RLG, Where Museums, Libraries, and Archives Intersect

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INTRODUCTION

This presentation was prepared for the session "Towards integrated resource discovery and seamless access to hybrid materials." This topic is of particular interest to RLG (Research Libraries Group) because the organization has a long and abiding interest in working to provide integrated access to research information from museums, libraries, and archives. What is RLG? RLG is a non-profit consortium of over 160 research institutions from 15 different countries. Included are major universities, national libraries and archives, major museums, and other special kinds of historical collections. The mission of RLG is to collaboratively improve access to information that supports research and learning. The two major streams of activity in this regard include programs and projects that address problems shared by a number of institutions, and the creation of information discovery and delivery services. Member programs and projects are designed to develop solutions to problems in the area of access and preservation of research materials. Types of activities in this area are standards development, creation of guidelines and best practices for description, particularly in the area of unique or primary materials. Often the work of member task groups will result in the fuller development and implementation of online services. The RLG Union Catalog was initially the product solely of member institutions pooling their resources so they could share cataloging information. It now includes data from hundreds of libraries around the world. Two resources that have recently been developed in this way are RLG Archival Resources and RLG Cultural Materials and those are the focus of this presentation.

HISTORICAL WAYS OF PROVIDING ACCESS TO PRIMARY MATERIALS

One of RLG's key strategic areas is in providing access to primary sources, those materials that support in-depth scholarly research. This includes unique archival records, manuscripts, personal papers, images, sound, motion and objects. The history of archival descriptive practice is complicated and varies greatly from country to country. In North America, there is a patchwork of practice stemming from the history of decentralized custodial responsibility for historical records. National and state government archives have limited their responsibility to governmental records, while special collections within research libraries and other independent historical repositories have tried to

capture the personal papers, manuscript materials and other non-governmental records that document the North American experience. This approach to documenting culture relies heavily on altruism and subsidized support for the capture and preservation of records.

Descriptive practice reflects this historical development. Within government archives, records are described in a manner that reflects the individual agencies needs and preferences, often in a non-standard way. With the dispersed collection of non-governmental records, there is even more varied practice. Past methods of providing access to these unique research resources included: the published guides that some institutions were able to create; the unpublished guides available only in repositories; good reference staff; good scholarly guesswork; conference papers and footnotes in published works. Now that we have the means to make information about historical records accessible in electronic form, there is a need to adhere to standards that allow this kind of information to be presented in a stable and sustainable form and to be shared across systems. The history of standardized descriptive practice for special collections - even those within major universities - is a relatively short one. Until about 15 years ago, special collections remained outside the mainstream of bibliographic descriptive practice. The belief that unique materials could not be described in a standard way was very strongly held by most archivists in North America and there was little guidance or leadership coming from any of our national institutions.

The development of the MARC-AMC format was a compromise that a few institutions adopted in the early 1980's, embraced later by the profession after years of experimentation within certain communities and with a great deal of assistance from the institutions that encouraged the bibliographic integration of special materials alongside mainstream library bibliographic information. Today in the RLG union catalog there are over 700,000 MARC-AMC records representing that many special collections - mostly from North American institutions.

In a 1992 report on historical documents called *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage*, funded by the National Historic Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), recommendations for creating better access to archives included training in use of sources, travel support for individuals to use sources, dissemination of research tools, finding aids and better access (this was of course prior to any Internet availability). And it included a criticism for not cataloging finding aids. Even with the ability to catalog at the collection level and include that information in a union database, much material remained inaccessible for a host of reasons. A survey conducted of RLG members in the early 1990's found that nearly 60% of special materials remained inaccessible because of lack of staff, money or expertise to make those collections known.

With the advances being made in the use of electronic technology, the world of special collections was still lagging behind other means of improved access to information. Clifford Lynch, Director of CNI (Coalition for Networked Information), pointed this out very clearly when he said: "we need a new vision of opening up historically inaccessible special collections and linking them to both the existing and developing base of scholarly publication." (From an RLG Symposium in 1996, on Selecting Library and Archive Collections for Digital Reformatting.)

CURRENT EFFORTS

As hard as it was to get the archival community to adopt the use of MARC-AMC for collection-level description, the development and application of the new standard for electronic encoding of full-text archival finding aids in EAD (Encoded Archival Description), has been astoundingly rapid. EAD gives the ability to provide full text finding aids in all their hierarchy in a web appropriate environment. This is a great leap forward for enhancing access to collections using the preferred vehicle for information dissemination. At the same time, there is much greater appreciation for the need to promote and integrate access to primary materials coming from the research community. A recent report from the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), published in January 1999, on Scholarship, Instruction and Libraries at the Turn of the Century, had the following strategic recommendations:

- Renewed emphasis on and encouragement of use of original materials in critical thinking,
- Priority for developing finding aids for materials in all formats, along with a national standard for encoded archival description and a networked environment for them.

Another report, *Where History Begins - a report on Historical Records Repositories in the US* published by the Council of State Historical Records Coordinators (COSHRC), published in May 1998, gave a list of the most pressing problems confronting institutions, and 'Space and Storage' were listed as number 1, 'Access and Finding Aids' were listed as number 2.

Finding aids are the most important and effective tools for locating research materials, and improving access to them is critical. Encouragement of further sharing of these important resources is receiving a great deal of international attention as well. Web-based access mechanisms are maturing nicely and aggregating of this information is being done locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

The availability of financial support for programs and projects that will make these special collections more accessible through electronic mechanisms has sparked a great deal of activity in this area. A few examples are the Online Archive of California (a state wide program to aggregate finding aids from the California repositories), RLG Archival Resources (an international program that provides unified access to dispersed collections,) and there are subject based projects like American Memory at the Library of Congress, and the Center for the History of Physics at the American Institute of Physics. The international MALVINE project sponsored by the European Union is another example of bringing together finding aids from several European countries. All of these projects are using the EAD standard so eventually they could all be integrated. RLG's
ACHIVAL RESOURCES

RLG has built a service based on the use of EAD for archival finding aids and combined that with the ability to search across both these full-text documents as well as the 700,000 bibliographic collection level records that describe archival materials. The result is an immensely powerful tool for information discovery and delivery. There are today over 150 institutions contributing finding aids to the service and thousands of institutions represented in the bibliographic records. You can search and find related materials in archives from Minnesota to Australia and to the Netherlands on subjects like technology transfer or global immigration. The topics are limitless and the discovery ability unprecedented. This service has grown very rapidly and nearly 1000 new finding aids are being added each month when it is updated. Several efforts are underway to translate the EAD documentation so that it can be applied in French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and more. The expectation is that growth will continue rapidly to make this an even more powerful resource for uniting dispersed collections and information and eventually this will be the discovery tool of choice for most archival researchers.

RLG's CULTURAL MATERIALS

Providing access to collections is one of the highest priorities for cultural institutions and is a major criterion for measuring success. Successful programs will continue to grow and attract the support needed for carrying out all vital responsibilities. In other words, success breeds success. With the ability to present cultural materials in digital form on the web, cultural institutions have been swept up in a race to get their materials represented in this fashion. The resource called RLG Cultural Materials is the result of a collaborative process undertaken by member institutions that held the common desire to manage their digital collections in a responsible, standardized and sustainable way. They also recognized the value of aggregating these digital collections to provide a service that would make their own materials stronger when integrated with other related types of information. An alliance of member institutions (now 54 of them) came together to manage the development of this resource collectively. They set the terms and conditions

on how the materials could be used, first for the academic community, and second for a wider, broader consumer market. Advisory groups were formed to development guidelines for digital object creation, for description, and for content development. Additional groups were asked to advise on the technical development of the service and on usability - both for research and for use in instructional environments.

The underlying data structure that was used to integrate these widely varied digital surrogates and their accompanying descriptions was based on a data model called the CIDOC-CRM, a reference model created by a standards committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). The RLG data model was adapted to handle the mapping of disparate types of materials - those already in digital form. The advisory committees on description and digital object creation were formed in hopes of providing stronger guidance on digital projects going forward. The service currently holds over 200,000 digital works that range from a single image or item to very complex digital objects that may have many pages or sound and video. Powerful searching allows discovery of types of works by format, places depicted, places where works were created, and by people, names, creators, and subjects. Results of searches can be sorted and displayed in many different views - thumbnails with very brief captions, medium resolution with fuller description and very high resolution with extensive documentation.

In January 2003 RLG implemented a METS (Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard) viewer to handle the display of complex digital objects. When a complex work is discovered, the structural details of the object, its description and its related digital materials can be navigated consistently by using the METS viewer. For example, a viewer for the Ellesmere Manuscript of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* provides a detailed description of the work as a whole, a way to navigate the individual tales through a table of contents interface and tools to zoom in to closely examine page details. The content of this resource reflects the breadth and depth of the collections held by RLG member institutions. Subject areas that are growing rapidly include the history of science and technology, popular culture, performing arts, exploration and expeditions, anthropology and many more.

Building these resources puts pressure on the creators of information to mediate carefully before putting information into the 'unmediated' zone of the web. The whole purpose of this exercise is to make things easier and more accessible, and not more confusing than before. Remembering to design new access systems that are compatible with other access systems is also a concern. We cannot let users think that what is on the web is all there is and so these new systems must find ways of referring to those sources that are still not available in electronic form. Uniting dispersed collections and overcoming language barriers are some of the most interesting challenges ahead. Can we identify and promote the linking of dispersed collections, perhaps through collaborative selection decisions? And can we overcome barriers to truly international, interdisciplinary research.

Finding aids are fast becoming locator tools for actual digital archival objects. Museums and other artifact collections are racing to the web. As our population ages and more people live longer, there are opportunities for lifelong learning that can be met by knowledge providers. There is interest in finding new and better ways of introducing cultural information into primary school curriculum. But many potential users will be new to us and perhaps our collection development will become driven by different demands for this information. Greater use of these materials makes collections of unique and special materials even more of an asset if we think beyond the immediate markets and missions we hold now. And those collections that are visible and known are the only ones that have a chance of being used in this new way.

REFERENCES

1. *Scholarship, Instruction and Libraries at the Turn of the Century*. Results from Five Task Forces Appointed by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Council on Library and Information Resources. CLIR, January 1999, 44 pp. ISBN 1-887334-62-9. http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub78/contents.html
2. *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage*. National Historic Publications and Records Commission and the American Council of Learned Societies, 1992.
3. *Where History Begins - a report on Historical Records Repositories in the US*. Council of State Historical Records Coordinators, May 1998.

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

ACLS - American Council of Learned Societies. http://www.acls.org/

American Memory: Historical Collections for the National Digital Library. http://memory.loc.gov/

Center for the History of Physics. http://www.aip.org/history/

CNI - Coalition for Networked Information. http://www.cni.org/

CLIR - Council on Library and Information Resources. http://www.clir.org/

COSHRC - Council of State Historical Records Coordinators. http://www.coshrc.org/

EAD - Encoded Archival Description. http://www.loc.gov/ead/

ICOM - International Council of Museums. http://icom.museum/

MALVINE - Manuscripts and Letters via Integrated Networks in Europe http://www.malvine.org/

METS - Metadata Encoding & Transmission Standard.
http://www.loc.gov/standards/mets/

NHPRC - National Historic Publications and Records Commission.
http://www.archives.gov/grants/index.html

OAC - Online Archive of California. http://www.oac.cdlib.org/

RLG – Research Libraries Group. http://www.rlg.org/

RLG Archival Resources. http://www.rlg.org/arr/index.html

RLG Cultural Materials Initiative. http://www.rlg.org/culturalres/

RLG's Library Resources. http://www.rlg.org/libres.html

RLG and Access to Primary Sources. http://www.rlg.org/primary/index.html