Standards: Background Paper

Archival Description Standards: Scope and Criteria

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Abstract: The archival profession is witnessing a call for the development and adoption of archival description standards that stems from a desire to exchange descriptive information among repositories by taking advantage of more effective and affordable technology. This movement, however, has not fully comprehended the costs and limitations inherent in the development and use of standards. In particular, it has not addressed the need to make the most effective use of resources and to satisfy local requirements by defining the proper scope of standards and the criteria by which to evaluate them. This paper attempts to focus the standards process by offering a definition of its proper scope, and criteria for evaluating the quality of proposed standards.

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THE DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE of a set of standards in any field is an undertaking that should not be entered into lightly or with unrealistic expectations. The factors that provide the impetus for standards are generally a healthy sign of professional development: consensus on the validity of procedures and approaches; a determination that the profession has embarked on a shared enterprise that requires unambiguous communication; and the willingness to adjust local concerns to benefit that larger shared undertaking. A realistic assessment of the cost of developing and maintaining standards and of the limited benefits that their use will generate, however, is essential to their effective implementation.

Need for Archival Descriptive Standards

Recent developments in the archival profession have fed the need for, and the drive toward, description standards. Foremost in these developments has been the supply-side movement toward shared databases for the dissemination of archival descriptions. The cost and effectiveness of technology to support these efforts, coupled with the absence of any compelling reason to make the attempt, had previously worked against the success of such undertakings, tending to reinforce the insularity of individual repositories. The successful attempts at union catalog-type projects for specific types of materials have generally been non-continuing efforts of limited scope. They can also be properly categorized as centralized rather than shared efforts.

The success of library networks and abstracting databases, and the availability of less expensive and more effective technology, have led archivists to pursue the development of shared inter-institutional systems for support of on-going cooperative descriptive projects. An essential part of these projects, particularly in the automated environment, is the adoption of shared standards for the unambiguous communication of archival descriptions. If one assumes the validity of the network-of-networks approach to information sharing (as opposed to a monolithic network), with an individual repository contributing descriptions to a multitude of variously oriented and overlapping systems, then the need for a consensus on extra-institutional and non-system-specific descriptive standards becomes imperative.

Consensus on approaches and practices is also emerging, although it is not yet supported by a theoretical structure sufficient to guide further developments and enhancements. Most development has proceeded from practical situations. While the underlying ideas that inform those practices are becoming clearer, testing and confirmation of those ideas still remain to be done. Part of that testing and confirmation process is the attempt to codify current thinking to resolve the ambiguities and inconsistencies resulting from that codification effort.

The most significant and far-reaching development, however, is the emerging realization that the universe of documentation that archivists must deal with, and that researchers require, cannot be treated as either institution- or form-specific. While recognizing the vital responsibility that a repository has to its parent institution, there is a growing understanding of the interdependence and interaction of institutions and the consequent interdependence of their documentation. Effective reference service can no longer address only the holdings of one repository, but should alert the user to the range of pertinent documentation, no matter what form or location. Descriptive resources that can be shared and understood, regardless of their origin, are needed to support this shared responsibility for the entire range of documentation.

The adoption of the MARC AMC format and the general use of *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts* by archival repositories attest to archivists' willingness to

attempt to accommodate their local needs within broader frameworks. This development is significant, given the traditional guarding of the repository's prerogatives in descriptive procedures; archivists have recognized the value of disseminating information about their holdings through cooperative networks and have come to realize that it is worth the price of modifying local practice to make that possible. There is also a reluctance to reinvent the descriptive wheel repeatedly and a realization that the differences in descriptive practices are not serious enough to prevent consensus.

Limitations and Costs

Against this background of desires and expectations, however, one must still recognize the cost and limitations of standards. Effective standards cannot be dictated by a single, centralized source, but must be arrived at through consultation and consensus. The political and economic independence of most U.S. repositories from each other works against the acceptance of standards imposed by fiat. It is also unlikely that any one repository has sufficient breadth of experience and holdings to be able to address the concerns of all repositories. Consequently, if archivists are to develop widely accepted and effective standards, they must look to more expensive and time-consuming processes that involve input from numerous sources.

The standards process is not a one-shot procedure, but an on-going mechanism for development, maintenance, dissemination, and review. The fact that a profession develops a particular standard or set of guidelines does not make that standard effective. No matter how exhaustively the development group may try to solicit input and cover all eventualities, there will be omissions and ambiguities and a continual need for interpretation. Changing circumstances or local needs may lead to requests for changes or enhancements that will take place unilat-

erally unless some mechanism is in place to process requests for modifications. Once published, standards must be continually available and promoted. All these activities require expensive, on-going support.

Over-simplification and excessive hopes for the role of archival description standards are understandable tendencies in a profession with limited first-hand standards experience. Standards are not a black box into which raw archival records are fed and from which a predictable and consistent description is generated. At the most basic level, differences in emphasis and expertise can result in two very different descriptions of the same material. Both may be "standard" descriptions in that they contain information assembled and recorded according to applicable description standards, but standards cannot prescribe focus, comprehensiveness, or accuracy. The expectation is only that the information in a description produced according to standards will be compatible and comprehensible with other descriptions produced according to the same standards.

Standards cannot impose conformity where real differences in substance and approach exist. Overly prescriptive standards that seek to homogenize descriptive practice can limit the usefulness and amount of information that is required to describe the material adequately. One must distinguish between situations where descriptive information will merge predictably and naturally, independent of the subjective judgment of the archivist; and those, such as assignment of access points, where different emphases or approaches will result in markedly different results. While description standards must directly address the structure and content of areas that fall into the first situation, their purpose in the second case must be to coordinate the comprehensible recording of information derived from a multitude of perspectives.

Standards development should also concentrate on areas in which it is agreed that

the lack of a standard will likely lead to confusion, and in which there is sufficient experience and knowledge to propose a solution that represents a professional consensus. Given the resources needed to develop and maintain standards effectively, serious decisions must be made about the usefulness and priority of standards development in any particular area.

Proper Scope of Description Standards

The archival profession has clearly expressed the need for description standards and demonstrated the likelihood of their usefulness in promoting the effectiveness of descriptive products, despite their costs and limitations. We have yet to delineate the general scope and basic intent of archival description standards and to determine how one can judge whether a proposed standard is appropriate. The following is offered as a statement of intent:

Description standards are appropriate: (1) to ensure that archival description is comprehensible to its users; (2) to ensure predictable access to archival descriptions; and (3) to encourage the acceptance and adoption of descriptive programs of professional quality.

Comprehensibility. An archival description provides information about a body of archival materials, sufficient to support the user's judgment on its relevance to his or her needs. In order to serve this surrogate role effectively, the description must be readily understandable to the user. The relationship of the information to the materials must be obvious, and separate pieces of information must be arranged in logical groups, each of which represent a particular set of the material's characteristics.

Comprehensibility is linked to interpretation and presentation, but rests on a basis of content. Definitional standards for data elements and data groups (or descriptive areas) are the most vital since they guide the content of the data element and the descriptive structure in which data elements exist. This definition must take place in a logical, and not just enumerative, fashion. Comprehensibility of content and structure must exist across descriptive products as well as across databases; it is the basis on which effective and flexible products can be designed.

A particular descriptive product must also have a comprehensible presentation; the user cannot make effective use of a tool whose presentation structure is inconsistent and changing. The existence of a consistent, comprehensible structure allows the user to internalize it and concentrate on the informational content of the description rather than its format.

It is less clear, however, that comprehensibility requires that descriptive products such as finding aids and access tools must conform to a standard presentation format. There is no evidence of the existence of, or need for, frequent and intense use of a range of archival descriptive products originating from different repositories, outside of a shared database. It is this type of use that might provide support for standard presentation formats for descriptive products beyond the catalog record.

A properly designed product will enable users to internalize its presentation and access structure quickly, allowing them to concentrate on content rather than format. The benefits of standardization, beyond those to be derived from well-designed products, are debatable, however. A case might also be made that the intended purpose and audience for a descriptive product should determine the format of the product, and that different purposes and audiences require different formats.

Guidelines for the design of products might be more useful than prescriptive standards for formatting archival descriptions. These guidelines would emphasize the types of information that, because they are logically related to each other, might

be presented together and are likely to be of most immediate and beneficial use to users.

Access. Another feature of a well-designed information product is predictability and reliability in access. Library descriptive standards restrict their scope in terms of access to guidelines for main or added entries, those that reflect the creative responsibility for the work being described. Access points reflecting the content or other characteristics of the work are treated separately as subject cataloging. Discussion of archival description standards have merged the two access approaches, attempting to deal with both objective description and content interpretation.

Questions of description standards for access extend beyond the issue of form of heading and choice of authority file. One must first understand the role of descriptive information in providing access and the consequent guidelines for choice of entry. Once archivists agree on guidelines for these types of descriptive choices, they can be explained rationally through bibliographic education for users of archival descriptive products, and provide access points with a greater degree of predictability and reliability. Users can then know the basic components of an archival description with some assurance and can formulate requests and citations in ways that embody those essential pieces of information.

The assignment of access points that reflect interpretation rather than description and the vocabulary-control aspects of authority control also need additional attention, but discussion of these issues should be separated from that of description standards. While they all contribute to the effectiveness of description and retrieval, they are logically separate activities and are best treated as separate pieces of an integrated process.

Improvement of description programs. Description standards have a less direct impact on the quality of, and support

for, descriptive programs. The existence of professionally accepted description standards can enable a repository to concentrate more of its resources on descriptive work than on the design and construction of descriptive systems. It can also offer the assurance of a basic level of descriptive quality to which a repository can aspire in developing its program.

A large number of archival programs report to non-archival administrators. Archival staff can use standards as a means of dispelling myths that administrators might have about the aims and levels of archival descriptive practice. Administrators, in turn, can use standards as objective means to assess the effectiveness of the program.

Criteria for Description Standards

The preceding sections of this discussion have dealt with the factors that can determine whether a particular area of descriptive practice should be subject to standardization across the profession. One must still, however, have a means of judging the validity and effectiveness of a particular proposed standard for an area that falls within that scope. Some of these criteria are process-oriented, some relate to content, and some focus on presentation.

Process-oriented criteria. Both the formulation and maintenance of an effective description standard require processes that ensure sufficient attention to development, review, and modification. Standards cannot be promulgated in a vacuum and must be exposed continuously to reevaluation in the light of actual implementation. While technological, economic, or system-specific requirements should not drive description standards, they will affect their adoption in actual practice.

A larger and broader group involved in the development of a proposed descriptive standard will more likely encompass all needed concerns in an acceptable fashion. No matter how extensive the experience and

knowledge that an individual or institution brings to the development of a standard, their perspectives will necessarily skew its applicability toward their own needs and viewpoint. While the profession should not discourage the individual application of resources to such projects, it should: (1) encourage individuals and institutions interested in developing standards to submit plans and ideas to a professional forum for critique prior to commencement of the project; and (2) provide a review mechanism to evaluate the progress and products of such efforts and serve as a vehicle for input and comment. The profession, in other words, should define and provide the prerequisites for successful standards development. The profession should also provide funding agencies with guidelines and criteria for good standards development and encourage evaluation of proposals in the light of those factors.

In addition to soliciting input in the standards development process, archivists must also establish a mechanism for evaluating particular standards and for promulgating those that are deemed useful and valid. While the profession should try to encourage input into standards development projects, it must take an even more active role in evaluating and approving products designed and promoted as description standards for the profession. A central body should coordinate the review of proposed standards according to established and published criteria, and provide a forum for soliciting and receiving comments. Upon completion of the review process, the body should determine whether the standard meets the stated criteria, and report to the profession. In this way, practicing archivists will have the assurance that their colleagues have reviewed and endorsed such standards. A description standard cannot be a static document. As the standard is used in practical situations, flaws and areas in need of interpretation or enhancement are sure to surface. If the standard does not provide a

means for review of these findings, the standard will either fall into disuse or be modified and interpreted unilaterally. To the extent possible, the profession should require developers of description standards to state the procedures they envision for ongoing maintenance of the standard and evaluate the practicality of such proposed mechanisms. Unless the review body is satisfied with the potential effectiveness of the proposed mechanism, it should proceed with caution before promulgating the standard for use by the profession.

Finally, there must be an on-going and widely-known source for dissemination of the standard itself and information about standards decisions. The standard developer may have the ability and commitment to handle initial distribution. On-going availability, however, will require that the profession negotiate responsibility with a program, such as the Society of American Archivists' publication program or the National Archives and Record Administration's Archives Library Information Center (ALIC), with the necessary resources and commitment to devote to such dissemination.

Content-related criteria. The test of a description standard is the extent to which its content addresses and resolves concerns in the pertinent area of archival description. The proposed standard should include a statement of its purpose and scope. Such a statement helps the user apply the standard properly. It also provides evidence that the developers of the standard have considered the implications and application of their work and allows others to assess both intent and results accordingly.

The proposed standard should also embody, as closely as possible, the professional consensus on current practice in the area without foreclosing possibilities for further development. The profession should not promulgate standards that embody practices that have not been thoroughly tested in actual situations. Standards should

also avoid long-standing practices that have
proven difficult to rationalize and apply or
that are under scrutiny for replacement. Lo-
cal practices, no matter how effective or
beneficial, should not become profession-
wide standards until they have been proven
in a number of settings.

One must also be able to verify the prac-
tices suggested in the standard. A standard
does not exist when two people can legit-
imately derive two conflicting practices from
it. The standard must provide for an un-
ambiguous means of determining its proper
application in particular situations. The
standard must either suggest reasonably
achievable practices or provide levels of
implementation that permit progressively
enhanced but compatible applications. A
standard that expects repositories to com-
mit unavailable resources for compliance
will be ignored, whatever the potential ben-
efits.

Presentation-related criteria. No mat-
ter how thoroughly a standard has been de-
veloped, much of the success of its
implementation will rest on its presenta-
tion. The easier a standard is to understand
and apply, the more likely it is to gain ac-

ceptance. The composition and style of the
standard must be clear and unambiguous,
written to assist the potential user and to
reflect its intent accurately. Wherever pos-
sible, standards should include examples of
applications in varying situations, clear ta-
bles of contents, and comprehensive in-
dexes.

None of the above discussion presents
any novel or surprising conclusions. To a
large extent, it is cautionary in emphasizing
the complexity of the standards process,
particularly when it attempts to deal with
profession-wide concerns. Archivists are
chronically short of resources, both as in-
dividual institutions and as a profession.
Whatever commitment they make to an ef-
fective standards process should be well-
considered in light of the costs, limitations,
and expected benefits. A well-managed and
implemented standards process is an essen-
tial prerequisite to expanded and enhanced
information exchange. An ad hoc approach
that does not attempt to guide the process
wastes scarce resources and can lead to in-
effectual and misguided efforts that can
hinder the development of truly usable ar-
chival description standards.