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March of the Librarians

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Recently I got a note from an acquaintance in Canada asking me if I was that librarian in the red coat in one of the first scenes of the latest YouTube sensation, *The March of the Librarians*. [1] I had to admit to her that no, it wasn't me, but that I, too, had thought it might be when I first saw the video—until I remembered that I didn't have a red coat! I'm afraid that, particularly at a distance, a lot of middle-aged, zaftig librarians with gray hair and sensible shoes look remarkably alike—a thought I don't like to dwell on, but there it is.

In case you haven't seen it, do take a peek. It's a take off on the surprise hit film *March of the Penguins*, but the librarians' version is filmed at ALA Midwinter in Seattle instead of the Antarctic. It even uses the same music as the penguin film, and the narration sounds like every nature film you've ever seen, complete with pointing out the facial “plumage” sported by the males, and the predatory nature of the vendors in the exhibits. There are a lot of scenes of librarians riding up and down those escalators at the Seattle convention center, taken from above, looking remarkably like the penguins hiking across the ice of the Antarctic. Except more colorful, of course.

As I've mentioned before, a significant chunk of my time these days is spent thinking about what the future will look like for the traditional cataloging sector of our profession. I'm not alone in that concern, I know, but as someone who is generally considered a defector from the one true path, I've few compunctions about saying pretty much what I think, and I'm prepared to get strong reactions. I admit to liking reactions, both positive and negative, so I'm not uncomfortable in this role. Some of you have probably read the article I co-authored with Karen Coyle, published in the January *DLib Magazine*. [2] That article got a gratifying amount of reaction, from both sides of the issues.

As I said at some point in that article, one of my big issues with the RDA development is that it assumes that there is still one true path, bibliographically speaking, and it attempts to herd everyone onto that path and keep them there. This has been remarkably unsuccessful, as it's clear that large groups of librarians (and archivists) have been cutting alternate paths through the wilderness, and paving them, even. Mainstream librarians, those whose major focus has been traditional book-and-periodical based collections, have seen themselves as the center of the universe, and their seeming success in achieving hegemony with their major standards—AACR2 and MARC—have led to the usual hubris as the world of publishing, scholarship, and information has moved beyond their long held assumptions.

I've been on record approving the RDA's aspirations to build bibliographic guidance that can be used more generally than AACR2 could, although I should probably withdraw a vain hope I uttered in print about my hopes that our cousins in archives and museums might “return to the fold.” That's analogous to my family saying that they wish I'd become a Republican: it's just not gonna happen, no matter that our relationships now are better and closer than they have been for years. I've been working lately with a small group of librarians who have been expressing very vocal unhappiness with RDA development, and I'm coming to the conclusion that rather than welcoming the wandering archivists and museum cousins back in to the fold, what we should be doing is recognizing that they're far further along than

traditional librarians in planning for better access for now and in the future. They have come up with some approaches to describing their materials that are clearly more flexible, effective, and forward thinking than anything being discussed by RDA developers. That said, they would probably be the first to say they have more work to do to approach their ideal.

Bill Landis, an archivist now working at Yale, describes the situation in an article being prepared for publication in the *VRA Bulletin*:

“AACR, and with it the broader notion of bibliographic control, have taken a somewhat universalizing approach to defining a concrete scope for bibliographic standards. Library materials are clearly the focus of these standards, but more precisely their aim is the creation of descriptive surrogates like catalog records for materials that are consciously published and/or distributed in multiple copies. Dissatisfactions similar to those within the archives and museum communities discussed in this article have led some communities of format-based professionals to develop their own rules that are based on, but differ from AACR's format-specific chapters.” [3]

As the RDA development moves inexorably (and dysfunctionally) forward, there has been increasing interest in breaking down the silos between libraries, museums and archives, by looking anew at the structural and distribution standards, as well as the so-called “content standards.” I must admit that I’ve never been clear what a “content standard” is, though the term is used fairly promiscuously to cover the named elements or categories of information within a standard, as well as the information or values that are used with those elements or categories. Whatever you call the parts of a standard, it seems clear (to me, at least) that we must disaggregate the components we used to mush together in our standards, in order to make it possible to use them in shareable and interoperable ways.

Based on what we see in user behavior, it seems obvious that the silos we’ve created behind the scenes don’t work very well in the new information environment. Quoting Bill Landis again:

“Nothing about cultural heritage materials themselves indicates that they should be controlled using one framework or another. One can not pick up a cultural heritage object, for example, and say that it is inherently archival. This is a repository-based decision, impacted by a host of factors, and various collections within a given cultural heritage institution might be controlled differently.” [3]

So, if each repository can make its own decisions about treatment of materials, and we still want to share the resulting metadata—and every indication is that both will apply—we must be able to use standard approaches to data creation and management to accomplish this. The VRA Core (now at version 4.0), the Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA), Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO) and Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS) have adapted far better than libraries have to the new technological imperatives around data sharing. [4,5,6,7] Both CCO and DACS have unfortunately stuck with a traditional print publication model, making it difficult to use outside the archival community (and not incidentally, difficult to update in a world of constant change and adaptation). Both CDWA and VRA Core are essentially available online and have been for the last few versions. None of these standards have gone the distance and formally declared their terms and definitions, a step increasingly necessary to ensure that data can be easily processed by machine. (More on this in a later column!)

The small group of disaffected librarians I've been working with has proposed a "*Framework for a Bibliographic Future*," which advocates a full disaggregation of our current standards into a new data framework:

"The four components that we propose are: a **model** of basic structures and relationships, a **schema** that defines an extensible set of properties, **guidance** for application of the properties, and **encoding**. The model can be used to create one or more schemas, and any schema can be expressed using one or more encodings. The guidance document is a key element that provides both direction to creators but also describes the semantics of the data elements in a human-understandable way. These four components provide a basis for creation of machine-manipulable metadata that has meaning to a community yet it can be defined in a rigorous way to communicate clearly to any users of the data." [8]

The archives and museum communities have done some of this already, but have still combined some components in ways that make interoperability a bit challenging, quite aside from the fact that there is a somewhat confusing plethora of standards around images. Mary Elings and Günter Waibel, in a recent First Monday article, described a similar component-based framework, consisting of data fields and structure, data content and values, data format, and data exchange. [9] Clearly there is basic agreement between these frameworks, though the names are slightly different and one framework begins at a higher level and the other goes a bit further into the concrete.

What all this highlights is that while we still may disagree vehemently about the one true path to the new goals of shareability and interoperability, we can probably agree that different approaches to description (bibliographic or otherwise) based on different community needs are a new law of the universe in which we now live.

So, despite the seeming evidence of the *March of the Librarians*, in fact we as librarians, archivists, and museum professionals haven't been marching in step for a long time. One of the benefits technology confers upon us, in addition to the complications it creates, is the capacity to support both diversity and interoperability. It's not about marching in step to the same music, but instead agreeing on the musical notation: the technical agreements, shared efforts on mapping, sound planning and quality control. The challenge ahead is to build on a shared understanding of our mutual needs and reaffirm the imperative of working together. To make that ideal a reality requires leadership that understands that change is inevitable, and can't be fought with a rear guard action.

[1] *March of the Librarians*. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Td922l0NoDQ>

[2] Coyle, Karen and Diane I. Hillmann. *Resource Description and Access (RDA): Cataloging Rules for the 20th Century*. Available at: <http://dlib.org/dlib/january07/coyle/01coyle.html>

[3] Landis, William E. *Plays Well With Others: DACS and CCO as Interoperable Metadata Content Standards*. (To be published in the VRA Bulletin)

[4] VRA Core 4.0. Available at: <http://www.vraweb.org/projects/vracore4/index.html>

[5] Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA). Available at:
http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/standards/cdwa/

[6] Cataloging Cultural Objects. Available at:
<http://www.vraweb.org/ccoweb/cco/index.html>

[7] Describing Archives: A Content Standard. Information available at:
<http://www.archivists.org/catalog/pubDetail.asp?objectID=1279>

[8] *Framework for a Bibliographic Future*. Available at: <http://futurelib.pbwiki.com/Framework>

[9] Elings, Mary W. and Günter Waibel. Metadata for All: Descriptive Standards and Metadata Sharing across Libraries, Archives and Museums, *First Monday*, v. 12, no. 3 (March 2007). Available at:
http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue12_3/elings/index.html