

Cataloguing Rules! The Road to RDA

by F. Tim Knight

“Still I can not help thinking that the golden age of cataloging is over ...”

Charles A. Cutter

Preface, 4th ed. Rules for a Dictionary Catalog (1904)

It was 1901 when the Library of Congress began distributing their printed catalogue cards to interested libraries. In 1904 Cutter was considering the impact the distribution of these cataloguing cards might have on the cataloguing profession. In the preface to the 4th edition of his Rules for a Dictionary Catalog he wrote:

“Still I can not help thinking that the golden age of cataloging is over, and that the difficulties and discussions which have furnished an innocent pleasure to so many will interest them no more. Another lost art.”

But rather than marking an end to this 'golden' profession it proved to be the beginning of a new age, an age of cooperative cataloguing. And shared cataloguing turned out to be a technological innovation that greatly improved the cataloguing process fostering greater consistencies in the interpretation and application of the cataloguing rules and lowering costs through reduced duplication of effort and greater economies of scale.

As we continue to transition into the 21st century we are faced with a similar turning point. In this age of networked information, information organization and retrieval has become incredibly important. And the library profession, the profession that has traditionally dealt with information, like everybody else, has found it difficult to handle the volume of information that now flows through our information space. We are expecting our information organizers, our cataloguers, to continue to handle and provide access to our library resources. But in some ways the cataloguing profession is stuck. Our bibliographic tools cannot keep pace with this new digital reality. We need to reassess our cataloguing tools, update our bibliographic processes, and broaden the scope of our metadata creation. If we succeed we may find ourselves at the beginning of a new 'golden age of cataloging'.

The seeds for Resource Description and Access (RDA) were sown in October of 1997 when, for three days, Toronto hosted an invited group of international cataloguing experts brought together under the auspices of the International Federation of Library Associations to review the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR). Attendees at this International Conference on the Principles & Future Development of AACR concluded that there were some fundamental problems that needed to be addressed if AACR were to continue to be a useful descriptive standard into the 21st century. The central question revolved around whether AACR could function in the rapidly changing information environment that was ushering in an entirely new bibliographic universe.

For the next few years the Joint Steering Committee for Revision of AACR (JSC) continued to maintain AACR2 producing a series of revisions that attempted to correct or realign the issues identified at the conference. However, because these updates were reactive, applied to the problems after the fact, they didn't solve the longterm challenges facing cataloguers involved with the information flood and the description of electronic resources.

For a short period there was talk of trying to create a new edition, AACR3, but it became clear that without a complete overhaul AACR3 was not going to be the answer. AACR had become fragmented and was simply not flexible enough to anticipate the many new and emerging information resources that were making their way onto the internet and subsequently into our libraries. To keep up with life in the 'digital world' a completely new approach was needed, and in 2005, the JSC changed its name to the Joint Steering Committee for the Development of RDA and presented the first draft of a new cataloguing standard: Resource Description and Access.

To understand the need for RDA we should take a quick look at how the current information space developed and how it contributed to the development and modification of AACR.

When you think about it AACR is not really all that old. It first appeared in 1967 as a collaborative effort between the American Library Association, the Library of Congress, the Library Association (British) and the Canadian Library Association, and although it was a joint project in the end it was issued in two similar but separate editions: one for North American libraries and the other for British libraries. This collaboration had started 60 years earlier at about the same time that Cutter had been worrying about the potential impact that the printed cataloguing cards was going to have on the cataloguing profession. It wasn't until 1978, under the direction of Michael Gorman, that the first combined set of rules was issued as AACR2. So although the development of AACR started at the beginning of the 20th century it's really only been available for the last 40 years. But a lot has changed in those 40 years.

It is important to realize that the heart and soul of the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules is the book. Books with a title and a statement of responsibility clearly displayed on the 'chief source of information': which on a book is the title page. A book will usually have a straight-forward title, a clearly stated statement of responsibility (i.e. an author or two), a familiar publisher, with standard paging, perhaps some illustrations, bibliographic references, etc. This is what AACR was designed to describe and it does it well.

As the publishing industry grew more books were produced, and the cataloguing rules evolved to handle the idiosyncrasies of the different publishers as they tried to distinguish themselves in the growing market place. As the publishing industry expanded in the late 60s/early 70s, the number of books entering the market increased substantially along with an increase in 'foreign' language titles coming from 'foreign' publishers. But AACR was equipped for these changes, because AACR dealt with books.

When new information formats began to emerge they were identified as 'non-books'. Anything outside of the book paradigm was considered different but still examined through the lens of the book. Microfiche and microfilm became popular because it offered to expand collections and save space on library shelves. AACR easily handled this format because this was just the book reproduced. Then other 'non-book' formats began to appear like film strips, audio tape cassettes, 16mm films, vinyl records, and video tapes all accepted as valuable parts of the library's collection. These new formats were handled relatively well by AACR, but the cataloguing process still attempted to impose the characteristics used to organize books on these 'non-book' resources.

And indeed, these were not books. Where is the title page now and where is the title? Is it on the

case? On the label? Oh, wait it's actually on both, but the titles are slightly different? Let's check the brochure that came with it or perhaps a printed catalogue from a noted authority. Maybe the best title will be found on the content of the tape itself? Cataloguers will need to listen or watch the content to find out the necessary information. It's a process that is no different from investigating a book, but we're looking for descriptive characteristics we're used to finding when dealing with books which may or may not be found in these new material formats.

In the early 80s the floppy disk appeared storing text documents and software for use with the recently introduced personal computer. This format was intuitively called 'computer files' by the rule makers. Towards the end of the 80s the process of converting the card catalogue to the computer-based Online Public Access Catalogue, i.e. the OPAC, had begun. Electronic texts also began entering library collections on the CD-ROM which quickly became very popular for databases and multimedia in the early 90s. Then come the audio CD for music and spoken word. And DVDs for films. All kinds of information in an ever increasing number of digital information formats.

Up to this point libraries had been selecting and organizing resources that they had purchased and owned. There were many new innovations to deal with but it was still taking place within the confines of the individual library building as they developed their own physical collections. But since the mid-80s ARPANET¹ had been quietly percolating along emerging in the early 90s as the Internet. Here we found Gopher space (remember Archie, Veronica and Jughead) the first 'search engines', Gopher information directories really, followed shortly by the full blown wild World Wide Web (with an acronym containing more syllables than the full name it represents) appearing in the mid-90s.

And, to be sure, a lot of this information was useful to our students, faculty, lawyers and researchers. We can't collect it and own it like the physical resources we've been used to, but we can select and point to it so our users can find it more easily. In fact we can describe them and add them to the catalogue. After all they're just like those 'computer files' we've been handling only now they're available outside the library over the Internet.

Now we have resources that are part of the library's collection but not actually found inside the library. How do we describe these resources? What's the best way to connect our users to these new information sources? How do we express the relationships between resources so relevant materials they find on their own will lead to other relevant materials? How can we describe all these different digital resources with cataloguing rules that are still largely rooted in describing the book?

But wait, AACR has evolved too! There are chapters for books, maps, music, recordings, electronic resources, etc. A chapter for all of the types of things you'd find in a modern library. If you want to describe an electronic book the cataloguer would consult chapters 2 (Books, etc.) and 9 (Electronic Resources). That seems reasonable. If the item were a map, chapter 3 (Cartographic Materials). A map that's online, chapters 3 (Cartographic Materials) and 9 (Electronic Resources). But today we've got blogs, audio blogs, video blogs, comments to blogs, video comments to audio blogs, wikis, social networks, social tagging, social bookmarking, groups on social networks, electronic journals, electronic pre-prints, electronic journal aggregators, institutional digital repositories, etc., etc., etc. Although it can be done, this really does not translate well into AACR2.

1 Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) of the U.S. Department of Defense.

When we're dealing with what Stephen Abram has called 'format agnosticism', where everything is available digitally, it doesn't matter so much if it's a book, a journal article, a presentation, a blog, a news release, a recording, etc. It's out there and it's available. It's either useful to our library users or it's not.

Think of a podcast for example. How would you describe a podcast? A podcast like TVO's Allan Gregg in Conversation². It's an audio recording, it's in a digital format available remotely on the Internet, and it appears regularly every week or so. AACR2 has a chapter for each of these. So you could flip back and forth between chapters 6 (Sound Recordings), 9 (Electronic Resources) and 12 (Continuing Resources). Or maybe, if we continued developing AACR, we might end up creating a new chapter devoted to describing podcasts. Which is fine to a point, but can we continue to create new chapters for every type of emerging information resource that might come around? It takes too much time to develop new rules and this will just make cataloguing more complicated, time consuming and costly. This is still a reactive approach which means the rules will always be behind any new developments in information technology. Enter RDA.

One of the main goals of RDA is to simplify the cataloguing process. Rather than provide a number of specialized chapters that deal with particular categories of materials RDA will attempt to present a single set of instructions capable of describing any type of information resource. It will no longer matter if the resource is a book, a podcast or some as yet to be invented information resource. RDA will provide the necessary guidelines and instructions to record the attributes and relationships that represent the content of the information resource.

This should help new cataloguers, and metadata creators working outside the library profession, who may be unfamiliar with the traditional library approach to information organization, learn the necessary processes involved with creating metadata and contribute to better and more consistent cataloguing decisions. This should also make it easier for the experienced cataloguer, used to the inherent complexities of flipping around in AACR, to transition to this new cataloguing methodology.

By focussing on content RDA will establish a clear line of separation between the recorded bibliographic data and the presentation of that data. This will keep the recorded data independent from any particular structure or syntax that might be used for the storage or display of the bibliographic information. By isolating the data the metadata can be used and reused in a variety of ways with a much greater potential for application in different information contexts. Most information resources are now 'born digital' and some form of metadata is created for different purposes at different points along the information supply chain. It makes increasing sense to consolidate and incorporate this available metadata to enhance user access to the resources.

Metadata can be provided by the author, the publisher, the distributor, the seller, the access provider, the indexer or the cataloguer. Each creates metadata that serves their own needs and there can be considerable overlap in the information provided from one contributor to the next. But the metadata doesn't usually travel along with resource and is usually left behind with the metadata creator. If this metadata were created using a common standard it could be more easily captured, transferred and built upon at each stage in the life of an information resource. This could reduce duplication of effort and realize new economies of scale leading to a reduction in the overall cost of creating metadata, both in

2 <<http://feeds.tvo.org/podcasts/audio/AllanGreggInConversation?format=xml>>

terms of money and time.

By working with other metadata communities the potential for sharing existing metadata, like tables of contents, reviews, classification numbers, etc., will enhance the cumulative efforts of all metadata providers. A shared content standard could also facilitate harvesting metadata directly from information resources. Using computers to collect descriptive metadata could provide greater opportunities for information professionals to focus on the intellectual content providing more time for intellectual analysis and organization.

With this in mind RDA stakeholders are working together with other information communities (e.g. archives, museums, publishers, educators, book dealers, library system vendors, etc.) to explore solutions that could align the efforts of RDA with the metadata standards used in these communities. There are many metadata communities each with their own detailed metadata schema, but few of these schema include the required details that ensure the metadata is complete and interpreted and created in a consistent manner.

As a content standard RDA could be applied in a variety of existing metadata encoding environments. For example, RDA descriptions could be stored and transmitted using the MARC format, or the same descriptions could be used in metadata schema such as Dublin Core or MODS (the Metadata Object Description Standard). The book publishing industry uses a metadata format called ONIX (Online Information Exchange) and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers have developed a system that describes learning objects known as IEEE-LOM. All of these groups have expressed some interest in a content standard like RDA that could potentially bring consistency to their metadata content.

The resulting RDA descriptions will live in the digital world along with the resources they represent. So they will be available for use in newly created web services, 'mash ups', resource discovery tools and library web-based catalogues. The RDA standard itself will be an electronic web-based tool which will enable it to break free from the linear constraints that are an inherent part of using the paper-based version of AACR. In addition to allowing features like bookmarking and navigational approaches that will match specific sets of rules to particular cataloguing work flows, an electronic version will also make it easier to update and keep current as the technology continues to change.

The development of RDA is international in scope and being led by the Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA (JSC). It's a relatively balanced group with broad representation from both national and academic libraries and many information related associations. Constituency review of the final print draft of RDA concluded recently in February 2009 and the JSC has begun to review the constituency submissions. The draft and comments can be found on the JSC web site³. The much anticipated electronic version of RDA is still an unknown factor and has been promised to appear a couple of times but so far only presentation slides of the prototype, delivered at the RDA satellite conference in Quebec City⁴ last August, have been seen. It may be ready in time for a pre-conference session at the Canadian Library Association conference at the end of May. It will be the demonstrated success of the electronic version of RDA that will define the success of this new information standard.

3 JSC Web Site <<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/jsc/working1.html#drafts>>

4 RDA: Features and Functionality / Chris Oliver <<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/jsc/docs/iflasatellite-20080808-demo.pdf>>

The road to RDA has been both an inspiring and frustrating one. On the one hand the need for something like RDA is absolutely imperative if the cataloguing profession hopes to move forward and continue to play a part in the emerging digital world. On the other, it has sometimes been difficult to follow the developmental thread of RDA. There was no complete draft until the end of 2008 and the earlier partial drafts of RDA, which started to appear at the end of 2005 and on into 2007, were like touching parts of some strange unknown beast in a dark room. It was hard to conceptualize the whole with these incomplete pieces. And just when a glimmer of understanding had begun to appear the philosophical foundation shifted in October 2007 incorporating FRBR (the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records) as the underlying data model for the structure of RDA.

RDA is scheduled for release in the third quarter of 2009 and although the process has seemed rushed and at times awkward and incoherent I remain optimistic. I am hopeful primarily because RDA has all along been informed by the sound guidelines found in the Statement of International Cataloguing Principles⁵ which states in part that,

“Several principles direct the construction of cataloguing codes. The highest is the convenience of the user.”

The convenience of the user has long been the aim of cataloguers operating in the so-called 'traditional' library and it is encouraging to know that this continues to be one of the guiding principles in the development of RDA.

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5 Produced by the IFLA Meeting of Experts on an International Cataloguing Code (IME ICC) see <http://www.ifla.org/VII/s13/icp/ICP-2009_en.pdf>