

## RDA: For Whom?

One important difference between both editions of the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules and RDA is that the former were created by and for the Anglo-American world and were not meant to be all things to all people. Yet it is that very limitation that has proven to be one of the major problems for the continued use of those Anglo-American Cataloging Rules among librarians today when an international standard appropriate for international cooperation is desired. This matter, important as it is, was not however the chief factor which led to the development of RDA. The world of electronic documents as these are available on the web led many people in the 1990's to become concerned that we, i.e. libraries and librarians, are being left behind and that our technical legacy needed to be revised or even abandoned in favour of a technical system adequate to the information practices that we believe we ought to be supporting.

Why it is that we are now discussing RDA rather than AACR3 is a story that has been told elsewhere. In its simplest form, this story is that the people given responsibility for making the needed revision felt that the universe of physical objects for which the old rules were developed has been superseded by a world in which digital objects require our attention. And here ideologies and passions have polarized the debate on RDA. On one side are those committed to a world of digital objects with URIs in which description is believed to be unnecessary, and on the other those who note that the production of physical media has increased rather than decreased, and therefore our future standards must be appropriate for both digital and physical materials.

The Anglo-American Cataloging Rules were based upon traditional practices, user behaviours such as citation. In contrast, RDA has been developed largely on the basis of beliefs about what some technological system can do or might someday do, or—Cutter notwithstanding—upon theories about the function of bibliographic data. Some have argued that since user practices have changed those former practices—bibliography, citation—should no longer determine either the form or the content of whatever it is we are going to do. The rules ought now to be designed for the production and manipulation of data by machines. Whatever human communication may take place in libraries will be a simple matter of locally tinkering with displays, ideally a matter to be determined by the individual user “on the fly.”

Others among us note that a list of URIs is usable when described or given in a particular context, but otherwise often uninterpretable or meaningless. In other matters we note that every study of user desires has found that users want more not less evaluative information (description with a readership in mind), and that a textually interpretable citation is absolutely necessary not only when non-digital objects are required in their physical forms, but also in a world of multiple versions, broken links, disappearing resources, malicious software and restrictions on access.

Criticisms of RDA have come from both of these perspectives, and clearly one cannot design a standard for description based on the belief that description is unnecessary. So, for some, RDA does not go far enough, for others it goes too far. In order for RDA to satisfy those seeking a new

set of rules, those intended users would have to agree upon the objectives of the new code as well as upon the nature of the world in which it is to be implemented. That situation, we all know, does not exist. We demand a new code that will facilitate cooperation rather than impede it, but when we discuss what it is that we are intending to accomplish through cooperation, we sound like Ramon Llull's medieval debate between a Catholic priest, a rabbi and a muslim theologian: all agree that there is one God and each insists that belief in the others' god dooms the others. Some insist that we are doomed if we continue to focus on description, transcription and citation practices, while others insist that we are doomed if we abandon the descriptive conventions hammered out in Paris more than 40 years ago. The truth is probably more like the rest of life: damned if we do, damned if we don't. The problem with which we are faced is that our world is neither as linear, unidirectional and inevitable as prognosticators assume, nor as simple and agreeable as Paris in 1961. Our world is and always has been characterized by pluralities, multilingualism, and an astonishing variety of practices and purposes all of which mean that cooperation must depend upon either local adaptation or international tyranny. To the dismay of many but to my absolute delight, RDA has chosen the former over the latter. However, this bright spot does not eliminate the problems that many have noted.

I read the draft of RDA released last year and saw evidence of many of its contradictory goals throughout. A text so mind-numbingly repetitious and detailed that I thought surely its authors were assuming machines as its primary readership, yet a persistent reliance upon cataloger judgement or local practice which ensures that the rules cannot be operationalized for machine production of metadata in a cooperative environment. The much-touted emphasis on relationships between resources relies entirely upon human judgement about what is related to what and how. In this room we might well ask whether it is possible or desirable to automatically generate relationships between any texts that we may deem important, e.g. the Torah, the New Testament and the Koran. And we should all know that every rule for human action must be interpreted for each and every instance in which it is evoked—just ask your rabbi.

On the University of Chicago Campus one can often see t-shirts with the question "It works fine in practice but does it work in theory?" While many have questioned the practicality of implementing RDA, its theoretical basis raises questions as well. A curious combination of Platonic forms (works, manifestations, etc.) as its ontological foundation with a positivist epistemology. Useful as it may be in some cases for certain kinds of materials, I am convinced that the theoretical weakness of FRBR will be followed by practical failures and dreams of the good old days—never a good thing when one needs innovation. RDA or any future standard cannot ignore the changing technical situation and changing user practices, nor should it assume the inevitability of some vision of the future such as that pressed upon us by Manichaeian mystics of a digital utopia, for RDA is itself one step towards shaping that future. And that future—our future—is what is in question in many ways. Mr Attig is better informed than I or anyone else here to describe to us just how RDA may or may not shape our library futures.