

# The International Scene

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The International Scene department is a forum for short substantive pieces on archival practices and issues in foreign settings. Particularly welcome are papers that illustrate archival practices or thinking that is not characteristic of the American archival scene. Articles by foreign archivists focusing on significant and innovative programs, projects, and activities in their institutions; observations of American archivists abroad; and commentaries by foreign archivists examining American archival practice and theory are of interest.

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## Explorations of Form of Material Authority Files by Dutch Archivists

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During the course of the NEH/Mellon sponsored Research Fellowship Program for Study of Modern Archives at the Bentley Library in the summer of 1986, the authors spent considerable time discussing access approaches to the information content of archives which did not require subject content analysis of archival series. One such access approach, advocated elsewhere by Bearman,<sup>1</sup> is to use the "form of material" to serve as a proxy for information content analysis, and to approach specific holdings of a repository through knowledge of the characteristics of the "form of material."

Although such an approach could never stand alone as a total solution to archival access (without office of origin, function, time of record creation, and possibly even some subject access), it seems promising on several counts. One obvious advantage is that archival practice recognizes forms of material, or record types, and, while archivists have not standardized their definition of record

types in the United States as the Dutch have done, the need to adopt a consistent vocabulary naming forms of material is recognized and is being acted on in archival networks.

In discussing these possibilities, the authors recognized that a drawback of the form of material vocabulary list adopted by members of the Research Libraries Information Network in the United States is the absence of detailed definitions of the form which scopes the terms and assures greater consistency in their use.<sup>2</sup> Such a list, with definitions, was completed in Holland in 1962, and revised in 1983.<sup>3</sup> The *Lexicon van Nederlandse Archieftermen* is approved by the Society of Dutch Archivists, taught in the National School for the Training of Archivists, and widely accepted as the official terminology for the arrangement and description of archives. As such, the 114 terms it defines are consistently used throughout Holland in the construction of inventories.

<sup>1</sup>David Bearman, "'Who about what' or 'From whence, why and how': Establishing Intellectual Control Standards to Provide Access to Archival Materials," *Conference on Archives, Automation and Access* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria Press, 1986), 39-47. See also, David Bearman and Richard Szary, "Beyond Authority Headings: Authorities as Reference Files in a Multi-disciplinary Setting," *Proceedings of the ARLIS/NA Symposium on Authority Control*, ed. Karen Muller (Tucson, Az.: Art Libraries of North America, 1987), 69-78; and David Bearman and Richard Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985): 14-27.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Hickerson and Elaine Engst, "Terms for Use in Field 655 of the U.S. MARC Format for Archival and Manuscript Control," unpublished, January 1984.

<sup>3</sup>J.L. van der Gouw, H. Hardenberg, W.J. van Hoboken, and G.W.A. Panhuijsen, *Nederlandse archiefterminologie* (Zwolle 1962); *Lexicon van Nederlandse Archieftermen* (Den Haag, 1983).

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Before form of material can be used for access to archival holdings with enough specificity to serve as a proxy for content indexing, however, many specific record series must be described in standard form of material authority files. Thus, terms in the current lists in the United States and in Holland can be seen as standard component terms or lead terms, used in constructing the names for forms of material in an authority file which would resemble the general records schedules being developed by a number of leading state archives for local governments. Such a file has potential not only for archival reference, but also for archival guidance of records managers and in making archival appraisal decisions.<sup>4</sup> The opportunity also exists for cross-institutional collections strategies based in part on such form of material lists and for national information retrieval utilizing forms of material for content access.

### The Dutch Example

Dutch archivists are quite far along in the development of a number of form of material descriptions at the level of record series. Since the publication in 1898 of the *Handleding voor het Ordenen en Beschrijven van Archieven* by Muller, Feith, and Fruin,<sup>5</sup> inventories based on the principles of provenance and original order have been accepted as the principle finding aid by Dutch archivists. Many other kinds of aids on different levels, such as indexes and abstracts of documents, and guides to repositories, have also been created, but never coordinated on a national level. In 1979 the Dutch archival profession undertook the publica-

tion of a series of guides to all the repositories in the Netherlands.<sup>6</sup> When completed later this year, these publications will cite each archival series or manuscript collection with a short description, including the dates and size, and make reference to existing finding aids. Once the process of providing national access to archival holdings was underway, the Society of Dutch Archivists devoted its 1981 annual meeting to finding aids. One suggestion made at this session, and since acted upon, was to publish *broncommentaren* or source commentaries.

It was widely felt that much of the knowledge built up during archival processing was lost. Although the inventories contained brief introductions, they were not supposed to contain details of the contents of specific records, regardless of the potential value of such information to researchers. During processing, archivists gained knowledge applicable to certain types of records which are found in archives throughout the country. In the inventories themselves such records were simply named using the approved term, although the series might contain information which most researchers would have no reason to suspect would be present. For example, nineteenth century school registers contain information about the vaccination of children, a fact known only to historians of medicine and archivists who process such records.

In the discussions at the 1981 meeting, it became apparent that historians were very interested in researching these regularities in records and a Committee on Broncommentaren, consisting of both archivists and historians, was established by the Society to pursue the idea.

<sup>4</sup>David Bearman, "Provenance Access to Archival Materials: Form of Material as a Descriptor of Record Series and a tool for linking Scheduling and Appraising of Modern Records," unpublished Mellon Fellows discussion paper, 5 August 1986.

<sup>5</sup>Samuel Muller, Johan A. Feith, and Robert Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, trans. Arthur H. Leavitt (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1940).

<sup>6</sup>L.M. Th. Hustinx, ed., *Overzichten van de archieven en verzamelingen in de openbare archiefbewaarplaatsen in Nederland* (Alphen a/d Rijn, 1979-), 14 vols.

That "type of record" or "form of material" was chosen as a starting point was not surprising, since Dutch archival practice emphasizes form of material in its archival descriptions. It is recognized as an important way to distinguish records from each other and to give clues to contents. Not only does the *Lexicon van Nederlandsche Archieftermen* pay special attention to form of material, but one finds in publications such as that of the municipal archives of Rotterdam examples of types of records, accompanied by photographs and a short description of the record type.<sup>7</sup> In the latest atlas of Dutch paleography,<sup>8</sup> there are more than 125 photographs of forms of material, and one of the explicit purposes of the publication is to provide as much information about such forms as possible. Dutch archivists, like their American counterparts, however, have been more accustomed to use form of material to recognize and describe records than to provide access.

The Committee on Broncommentaren limited its initial efforts to the nineteenth century, both because the historians involved were most interested in the period following the Napoleonic wars when the centralization of the Dutch government took place and special forms of material specific to bureaucracies were first introduced, and because the twentieth century presented an overwhelming number of forms of material. Criteria for including a form of material for the commentary series were that it should have been used more or less nationwide and be found, therefore, in numerous archives. In this way the series would benefit archivists throughout the country as well as researchers. Archivists were asked to sub-

mit examples of candidate forms of material from their repositories for consideration. Thus the committee could, in principle, make up an extensive list of such forms of material, although it used the submissions only to make its initial judgment of how to proceed with some exemplary commentaries.

While the *Lexicon* defines a register as a single form of material, the Committee on Broncommentaren was faced with census registers, various kinds of tax registers, conscription registers, school and church registers, registers of notaries, registers of social security, and the like. Each of these forms of material served a specific purpose, was in use in a variety of jurisdictions or nationwide, and was relatively consistent over a considerable period of time. The committee developed an outline and instructions to authors of the broncommentaren which fixed the topics to be addressed and the order in which they should be treated in order to assure that the publication series would be consistent although authored by many persons over time, and to facilitate their ultimate use.<sup>9</sup>

The guidelines stipulate that broncommentaren have the following structure:

Sect. 1: The introduction consists of  
*a) Historische situering*, the historical context of the form of material including, if specific, the jurisdiction and purposes of its creation; and *b) Visuele kennismaking*, the appearance of the form of material including a general description of its format and design such as the headings and columns used, its dimensions, and photographs of the documents, plus information on the evolution of the form over time if changes were made.

<sup>7</sup>Th. J. Poelstra, *En Hollands stadsarchief. Wegwijzer tot onderzoek*, 2nd ed. (Rotterdam, 1986).

<sup>8</sup>P. J. Horsman, Th. J. Poelstra, and J. P. Sigmond, *Schriftspiegel, Nederlandse paleografische teksten van de 13de tot de 18de eeuw* (Zutphen, n.d.).

<sup>9</sup>"Handleiding by het vervaardigen van een broncommentaar" ("Manual for the production of a broncommentaar") (Nymegen-Arnhem, 1982).

Sect. 2: *Administratieve ontstaansgeschiedenis* (administrative and juridical history) consists of a) legislative authority, b) judicial decisions and administrative determinations of procedures for use, and c) the reliability of the information content of the form. This last section is considered particularly significant both by archivists and historians, since there are functions of the government which created these forms, such as taxation and conscription, which were avoided by parts of the population, particularly at certain times.

Sect. 3: *Verwijzende notities* (references), consists of a) location of the form of material, reflecting its provenance (for example, that it would be found in municipal archives, state archives or only certain regions of the country); b) related forms of material, and forms of material which are likely to contain information with which to test the veracity of data provided in the form which is the subject of the commentary; and c) literature, either about the form of material itself as a type of record, or literature which makes extensive use of the form of material as a source of information.

Sect. 4: *Mogelijke gebruikswijzen* (use) consists of advice on how best to use the form of material, suggesting opportunities for its use (for instance in genealogical research, population studies, etc.), or how to combine its information with that of other forms of material for particular purposes.

Annotations and appendixes.

Obviously, the preparation of a broncommentaar as defined above requires extra time in the processing of records, but once written such broncommentaren are extremely useful not only for researchers using the specific series, but for reference archivists all over the country. Dutch archivists hope to find the compensation for this extra investment in better access. In addition, it is not simply a project of the archivists, but was from the very start a joint endeavor with historians. The history department at the University of Nijmegen is already actively involved in producing broncommentaren, and it is hoped other universities will follow their lead. The National School for Training of Archivists is also involved, and its students will doubtless contribute considerably to the evolving literature, since they are encouraged to write a broncommentaar in the course of their studies.

All broncommentaren have to pass the committee which will make all editorial and publication decisions. It presently plans to publish four broncommentaren each year. The first four,<sup>10</sup> issued in 1982 and 1985, described the following forms of material:

- I. Register of municipal tax on individual incomes, 1851–1922;
- II. Registers of licensing fees for professions, 1805–1893;
- III. Census Registers, 1807–1808;
- IV. Voting Lists, 1811 (1812, 1813).

Dutch archivists are aware that this is an ambitious program, especially for a

<sup>10</sup>P.M.M. Klep, A. Lansink, and W. van Mulken, *Broncommentaren I De Kohieren van de gemeentelijke hofdelijke omslag 1851–1922* (Arnhem: Stichting Archief Publikaties, 1982); P.M.M. Klep, A. Lansink, and W.F.M. Terwisscha van Scheltinga, *Broncommentaren II De registers van patenplichtigen 1805–1893* ('s-Gravenhage: Stichting Archief Publikaties, 1985); J.L. van Zanden, *Broncommentaren III De Volkstelling van 1807–1808* ('s-Gravenhage: Stichting Archief Publikaties, 1985); J.L. van Zanden, *Broncommentaren IV De "Registres Civiques" 1811, 1812, 1813* ('s-Gravenhage: Stichting Archief Publikaties, 1985); and B. Koerhuis and W. Van Mulken, *Broncommentaren V De Militieregisters 1815–1922* ('s-Gravenhage: Stichting Archief Publikaties, 1986).

small country like the Netherlands, but hope that with the cooperation of archivists and historians, they will be able to create a series of broncommentaren which ultimately describe all the important forms of material in use in the nineteenth century in Holland.

### Implications

The authors' discussions of this series of publications suggested some exciting opportunities for Dutch archivists and some potentially valuable contributions to practice in the United States.

Making the link between such extended analyses of forms of material and the terms used to describe forms of material in inventories, and using these terms consistently across all of archival practice within a country, would considerably extend the understanding of records which archivists could provide to researchers.

Building national information systems, published or on-line, which exploited the consistent use of such terminology, and supporting access by an authority file which is created by such a series of broncommentaren would allow researchers to co-locate material with common informational attributes and use form as a vehicle to cross jurisdictional boundaries in the search for relevant evidence. Especially in public records, where the particular name of an office of origin for the same form of material will vary widely across jurisdictions, researchers could use form directly without having to rely upon knowledge of the changing structure of

responsibilities across numerous jurisdictions.

While the broncommentaren are currently oriented largely toward researchers, and especially towards historical research, they could be made valuable to archivists by including a section devoted to archival management of the form of material, which would address considerations for appraisal (including sampling issues), arrangement problems, and reference use. An additional section concerning records management concerns, such as cut-off points for transfer, scheduling (including mandated retention requirements), and exploitation of the form of material to satisfy administrative information requirements, would be of value to records managers and could have the added benefit of strengthening the ties between records managers and archivists. It would also provide a means for carrying the project of broncommentaren into the twentieth century where its use could be proactive, rather than simply retrospective.

Advancing this type of publication as a legitimate avenue for archival professional achievement, and including records managers and historians in it, has the additional benefit of providing one focus for archival professional training since appraisal, description, and access to records depends upon knowledge of these forms of material and their characteristics including history, legal status, and potential research use.