

## Standards in a new bibliographic world

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### ABSTRACT

Jointly developed and agreed standards are essential for description and exchange of data on cultural assets. We are at a turning point here. Standards with broad acceptance must move away from strict sets of rules and towards framework models. To meet this challenge, we need to fundamentally rethink the conception of standards.

Cultural institutions hold treasures and want to make them accessible to a wide range of interested parties. What was only possible on site not so long ago, now also takes place in virtual space and users worldwide can access the content. To make this possible, all resources must be provided with sufficient and sustainable metadata. Many sets of rules and standards can do this and aim to make the exchange of data as international and large-scale as possible.

But does this also apply to special materials? Is a lock of hair to be recorded in the same way as a book, or is an opera to be recorded in the same way as a globe? By now, it is clear to everyone involved that this is not the case. Far too much expertise is required for this, which is not available in the breadth of cataloguing. This is quite different in the special communities, where this expertise is available and many projects and working groups are working intensively on the relevant topics. In order to bundle these approaches and enable more effective cooperation, the colleagues must be networked and embedded in a suitable organisational structure. This is the only way to achieve results that are accepted by a broad range of users and at the same time are sustainable and reliable.

This article is intended as an introduction to a future discussion and does not aim to provide answers.

### KEYWORDS

Standards; Internationalization; Cataloguing; Special Resources; Objects; Collections; Cooperative Cataloguing; Data Exchange.

## **What is the new bibliographic world?**

The world of information and documentation institutions has changed dramatically in the past few years. Information must be made available both quickly and reliably. The speed at which information flows has increased exponentially, whereas the durability of the data has decreased considerably. The worlds of academia and research produce and distribute information in vast quantities and update it virtually in real time. New methods of production and distribution are capable of making this information available, reusing it, changing it and reintroducing it to the data cycle, all within a very short period of time.

The basis for this was and remains the technical innovations of recent decades, which made these processes feasible in the first place and whose effects have been so profound that they have also transformed society. In those areas of the world where democracy is established, all levels of society – regardless of sex, age or world-view – gained access to knowledge and information. Life-long learning and education became available to far more people and are now taken for granted by the younger generation.

At the same time, this achievement also necessitates more stringent quality control. Data can be altered, falsified and reintroduced into the information cycle with the same speed that they can be produced in the first place. So-called fake news has become an ignoble part of our global communication in recent years.

Every information and documentation institution must reinvent itself in this new environment. The traditional tools used in libraries, archives and museums are no longer sufficient to the task. These tools are no longer adequate for administering and controlling the global data streams with the desired quality or speed, and the large quantities of data can no longer be tackled with conventional means. It is essential to create synergies and intensify or establish international, interdisciplinary cooperation. To this end, it should be self-evident that the efficacy of the old, familiar tools and approaches must be re-examined.

## **What role can international standards play in this context?**

Standards provide the foundation for the generation and functional exchange of data. Even communities that seem to be highly independent will sooner or later reach a point where they require shared agreements and regulations in order to ensure the interchangeability of data and maintain a certain level of quality. Effective and contemporary standards can accelerate the editing and generation of data and increase efficiency in the further use of data. To achieve this, however, these standards must be updated continuously and adapted to the current circumstances. General standards that are adapted by the respective user communities to their specific needs can be of benefit in this context, but also require a large degree of initiative on the part of the respective community. Modular standards are easier to work with and more flexible in their application. In many instances, a minimum degree of consensus is all that is required to ensure the exchange of data. Special requirements can be added in dedicated modules, which in turn are then further developed by experts in the respective field. In light of the aforementioned developments, rigid frameworks that contain fixed rules and are heavily text-based have proved to be no longer fit for purpose.

In this context, authority data have become particularly significant. They are a tried-and-tested

tool in libraries and are labour-intensively administered there – within the Integrated Authority File (GND) in German-speaking countries, for example, or using the Library of Congress Authorities in Anglo-American countries – and, in some instances, collated within intraregional data such as the Virtual Authority File (VIAF). However, the importance of authority data has further increased as a result of increasingly interdisciplinary collaborations. Authority data e.g. for individuals and geographic entities are the smallest common denominators for the collaboration across different communities. Yet the altered circumstances have also resulted in fresh challenges. In addition to expanding the vocabulary, new concepts must be developed and a shared definition created for entities that have hitherto been imbued with different meanings and the subject of diverging interpretations. For example, the term “work” is interpreted differently in the world of archiving than it is in library-related contexts.

## **Who are the stakeholders in this new bibliographic world?**

As described in the preceding section, data-administering cultural institutions are an essential part of our society. This is nothing new; for centuries now, libraries, archives and museums have been responsible for the preservation and administration of our cultural heritage. Yet this task has long been regarded as an activity exclusively for the benefit of a select clientele. By contrast, modern cultural institutions regard themselves as habitats, sometimes to an extent that exceeds their legal mandate. New library and museum buildings around the world stand as testimony to this fact. Yet it is not just the external appearance of cultural institutions that has to adapt to these new circumstances, but also the products and services they provide. However, this adaptation must occur not only in line with the respective institution’s own community, but also on an interdisciplinary basis.

Unlike 50 or 100 years ago, say, the updating and new development of standards in the sphere of information science requires the input of expertise from many different areas. Technical expertise is a given in this context; however, sociological and socially relevant aspects must also be factored in. If standards are to continue adhering to the International Cataloguing Principles (ICP)<sup>1</sup>, then users’ search habits and the reliability of the generated data must be included amongst the key criteria. Democratic methods for developing standards are also desired today, which generally increases the development period but also ensures considerably greater acceptance. Ideally, standards should already be considered from different perspectives in terms of their intended use, target audience and applicability before they are actually developed or updated. Especially when it comes to implementing theoretical concepts and models, attention must be paid to their practical relevance, and the expertise of colleagues working in user communities and educational institutions sought. Sensibly, global feedback phases are no longer a rarity, and an interdisciplinary perspective should become a matter of course.

Sound and practicable organisation is required in order to bring together these different players. In general, libraries have the requisite standardisation committees at their disposal and have gained lots of relevant experience over the decades. Examples of such collaborations will be described in the next section.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11015>.

## What role do the user communities play?

Due to changed circumstances, the user communities play a greater role in the development of standards than was previously the case. Flexible standards must be repeatedly analysed to ensure that they are up to date, and continuously amended. The assumption that the adoption of national or international standards could negate the need for any standardisation work of one's own has proved false. A comprehensive and international standard cannot meet the needs of the often very heterogeneous communities, but merely provide the basis for local and subject-specific adaptations. What is required is a group of experts in the areas of data generation, the further use of data by community members and technical parameters. This task is resource-intensive and expensive but can result in efficiency-savings when narrowing the broad scope of standards and their application. This is because the needs of, for example, those performing cataloguing work are known and can be taken into consideration when adapting the standards. In future, this task will require the establishment of a greater knowledge-base and expertise in the training of specialist staff.

## Examples

We will now provide three examples to further illustrate the requirements outline above. These are standards that originate from very different traditions and areas of application, and yet feature certain commonalities.

### Rules on Cataloguing Authority Data in Archives and Libraries (RNAB)<sup>2</sup>

This standard was first published in 1997 under the name “Rules on Cataloguing Autographs and Legacies” (RNA) and is used for these kinds of material by many archives and libraries. Since 2015, the standard has been painstakingly revised and was first published on the website of the German National Library in 2019. The organisation of this standard is regulated in a dedicated co-operation agreement between the Austrian National Library, the Swiss National Library, the Berlin State Library and the German National Library. The update was carried out by a thematic working group of the Committee for Library Standards<sup>3</sup> and underwent a comprehensive assessment procedure performed by colleagues working in archives and libraries.

In terms of its content, the standard has predominantly been optimised for use in literary archives. Alongside the actual revision of the rules, the circumstances of the institutions using the standard have also been taken into consideration at every stage. Thus the RNAB have deliberately been kept brief, dispensing with any complicated theoretical models. This was done in awareness of the fact that many institutions wishing to process this material do not have staff trained in Library Science at their disposal and that the cataloguing work has to be performed by other employees in addition to their primary tasks. For practical reasons, the standard was published at a time when it was clear that it would shortly require further revision due to changes in the fundamental model.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. [https://www.dnb.de/EN/Professionell/Standardisierung/Standards/content/rnab\\_akk.html](https://www.dnb.de/EN/Professionell/Standardisierung/Standards/content/rnab_akk.html).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. <https://wiki.dnb.de/display/STAC/AG+RNAB>.

The feedback from the user communities has been uniformly positive and vindicates the practical approach of the RNAB.

### 3R Project for DACH Libraries

The international Standard Resource Description and Access (RDA)<sup>4</sup> was first introduced in German-speaking countries in 2014 for the cataloguing of authority data, and then for bibliographic data in 2015. Due to changes in the standard, a project for the necessary adaptations was set up in 2020. This so-called 3R Project for DACH Libraries implements the above-described community-centred approach to standards. By means of a cataloguing handbook as a web-based tool, the rules of the RDA are being prepared for the user communities in German-speaking countries and documented in a cataloguing handbook. This handbook will be composed of three sections: the descriptions of the elements, the descriptions based on resource types, and general instructions and assistance. As an end-product, it will provide the foundations for the practical cataloguing of data in the respective institutions, but also form the basis of staff training and induction. The provision of the handbook as a web tool opens up many options for subsequent use and for institutions to compile their own information and examples with links to the original RDA standard. The project is set to be completed by late 2022 and introduced within the institutions by training staff in the use of the revised standard. The DACH cataloguing handbook is being developed by the cataloguing expert group<sup>5</sup>, a group of experts from library unions, public libraries and national and state libraries. The work has been commissioned and organised under the aegis of the Committee for Library Standards.<sup>6</sup> Specialist materials such as art books, graphic materials and audio-visual media have been incorporated into this process. The thematic working groups of the Committee for Library Standards are responsible for this task and will participate in the resource-description work from late 2021 onwards. The new cataloguing handbook will be documented in a web-based tool modelled on Wikibase. The work is being carried out within the DNB as part of an in-house documentation project.

### International Standard Bibliographic Description (ISBD)<sup>7</sup>

Within the world of libraries, the ISBD is a very well-known and globally used standard issued by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA).<sup>8</sup> It was first published in 1971 and has been revised and expanded many times since then. The current version is the Consolidated Edition from 2011.

The ISBD seeks to provide a basic standard for as many different applications as possible in different environments and regions. Based on this fundamental principle, the aim is to make the exchange of data easy and effective. By using a dedicated system of symbols, data elements are labelled and made comprehensible internationally.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. <https://access.rdatoolkit.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <https://wiki.dnb.de/display/STAC/FG+Erschliessung>.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. <https://wiki.dnb.de/display/STAC/STA-Community>.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <https://www.ifla.org/publications/international-standard-bibliographic-description>.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. <https://www.ifla.org/>.

In recent years, the importance of the ISBD has waned slightly in Europe and North America. The standard is no longer in step with the times in terms of publication type (print-based publication or PDF) and also fails to take account of modern publication formats such as audiovisual media. Furthermore, it also doesn't take account of the IFLA Library Reference Model (IFLA LRM)<sup>9</sup> developed in recent years. However, a survey conducted by the IFLA has shown that this standard is still very widely used in some parts of the world where there is a complete (or partial) lack of stable infrastructure. Furthermore, the ISBD is regarded as easy to learn and apply, including by employees who don't have advanced professional qualifications. For this reason, the IFLA ISBD Review Group<sup>10</sup> decided two years ago to fundamentally revise and update the standard. Along with revising it in line with the IFLA LRM, it is being restructured and adapted to modern conditions. The basic principle of user-friendliness and the possibility of performing simple cataloguing tasks with it are to be retained, however. In addition to its future publication in a web-based environment, the standard will continue to be available as a PDF document and to print out. The initial work results of this update are expected in 2022.

## Conclusion

Despite their many differences, all three of the aforementioned examples have certain things in common. They are all being created in a stable organisation culture. There is a committee taking responsibility for their development and revision, and supporting this work by providing resources. As different as they may be, all three standards focus on practical application and are geared towards simplicity and feasibility whilst simultaneously achieving the highest possible degree of standardisation. All three examples are being developed collaboratively and in direct communication with the respective user community. These commonalities seem to be a key factor in the success that unites these otherwise very different standards.

At the same time, these three approaches also highlight the fact that there can be no catch-all solution and that no single standard can ever adequately cover every practical application. This is even more true when we abandon discipline-specific approaches and start to think in more general and interdisciplinary terms. Every previous attempt to create a one-size-fits-all standard has failed. However, in this insight lies the future of standardisation within the realm of cultural heritage. Only modular, model-based frameworks will prove capable of ensuring the necessary flexibility and compatibility. Based on this fact, user communities must make adaptations in line with their needs that can be implemented in practice. In the long term, none of the cultural institutions will be able to employ a sufficient number of employees with the ability to implement highly theoretical standards. In light of the overwhelming amount of (digital) material that will need processing in future, this would also be a completely pointless endeavour. Keep it simple, but keep it standardised!

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11412>.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. <https://www.ifla.org/isbd-rg>.