oral History, the NHPRC, while also providing aggregate descriptions of collections of interviews, has developed for oral history materials a hierarchical descriptive format that reflects oral historians' needs for individual interview descriptions.[4]

Third, *how do repositories organize materials physically and prepare finding aids?* Can a systems approach be taken to this process, to cut across custodial or jurisdictional boundaries? Typically, institutional finding aids are prepared by the custodial units housing the records, and there may be many different custodial units or even discrete repositories within one large institutional setting.[5] There is often little or no communication among these units, and each proceeds on its own separate way, developing its own descriptive techniques and reinventing its own wheels, even though another repository within the same overall administrative jurisdiction may have already solved the problem. There is insufficient standardization of descriptive practices, inadequate communication of information on descriptive techniques, and little sharing of technical skills or equipment such as word processing devices and computer software and hardware.

At the other extreme are institutions whose administration adopts a particular form of administrative or intellectual control—such as an on-line system designed chiefly for library cataloging—without evaluating whether this system is indeed suited for all types of material at the institution. This situation often accompanies one in which the archives suffers from a chronic malaise of neglect by its administrative superiors. Or is the neglect that of the archivists in being less articulate than their librarian counterparts in analyzing their needs and seeing that they are met?

Development of finding aids systems means more than simple agreement on the intellectual content of descriptive tools. Mechanisms must be established on an intra- and inter-institutional basis for communication among repositories, and between custodial units and the administrators responsible for the development and implementation of their internal policies.

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[3] The most detailed discussion of the NHPRC data base concept can be found in *Report on the Conference of Automated Guide Projects, St. Louis, Missouri, July 19–20, 1977* (Atlanta: National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, 1978).

[4] A session at the 1979 Oral History Association Colloquium in East Lansing, Michigan, entitled "Sharing the Wealth: Possibilities for Compatible Descriptions of Oral History Collections and Interviews," outlined the NHPRC's data base approach. Session participants included Larry Hackman and Nancy Sahli of the NHPRC, Nancy Whistler of the Colorado Center for Oral History, Denver Public Library, and the late Louis Starr of Columbia University. See also "SPINDEX: Tool for Oral Historians," *Oral History Association Newsletter* 13 (Winter 1979).

[5] Multi-unit institutions are those which, like the Library of Congress, major universities, or complex library systems such as the New York Public Library, have many separate divisions, special libraries, or other jurisdictions housing historical record materials. Usually these units are in different physical locations, and are often answerable to various administrative authorities, although they are united by being part of the same overall organization.

Finally, *what happens to the information in the finding aids, or even to the finding aids themselves, after creation?* Here, national subject guides and publications like *NUCMC* have an advantage over institutionally produced products; for at least they usually find their way into major research libraries and are noticed if not reviewed by a variety of publications. Other finding aids fare less well. Those published by institutions are sometimes mentioned in news-notes sections of professional journals. A few may be listed in the *National Union Catalog* or be deposited in the National Archives Library. But most are victims of poor publicity and availability. (Try to buy a finding aid at B. Dalton's, Walden Books, or Brentano's, or find it listed in *Books in Print.*) No repository or library has assembled and made available for use a truly comprehensive collection of finding aids on a national basis. No one has even prepared a comprehensive national bibliography of finding aids and guides.

It isn't, of course, enough to ask what happens to finding aids after they are produced. We must deal also with the corollary question, what happens to the information in those products? Very few institutions in the United States—the LDS Church Historical Department is one exception—have ongoing programs, usually involving some sort of computerization, for continuously updating and generating revised finding aids.[6] Nor, within their existing finding aids systems, do many repositories make sufficient provision for cross-referencing so that researchers can be led from one collection or record group to another within the same location. And it is even rarer, with the exception of *NUCMC* and the NHPRC data base, to attempt a consolidated listing or index on state, regional, or national levels.

It is not within the scope of this paper to provide solutions to these problems. A project being developed by the SAA's Task Force on National Information Systems will grapple with many of them. Regardless of what that project concludes, however, individual archivists and keepers of historical source materials can and must develop a conceptual framework for approaching the development of integrated finding aids systems.

First, we must get out of the habit of considering historical records or primary source materials in terms of their medium, if this is what leads us to pigeonhole certain types of materials into special descriptive patterns, excluding their integration into more broadly based finding aids systems. Despite specific differences inherent in the nature of the records and the information they contain, certain common descriptors such as title, date span, and volume, apply to all materials. Similarly, certain common index and access terms can apply, regardless of the type of record involved. The Library of Congress, for example, is the same entity, whether referred to in a letter, pictured in a photograph, drawn to scale in an architectural drawing, or filmed in a television newscast.

Discussion of the development of common descriptive standards does little good, unless we ask ourselves who develops these standards. Seldom, if ever, do picture librarians and custodians of architectural drawings, keepers of machine-readable data files, and archivists of corporations sit down to try to formulate descriptive standards not only for the particular material with which they are involved but for all types of materials together, so that we might have not only descriptive standards for photographs but photo standards that would be compatible with those used for oral history, court records, and diplomatic dispatches. Exceptions such as the cooperative project now being undertaken by the state archives of Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Min-

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[6] For a discussion of the automated system of the LDS Church Historical Department see discussions by Ronald G. Watt and Brent G. Thompson in H. Thomas Hickerson, ed., *SPINDEX Users Conference: Proceedings of a Meeting Held at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, March 31 and April 1, 1978* (Ithaca: Cornell University Libraries, 1979).

nesota, or the discussions of the SAA's Task Force on National Information Systems, are rare. Development of unified approaches to anything is hard work. But if the archival profession doesn't do something, the problem will simply continue to grow.

Archivists must take the initiative in establishing contact with curators of photo collections, architectural librarians, and similar individuals who have custody over historically valuable records, yet who have not traditionally been part of the archival fold. At the institutional level, archivists can begin by simply ascertaining which individuals are responsible for what materials, and developing informal discussion groups, or other mechanisms, for focusing on common problems. At the state, regional, or national level, more formal procedures to develop uniform policies may be required, such as planning conferences, program sessions at professional organization meetings not usually included within the archival domain, or coordination of funding efforts by government agencies and private foundations.

From these contacts initial standards should be developed for unified descriptive procedures. Prior to being adopted by appropriate agencies, such standards should be subjected to the review of appropriate individuals, repositories, professional organizations, and other interested users of archival materials.

Standards, however, are successful only if they are adhered to by the various individuals and institutions affected by them. Success is difficult to achieve. No system pleases everyone 100 percent or even 90 percent of the time. The ideal to aim for, then, is a system including standards yet allowing room for individual variations, so long as those variations will not affect the smooth functioning of the overall system. Also, the system's procedures and standards should be documented in terms that all users can understand. One of the problems of many descriptive and cataloging systems is that they are intended only for use by institutions and individuals with (a) the capability to support complex and expensive computer hardware, or (b) an ex-

isting knowledge of either cataloging or descriptive systems, usually attained through advanced professional study.

In short, any standards developed must accommodate the needs of a wide variety of possible users, both at the individual and institutional levels. The goal can be achieved only if those developing descriptive standards and programs take into account the needs and capabilities of all potential participants in a system. This rule applies to intra- as well as inter-institutional situations. All individuals and institutions, or their representatives, likely to be affected by descriptive policy decisions need to make their concerns known aggressively.

Development and adoption of standards is not enough. We need, perhaps more in these inflationary times than ever before, new mechanisms for implementing every step of the descriptive process, from initial creation of in-house finding aids to final dissemination of products to the broader user-public. How many multi-unit institutions, for example, can claim to have even assembled in one central location, all the archival and manuscript finding-aids created by custodial units under their jurisdiction, in order to facilitate not only reference use by and for researchers but comparative study and analysis for administrative and intellectual purposes by internal staff? How many multi-unit institutions have even considered the option of a central processing and finding aid preparation center? Such centers need not be limited to single institutions. The Contemporary Scientific Archives Centre in Oxford, England, for example, serves as a central location for processing and finding aids preparation for scientific records in that country. Similar regional operations could be developed in the United States and Canada, not only to ensure the preparation of finding aids adhering to set descriptive standards but to alleviate many of the difficulties encountered when small repositories without adequate trained staff undertake arrangement and description activities. Discussion of this subject is beginning in a few regions in the United States; and the Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation has conducted a feasibility

study relating to establishing such a center for the Mid-Atlantic states.

Another mechanism badly needed is a deposit bank or other means of ensuring that printed and microform finding aids are housed in one or more central locations, and that bibliographic information about these finding aids, including microform copies, is made available for both control and reference purposes. This central-location deposit scheme is applicable to multi-unit institutions as well. Existing finding aids, with the probable exception of traditional card catalogs, could be gathered at one central location for administrative and research use. Such a collecting system could be structured hierarchically. A multi-unit institution might gather only those materials generated by that institution; state, regional, or national centers could have broader ranges of collecting activity.

As an adjunct to this activity, a comprehensive national bibliography of finding aids could be prepared, with annual supplements. Current annual lists, such as that published each year in the *American Archivist,* are far from complete, and a comprehensive publication simply doesn't exist. Such a publication could also include accession notices from repositories, thus obviating the need for the present, wasteful system of multiple reporting in myriad professional journals.

Another possibility for centralizing information is a computer system, pooling descriptive data from many custodial units. This system could be adopted at both institutional and multi-institutional levels. Such a system could be off or on-line. The important consideration is that such systems help standardization by requiring the use of at least a minimum number of common data elements and formats for their implementation. This is true both of MARC at the Library of Congress, which is a non-hierarchical cataloging tool, and the NHPRC's national data base which produces guides and finding aids in line-printer, microform, or published formats.

Lest we become too easily enchanted with the wonders of cooperation, computer equipment, and on-line systems claiming to give us everything under the sun, we should bear in mind that no machine can substitute for a lack of basic procedures, standards, and methods for description itself. The very existence of a gap between electronic and computer capabilities, and our own lack of basic descriptive standards for inter-related multi-media holdings accepted and used throughout the archival profession, is an indication of how far we must travel before an adequate solution to our problems is achieved. In a sense, it is the same situation that a carpenter would encounter in trying to construct a house, with laser-beam drills, automatic plumbline adjusters, synchronized electrical wiring articulators, but, alas, no architectural plans. And it would lead to the same skewed, wasteful results.

As we examine the descriptive needs of our own institutions, as well as those of our colleagues, we should attempt to assess current problems and approaches as an integral part of the overall process of development of finding aids systems for a variety of historical records media. Only by careful analysis of all aspects of what has gone before and what is happening now can we hope to develop the best possible systems for the future.

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