

The Use of Standards in the Application of the AMC Format

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Abstract: As archivists begin to use the new MARC Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) format, they will find themselves confronting many unfamiliar questions, not the least of which relate to the use of traditional library-based standards controlling the form and content of certain information elements. This article explores the ramifications for archivists using standards relating to cataloging codes, name authorities, and subject headings. In addition to explaining the importance of these standards as they relate to both the demands of the format as well as traditional archival principles, some suggestions are made to help ease the archivists into this "brave new world" of automation-induced library-archives coexistence.

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THE MARC ARCHIVAL AND MANUSCRIPTS CONTROL (AMC) format has the potential to change the lives of archivists forever. The format provides a structure for description that is not only fully consistent with archival principles but also compatible with modern bibliographic description. Contemplating the possibilities for information sharing, automated union catalogs, network building, and computerized management is enough to make most archivists positively giddy. Not since the development of the acid-free folder has news this good broken upon the archival horizon.

With this new freedom, however, there are new responsibilities. As archivists join the great game of library automation, they will discover that there are a number of new rules, most of them previously unheard of in archival precincts. These include such things as cataloging codes, Library of Congress subject headings, and name authorities. This article addresses some of the problems and questions raised by these rules, or standards, and explores their implications for archivists.

It is part of the collective folklore of archivists that there is a certain idiosyncratic (some would even say eccentric) approach to certain aspects of the practice of the archival craft. This has certainly been true in the case of descriptive standards. As Alan Tucker of the Research Libraries Group, Inc., has pointed out,

The same historical factors which explain the emergence of . . . library-oriented standards . . . also explain the absence of a similar level of standardization among archivists. The repetitive cataloging of thousands of copies of the same

item in thousands of institutions generated needs and solutions which have none of the same impact in an environment in which virtually all of the materials being described are unique.¹

Furthermore, until recently the theories and practices of the archival profession were not sufficiently well defined to allow any one person or institution to claim a monopoly on authority or to impose any given set of standards. Over the past few years, however, it has become increasingly clear that, in spite of certain institutional differences, archivists, manuscript curators, records managers, and all the others who look after the nation's documentary heritage do, in fact, have much in common with each other. It is also becoming clear that there is a vital stake in defining and articulating those areas of common terminology, methodology, philosophy, and mission that shape their profession. A large part of this task is the acceptance and use of certain standardized ways of communicating information about archival holdings.

A more immediate and compelling reason for archivists to abandon some of their more individualistic ways is the low tolerance that automated systems have for idiosyncrasy and individualism. Beyond this, however, and perhaps more to the point, the requirements of integrating automated systems demand that even more stringent standards be followed. As Alan Tucker noted in reference to the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) implementation of AMC, "If records for archival materials are to be included in the main . . . database and if they are to be retrieved by the same searches that retrieve books and

¹Alan M. Tucker, "The RLIN Implementation of the MARC Archives and Manuscript Control Format" (Paper presented at "Academic Libraries: Myths and Realities," Proceedings of the Third National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Seattle, Washington, 4-7 April 1984).

serials, maps and sound recordings, then they have to be created in accordance with the same rules or standards that apply to the other files.”²

The very existence of the AMC format owes much to a kind of sea change in archival thinking that occurred prior to its development. In the summer of 1980, working under the direction of the Society of American Archivists's National Information Systems Task Force (NISTF), Elaine Engst of Cornell University conducted a study of description practices in a broad variety of repositories. Her unpublished report, “Standard Elements for the Description of Archives and Manuscript Collections,” clearly demonstrated, in the words of Tom Hickerson, “that there are common methods of archival description which could be integrated into a broadly applicable set of standards.”³ This study showed archivists and manuscript curators that they had more in common with each other than was popularly believed. More importantly, though, it helped lay an essential foundation for the subsequent development of a format to carry the various elements of description. It also helped facilitate archivists' understanding that there was an area of common ground between archival description and library cataloging.

Coincidental to the process of defining descriptive elements and developing a format, another project was underway that attempted to “reconcile manuscript and archival cataloging and description

with the conventions of AACR 2” (the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*, 2d edition). A rationale for this work was based on the idea that if the “burgeoning national systems for automated bibliographic description . . . are to ever accommodate manuscripts and archives a compatible format must be established . . . [and that] with appropriate modifications, library-based descriptive techniques can be applied in developing this format.”⁴ The result of this task was recently published by the Library of Congress under the title *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries*.⁵

Thus, with NISTF's work in defining data elements and developing the AMC format, and the concurrent appearance of a cataloging manual based on archival realities, pieces of a puzzle, the contours of which had heretofore been only dimly perceived and understood, were starting to fall into place. While speculation on the forces of coincidence or archival serendipity may be risky, it is difficult to deny that, regardless of any other implications, these developments represent a quantum leap forward in the way that archivists perceive and use standards. It is gradually being understood that for the price of small losses in procedural autonomy, there may be much to be gained in terms of standardizing the way archivists communicate, both with each other and the world at large, about their collections and their procedures.

²Ibid.

³H. Thomas Hickerson, “Archival Information Exchange: Developing Compatibility” (Paper presented at “Academic Libraries: Myths and Realities,” Proceedings of the Third National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Seattle, Washington, 4-7 April 1984).

⁴Steven L. Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1983), p. 1.

⁵This publication is one of a series of manuals interpreting AACR2 for special materials; others have been done for graphic materials, motion pictures and video recordings, rare books, and maps and cartographic materials.

On the broadest level the AMC format itself represents a kind of standard. It has been designed to accommodate any kind of information or data about collections that archivists care to record. All that is required is that certain technical and structural standards be followed in using the format (particularly in such areas as fixed-field coding, record and field delimiters, and subfield coding), and that the various elements of description be entered into the specific fields that have been designated for them. Leaving aside for the moment the present uncertainty regarding exactly which fields are appropriate for which data, questions arise regarding the specific form of some of the information elements. This form can be determined through the application of bibliographic standards, specifically in the areas of cataloging and description and in name and subject authorities.

The archival world has had a long and uneasy relationship with the idea of cataloging. It is still seen by many archivists as the one area that is most susceptible to conflict between library science and archival practice. After all, when most librarians talk about processing, they usually mean some kind of cataloging; to archivists processing implies a whole spectrum of arrangement and description functions. Past attempts to "process" archival materials according to library practices—ignoring provenance to impose some exterior classification scheme—offer, even today, the most appalling examples of archival malpractice and "disrespect des fonds." Consequently, the inclusion of special provisions for cataloging manuscript materials in the ALA Cataloging Rules and in the first and second editions of the *Anglo-*

American Cataloguing Rules was never well received by archivists.⁶ By and large, these rules continued to treat manuscripts as a curious species of book (or, more offensively, as nonbooks) that had only to be twisted ever so slightly to conform to standard library cataloging. Because of this, in addition to a general lack of understanding in the rules of some of the most fundamental archival truths, most archivists usually consigned these rules to an oblivion perhaps befitting their presumption. The resulting vacuum left the field wide open for individual practice to run amok—which it did.

Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts (or APPM, as it has since come to be known) represents an attempt to fill that breach and to offer to archivists and manuscript curators a set of standards for the description of archival and manuscript materials that is faithful to archival principles while remaining within the general approach and structure of library cataloging as embodied in AACR2. As in all such endeavors, however, some compromises were necessary. In general, archivists who are unused to dealing with the seemingly painful precision of cataloging rules may find some of the details, such as the rules on punctuation, to be excessive and even obfuscating. On the other hand, librarians, perhaps not fully understanding the archival principles involved and what was necessary to accommodate them, may think the fabric of AACR2 has been shredded beyond recognition. Neither of these reactions are entirely valid. Subsequent wide use and acceptance of these rules have shown them to be a practical, useful, and much needed guide to the catalog description of all

⁶*A.L.A. Cataloging Rules for Author and Title Entries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1949), especially pp. 21–26; *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1967), especially chap. 10, pp. 259–271; and *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*, 2d ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1978), especially chap. 4, pp. 110–124. This second edition is known as AACR2.

sorts and levels of archival and manuscript material, either in a manual or automated mode.⁷

One of the principal features of these rules is an overall emphasis on collection-level cataloging (although there are provisions for the item-level approach, as well as description at the series, subgroup, and subseries level). Previous attempts to provide cataloging rules for manuscripts and archives invariably made the mistake of assuming that, for cataloging purposes, the analog to the book was the individual manuscript, often treasured if for nothing more than its autograph value. (This mistake is based, no doubt, on the habits of the rare book community in cataloging codices and other ancient manuscripts.) The size of most modern manuscript collections and archival record groups has, at the very least, demonstrated the utter futility and impracticality of item-level cataloging, and, at most, made many archivists cynical about autograph value. Furthermore, archivists are beginning to understand that aggregate or collection-level description is the

approach most likely to observe the principle of archival unity which recognizes that, in organically-generated collections, at least, it is the collective whole as the sum of the interrelationships of its components that has significance and that the individual item or subseries within a collection usually derives its importance from its context.⁸

Secondly, the rules recognize the relative role of cataloging in the description apparatus of most institutions. In

general, library cataloging is derived directly from explicit identifying publication information usually taken from the title page of the item being cataloged. Manuscripts and archives, on the other hand, are, almost by definition, unpublished and original and obviously lack these explicit sources of information, as they are called. Furthermore, "unlike book cataloging, in which the catalog record is the primary (and often only) form of access to the material cataloged, manuscript and archival catalogs are usually only one part of an institution's total array of descriptive and finding aids."⁹ In short, the approach of this cataloging manual is based on the understanding that, in most cases, cataloging is dependent on, and derived directly from, preexisting registers, inventories, calendars, and indexes.

Perhaps the chief advantage of these cataloging rules is that they are consistent with the style and standards of the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC),¹⁰ the context in which most archivists and manuscript curators learned to appreciate and understand cataloging. The principal elements of description in NUCMC are still included: title, span and bulk dates, physical description, notes on scope and content, source, finding aids, and restrictions. To be sure, these elements are now more tightly defined and in some cases carry what some may consider to be odd-looking punctuation, but a catalog entry constructed using these rules still looks familiar. More important though is that these rules, by adhering to the general structure of AACR2, provide catalog

⁷ *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts* has been mandated as the standard for descriptive cataloging of manuscript and archival material in the online cataloging systems of both the Research Libraries Group, Inc. (RLIN) and the Online Computer Library Center, Inc. (OCLC).

⁸ Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1959-).

records for manuscripts that are consistent with the records for books, maps, serials, and other library materials, thus allowing the full integration of archival and manuscript holdings into most existing bibliographic systems and networks.

Beyond the structural standards represented by formats and cataloging rules, the content and form of certain fields or elements of information in AMC is governed by more specific authority standards.

Through the Library of Congress's Name Authority Cooperative, headings for personal and corporate names are created by many institutions throughout the United States according to AACR2 and Library of Congress practice and are then submitted to the library's authority files. These files are subsequently distributed for use by the cooperating libraries, becoming a *de facto* national authority data base that is used by most of the bibliographic utilities in choosing headings both for main and added entries. For the very reasons of uniformity argued above, cataloging records for manuscript and archival materials integrated into such systems will also be required to follow these authorities insofar as possible.

It was not simply an oversight that the cataloging manual did not deal substantively with rules for determining choice of access points or headings. Other than providing simple guidelines for coping with chapters 21-24 in AACR2, this whole area was seen as a potential minefield for archivists and thought to be best avoided. Unfortunately, while it is still a minefield, it can no longer be avoided and must now be gingerly negotiated.

Most archivists know that main entries

are something more than the front door, although in the past main entries and titles were often confused. Put simply, main entry for both library and archival cataloging is defined as the entity (i.e., person, family, corporate body) that is chiefly responsible for the creation of a work. The determination of the form of these entries is governed by very specific rules in AACR2 that apply not only to the use of these names in main entries but also to their application in any access point or heading.

These rules in AACR2 for the form of access points pose complex problems for archivists. When the rules state that personal names are to be entered under the "name by which he or she is commonly known"¹¹ and that a corporate name is entered "directly under the name by which it is predominantly identified,"¹² immediate questions arise. Under these rules, for example, the papers of Samuel Langhorne Clemens must be entered under Mark Twain, one of the pseudonyms he used as an author, because librarians have determined that he is better known by that name. Similarly, we may presume from two recent biographies of Hilda Doolittle that this imagist poet and lost-generation poseur must have left some archival legacy; however, under the rules her papers (or, for that matter, any reference to her in the papers of others) would be entered under the name *H.D.* for that is the name under which she published her poetry. Indeed the archivist who becomes custodian of the papers of one of the two gentlemen who wrote under the name Ellery Queen shall face a real dilemma.

The rules for corporate headings are equally troublesome for archivists. For example, under the rules for direct entry,

¹¹AACR2, Rule 22.1A.

¹²Ibid., Rule 24.1.

the use of full administrative hierarchy is virtually precluded, often making it impossible to determine whether or not a given heading represents a government body—usually a critical question to archivists. To a librarian cataloging publications from the Bureau of Insular Affairs, it is not particularly important that this bureau is an arm of the Department of the Interior; to an archivist establishing record groups and series, it is crucial.

Quite beyond the difficulties presented by the rules themselves, however, are various library practices and interpretations in using those rules. Chief among these is the reliance, in establishing an authoritative form of a name for the first time, on a title page manifestation of that name. If there is no conflict in the authority records with a proposed entry, the form found in the work being cataloged is used. Thus the heading for *United Nations. Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization* is simply *Unesco* because, presumably, that was either the form used on the title page of the work being cataloged when the heading was established or it was determined that that was the more familiar form.

This practice presents a greater problem for personal names. Librarians formerly provided on their catalog cards as full a form of a person's name as research could discover, complete with maiden name and birth and death dates. This is no longer the case. If there is no catalog conflict, a name is established as it is given in the work being cataloged and any subsequent discoveries about that person's name or vital dates must be ignored. In any event, extensive research is now discouraged. This occasionally can be awkward. For example, the heading for Princess Grace was established before

her untimely death as *Grace, Princess of Monaco, 1929-.* Under current library practice and policy it will stay that way forever, even though most people are keenly aware of her demise. Such practice conflicts with the archival notion that finding aids, of which the catalog record is a part, are more than simply bibliographic surrogates. They provide information and assist research by putting individuals and their documentary remains in a meaningful context. It is sometimes difficult to comprehend why this information should be subject to artificial limitations.

To be fair, it is easy to understand, given today's publishing explosion, why library catalogers can no longer take the time to research fully the personal and corporate names that make up their headings. After all, most users of library catalogs are simply trying to find a book and the added detail of fuller name headings does not necessarily make that task any easier. It is perhaps harder for archivists to understand what these principles have to do with archival practice. As noted at the outset, however, the adherence to name authority standards is but one of the prices that must be paid so that the benefits of automation through AMC can be fully enjoyed. An obvious goal in embracing these standards is to make the price as small and painless as possible.

While there are certainly no easy answers to the problems posed for archivists by AACR2-based name authorities, all is not lost. For persons not known primarily as authors—and this includes perhaps the larger portion of persons represented in most nonliterary and archival collections—the rules provide for determination of forms of names from reference sources such as standard biographical and genealogical sources.¹³

¹³Ibid., Rule 22.1B.

In many cases, the papers themselves will serve as the ultimate and most authoritative source. Thus, by using and staying within the rules, archivists still have the freedom to establish many personal names according to the habits and principles that have long been followed. Moreover, by participating in name authority work, archivists fill the authority files with names established under archival principles. This information is then available to fellow archivists using the files, and there is no longer the possibility of having the names entered elsewhere in a less than complete and useful form.

The Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress and the staff of the Manuscripts Section of the Special Materials Cataloging Division (which produces NUCMC) have recently concluded an agreement with the library's Processing Services Department whereby name authority records will be added to the library's online authority file for names established in the course of cataloging manuscript collections. This agreement permits certain modifications to the library's normal procedures, which, in effect, allow most manuscript headings to be made in a way that archivists should find unobjectionable. They are established under the fullest name possible and with qualifying designations ("of Chicago," "blacksmith") added where necessary. The large number of historical persons added to the file through this project should make it considerably more useful to archivists using it for AMC cataloging.

Another method of coping with objectionable name authorities is through the use of the biographical/historical note in the AMC format. Although this was originally designed to "record any

significant information on the creator/author of the manuscript(s) or records required to make the nature or scope of the materials clear,"¹⁴ it is certainly appropriate and within the scope of the note to use it to clear up any possible confusion created by a somewhat opaque main entry. For example, under the rules, the papers of the first Archivist of the United States must be entered under *Connor, R. D. W., 1878-1950*, that being the name by which he was most commonly known. The biographical/historical note can then be used to record some salient facts of his career and to inform the reader that his full name was Robert Digges Wimberly Connor. For corporate headings, this note can be used not only to explain the functions of the body but also to delineate its full administrative hierarchy if the name is not fully given in the heading. Unfortunately, this technique works only for names used as main entries; there is currently no such amplification available in added entries except through notes added to authority records.

Even though the topic of subject cataloging of archival materials is of intense and increasing interest to archivists, it seems to have never been adequately addressed. This may be because this is the area in which local practices and idiosyncrasy are most firmly entrenched. Also, it seems that, as uneasy as archivists have been with library approaches to descriptive cataloging, they have been even less comfortable with traditional subject cataloging. Some have even dispensed with subject cataloging altogether, theorizing that "subject matter is implied by the instruments of action (people and their organizations), and that name control provides a means of subject access that is not dependent on content analysis."¹⁵ For those who feel that some

¹⁴Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*, p. 22.

¹⁵Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States; A Historical Analysis* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1983), p. 33.

measure of content analysis is a vital part of being an archivist, this is not a very satisfactory approach either.

As with the descriptive aspects of cataloging, the question of standards in subject cataloging can no longer be ignored but must now be considered by archivists as part of the larger questions raised by bibliographic integration. One of the problems in using book-oriented subject headings is that manuscript collections and especially archival records are not *about* things in the way books are. Books often have a fairly narrow topical focus that can be summarized in two or three well-chosen subject headings. A modern manuscript collection, on the other hand, may deal substantively with dozens of different subjects. Past attempts to apply library subject cataloging to archival materials were generally unsatisfactory; the headings used were simply too general to be useful. Witness the great proliferation in the first volume of the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* of the headings *United States—Politics and government* and *United States—History—Sources*. Furthermore, the general library approach artificially limiting the number of headings is inappropriate for archival practice.

Beyond questions of general approach, however, archivists have genuine problems using standard library subject headings. The *Library of Congress Subject Headings* (LCSH), now in its ninth edition, was originally offered as nothing more than a list of subject headings used by the Library of Congress in cataloging its collection of books; no particular claims of universality were made for it.¹⁶ With the successful system of distributed Library of Congress cataloging, however, these headings (and indeed nearly all of the other cataloging practices of the

library) have become a kind of *de facto* national standard. The success of the bibliographic networks and the distribution of MARC tapes have solidified this acceptance.

Although LCSH is now the standard for subject cataloging, there are still no claims of universality made for it. As new subjects are identified during cataloging and as old headings become outdated, obsolete, or even embarrassing, changes are formulated, debated, and ultimately published. For archivists and manuscript curators the problem is not that the lists in LCSH are not universal, or that the mechanism for change is awkward and slow. The problem is simply that the headings were designed for books. Headings that are perfectly adequate for books may be inappropriate for manuscripts and archives. One example is the practice of choosing a particular form of a family name as the official heading and relegating all variant forms to cross-references. Most archivists would find it very difficult to explain to their genealogical patrons why a reference to the *Kiley family* must be entered under *Kelley family* simply because the latter is the only acceptable form to LCSH. Other examples can be found in the period subdivisions under the *History* and *Politics and government* subheadings under names of countries; many of these subdivisions are entirely too general for archival use and in some cases are historically arbitrary or unsound.

These criticisms aside, it should be said that the majority of subject headings in LCSH are in fact perfectly useful for archival cataloging. Most subjects encountered in manuscript collections or archival records will be found in the lists of headings and their various subdivisions. For alternatives to LCSH, the MARC

¹⁶*Library of Congress Subject Headings*, 9th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1980).

structure of AMC has allowed for endless variation and idiosyncrasy by offering a series of parallel fields for local subject headings. The RLIN manuscript record, for example, requires only one or two LCSH headings, allowing the rest to fall in local headings fields. Of course, the extensive use of local headings is counterproductive from the viewpoint of full bibliographic integration; subject searches across all formats will bear full fruit only when the subject indexing is standard.

There are other standards involved in AMC that deserve brief mention. These include the genre/form list prepared by Tom Hickerson and other archivists at Cornell University for use in the RLIN implementation. Although this list still needs some refinement, it is a fairly complete listing of the physical forms of material likely to be encountered in archival records and manuscript collections. There are also the various code lists appended to the *MARC Formats for Bibliographic Data*.¹⁷ These include geographic area codes, language codes, country of publication codes, and relator codes, although few of these are pertinent to manuscript cataloging and they are seldom required.

Some of the standards that archivists must face as they use the AMC format should pose few real problems for them and may, in fact, offer a welcome rigor in areas where formerly only chaos reigned. Others will create problems and almost certainly provoke some archival soul-searching. On one point, however, there can be little argument: the AMC format has given the archival community the opportunity to become a full partner in the broader information community of which it was always an obvious and natural (albeit unwitting) part. The

answer to the question of whether archivists are ready for the challenge and responsibility of this role will almost certainly be framed in their acceptance or rejection of the various standards required for the proper use of the format.

It is not required, however, that archivists meekly and supinely accept all rules relating to their use of these standards. Where these standards are flatly inappropriate for archival use, changes should be made. For the first time, archivists have a real stake in matters that were previously the sole province of librarians; cataloging rules, name authorities, and subject headings are now firmly part of the archival lexicon. Archivists will make their voices heard in the councils that decide on such things or they will almost certainly regret it.

For those who consider this unlikely, consider the fact that the Society of American Archivists is actively involved with the American Library Association's Committee on the Representation in Machine-Readable Form of Bibliographic Information (MARBI) and the Library of Congress as part of a cooperative effort to maintain and improve the AMC format. An alliance such as this (incredible just five years ago) is a measure of how far archivists have come in dealing maturely and realistically with the problems of automation. Momentum of this sort must not be lost. Having grappled with and successfully resolved larger questions relating to the MARC format, is there any reason archivists cannot have a similar role in and impact on the formulation and maintenance of AMC format-related standards? Surely the eventual resolution of these questions relating to the use of standards will determine the success or failure of AMC as a component of archival automation and more universal bibliographic integration.

¹⁷*MARC Formats for Bibliographic Data* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1980).