Technicalities™

Information Forum for the Technical Services Professional

Reality Check

The Development of *RDA*: A View from the Trenches

By Kathy Glennan

Kathy Glennan

My engagement with the development of *RDA: Resource Description and Access* (RDA) over the past two decades has shaped my career, increased my understanding of international standards development, and changed my perspective of what a cataloging code should look like.[1] I am fortunate to have had the time and opportunity to participate in the complex process of creating and revising *RDA*, while taking increasingly responsible leadership roles in its governance. This view from the trenches is a summary of my involvement from the early days through my last year as chair of the RDA Steering Committee (RSC).

Cataloging code creation and revision always has been contentious in the Anglo-American realm. The professional literature abounds with critics and champions of each iteration that codifies cataloging rules and the objectives and principles behind them, starting with the British parliamentary commission that heard testimony about Sir Anthony Panizzi's "Rules for the Compilation of the Catalogue" in 1841, and continuing through the latest revision of *RDA*.[2] Some common threads of the critiques include: complexity of

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Recursive *Technicalities*

By Laura Kane McElfresh

Laura K. McElfresh

One of the side benefits of writing this column is a feeling of community with my fellow authors, whether regular columnists or special contributors. Moreover, even though we generally do not collaborate or otherwise coordinate our writing activities for *Technicalities*, and though we are a disparate enough group that our work is not duplicative, there are times when common threads emerge. Here I do not mean "threads" as in "shared topics or thematic elements," but more like

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Here is a sentence rich in clauses and other modifiers. Can you find the subject and verb? Try to diagram the sentence.[2] Is it, in fact, well-written or just familiar?

Clayton wrote about "The Needless Complexity of Academic Writing."[3] She quotes Pinker who described academic writing as "turgid, soggy, wooden, bloated, clumsy, obscure, unpleasant to read, and impossible to understand." Pinker observed that experts often find it difficult to be simple and straightforward when writing about their expertise.

My second tip is to avoid jargon. This can be difficult, even impossible, when writing about technical services, especially cataloging and metadata practices and standards. My advice is two-fold. First, spell out acronyms the first time they are used, followed by the acronym in parentheses. Second, explain. Do not assume your readers know everything you do. For example, not everyone speaks "MARC." MARC 490 does not automatically mean something to all readers. It would be better to write MARC 490 field (Series Statement). Do all of your readers immediately know what OA is?[4] Do not assume they do. One useful option is to have someone unfamiliar with the topic read your draft.

Finally, I offer the wonderful and very specific advice of George Orwell.

- Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.[5]

References and Notes

1. *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Sentence diagram," updated Aug. 8, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentence_diagram (accessed Oct. 2, 2022).
2. See Grammar Revolution, "Sentence Diagram of the Declaration of Independence," www.english-grammar-revolution.com/declaration-of-independence.html (accessed Oct. 2, 2022). Shortcut to the answer—"respect" is the subject and "requires" is the verb.
3. Victoria Clayton, "The Needless Complexity of Academic Writing," *The Atlantic* (Oct. 26, 2015), www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/complex-academic-writing/412255 (accessed Oct. 2, 2022).
4. "Open-access (OA) literature is digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions." Peter Suber, "Open Access Overview," last revised Dec. 5, 2015, http://legacy.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/overview.htm (accessed Oct. 2, 2022).
5. George Orwell, *"Politics and The English Language,"* in his *Essays on Language and Usage* (Leonard F. Dean & Kenneth G. Wilson eds., 2nd ed. 1963), 325-34.

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the code, changes from past practice, value of cataloger's judgment versus rules that can be applied consistently, organizational structure of the instructions, and whether or not a wholesale revision was necessary in the first place.

The Roots of Change

In the 1990s, after decades of using the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*, 2nd edition (*AACR2*), the cataloging community repeatedly called for fundamental revisions.[3] The changing information landscape meant that the code needed significant updating. The International Conference on the Principles and Future Development of AACR in 1997, hosted by the Joint Steering Committee for Revision of AACR (JSC), was the first step in this process.[4] This meeting eventually led to the draft of Part I of a third edition, *AACR3: Resource Description and Access* in 2004.[5] I participated in the American Library Association's (ALA) review of this draft in early 2005 as the Music Library Association (MLA) liaison to ALA's Committee on Cataloging: Description and Access (CC:DA). CC:DA members and liaisons read and discussed the draft and then helped prepare the 136-page response.[6] This document, along with responses from other Anglo-American catalog rules constituencies led the JSC to make a significant change in focus for the new rules during

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their April 2005 meeting. Outcomes included changing the working title to "Resource Description and Access (RDA)" and committing to aligning the code with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) functional requirements models.[7] Of importance was acknowledging that, although the new code would be built on *AACR2*, the new standard would be "designed for the digital world."[8] To further cement this change in direction, in 2007 the JSC was renamed the Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA (still keeping the JSC initialism).

The years between the release of *AACR3 Part I* and the publication of *RDA: Description and Access* in 2010 were very busy for CC:DA voting members and liaisons.[9] We reviewed and commented on the various rule proposals and ever-evolving draft chapters of *RDA* through early 2009. The JSC received over 50 ALA responses to draft chapters or other changes as well as ALA's own proposals during this time, all based on the feedback provided via CC:DA. I cannot overstate how much time CC:DA members and the communities that supported them put into creating proposals and analyzing suggested revisions during *RDA* development.

Within CC:DA, some felt strongly that the revisions embodied in the drafts were too radical, while others felt they did not go far enough.[10] The differing viewpoints led to some lively discussions at the national level.[11] I held the opinion that in spite of any protests, *RDA* would almost certainly become *AACR2's* successor; thus it was incumbent upon me to devote the necessary time and energy to ensure that *RDA* would best meet the music community's needs.

Expanding My Expertise

In 2006, I became a voting member of CC:DA, based on the strength of my engagement with *RDA* development. In taking on this larger responsibility, I needed to broaden my horizons beyond my specialization of music cataloging. As I did so, I gained a new respect for the knowledge and expertise that other specialist catalogers brought to the discussions.

My work on *RDA*-related efforts went beyond activities associated with CC:DA membership. This included service on:

- The RDA Appendices Working Group (2006-2008), a three-person group charged to prepare appendices on capitalization, abbreviations, and initial articles, and suggest revisions, deletions, and additions to the content where needed.
- The international RDA/MARC Working Group (2008-2011), charged "to collaborate on the development of proposals for changes to the MARC 21 formats to accommodate the encoding of RDA data."[12] Collectively, the group prepared 10 discussion papers and 18 proposals for changes to the MARC 21 Formats. I served as the primary author of two discussion papers and three successful proposals that addressed issues of granularity in recording date and place of capture, new content designation to support *RDA* detail with respect to works and expressions, and a new field for date of copyright notice.
- A small group of music experts from the Library of Congress (LC), MLA, and the Canadian Association of Music Libraries, brought together to address the issues raised in the 2008 proposal, 5JSC/LC/12, *Proposed revision of RDA chap. 6, Additional instructions for musical works and expressions.*[13] The proposal was not well received by the majority of U.S. and Canadian music catalogers. The experts, along with ALA and LC representatives, met in a day-long meeting in 2008 to discuss the suggested changes and to reach a shared understanding of how to proceed in resolving the issues the American catalogers had with the proposal. The group made some progress and continued its work via e-mail for several months. Ultimately, not all differences were resolved. I attended one day of the March 2009 JSC meeting in Chicago as an invited observer/expert to work through the proposal and the various responses with the JSC.

When my term as a voting member of CC:DA ended in 2010, I joined the Program for Cooperative Cataloging's (PCC) Standing Committee on Standards for a three-year term. I served on two PCC task groups working toward implementation of *RDA*, chairing one of them—the Task Group to Formulate or Recommend PCC/NACO [Name Authority Cooperative Program] RDA Policy on Authority Issues. This group produced 36 recommendations that were incorporated into the *Descriptive Cataloging Manual Z1: Name and Series Authority Records*.[14] Some recommendations specifically addressed how to apply the new *RDA*-related MARC 21 content designation.

During this time, I also returned to CC:DA as a liaison, now from PCC.

Stepping Up to Governance

Once *RDA* was published in 2010, the various constituencies shifted from reviewing draft instructions to making proposals to the JSC for change. Some of the proposals addressed known issues that could not be resolved before *RDA* was published, and others arose from gaps or problems identified by catalogers using the new code.[15] The JSC issued over 1,900 documents from 2010-2015, including discussion papers, proposals, constituency responses, meeting minutes, working group charges, and other guiding documents.[16] I took an increasing role in preparing draft proposals and responses on behalf of ALA during this time.

I was appointed John Attig's successor as the ALA representative to the JSC in 2013. Representing "the ALA position" at the international level was a formidable proposition, and I will be forever grateful for John's support and guidance during and after my transition to this role. As the ALA representative, I prepared and presented change proposals to the JSC and communicated outcomes back to CC:DA. During the week-long JSC meetings, I sometimes needed to gather information from ALA experts overnight, so I could ensure that the final decisions were workable from their point of view.

Stepping up to these new responsibilities introduced me to the eye-opening challenges of applying *RDA* at the international level. While the concept of universal bibliographic control works fairly well for transcribed elements in a bibliographic description, instructions about constructing access points reflect a particular community's traditions. When first published, *RDA* emphasized Anglo-American practices in this regard. Moving the names of the Books of the Bible from the official *RDA* text to the Tools tab in the *RDA Toolkit* in 2015 was one of the first changes made to de-emphasize the Anglo-American perspective.[17]

Governance Changes: From JSC to RSC

Internationalization goals also caused a number of governance changes. The first occurred in 2012, when the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek joined the JSC. In 2015, the opaquely named Committee of Principals, the parent organization of the JSC, changed its name to the RDA Board, and the JSC became the RSC at the close of its November meeting that same year. The Board then began a multi-year effort to further internationalize the organizational structure, leading to a plan for six regional representatives for both the Board and the RSC. The Board implemented their governance changes fully by 2018. However, to date the RSC has only had regional representation from Europe, North America, and Oceania, those areas previously represented on the JSC. This is due to a number of factors, including the level of *RDA* implementation in the regions, the existence of a committee to support a regional representative, and the fact that all RSC business is conducted in English. These governance changes had a significant ripple effect. To implement the plan, the existing JSC representatives were charged with developing regional structures for their communities. For North America, the three existing representatives proposed a new lightweight organizational layer between the RSC and North American constituencies (ALA, the Canadian Committee on Cataloguing, and LC). The result, known as the North American RDA Committee, or NARDAC, came into existence at the beginning of 2018. This group comprises two representatives from each constituency. I served a one-year term as an ALA representative during NARDAC's inaugural year. The governance changes and continued focus on internationalization has lessened the influence of the Anglo-American cataloging traditions in *RDA*, and that outcome has been the source of some consternation in the United States.

Redesigning the Tools

As change proposals led to the addition, removal, or relocation of *RDA* content, it became clear that *RDA Toolkit* needed a new content management system. The Board and the RSC determined that this project would provide an opportunity to address additional concerns, including:

- complying with international accessibility standards
- integrating additions from the new underlying model, the *IFLA Library Reference Model*[18]
- generalizing the instructions to promote greater internationalization
- providing better support for translations
- moving to an entity- and element-based view of the instructions
- making additional modifications with a linked data implementation in mind.[19]

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Undertaking all of these changes at once was preferable to multiple revision projects or rolling out major updates over the next decade. The RDA Restructure and Redesign (3R) Project was launched in 2016, and the original *RDA* text was "frozen" in 2017 so that these changes could proceed based on a stable text. RSC Chair Gordon Dunsire (2013-2018) had the vision about how to make 3R a reality and ensured its success.

A significant step in preparing the new version of *RDA* was shredding or reformatting the original instructions into their discrete components. The results included regularizing *RDA* element names and definitions, consistently including the four recording methods, resolving minor inconsistencies in wording across *RDA*, and providing standardized phrasing for reuse in all applicable elements. As an additional benefit, this effort also streamlined the work of translators, who only needed to translate the reusable text once.

During the first few years of 3R, the RSC temporarily increased its membership to include the chairs of its working groups, ensuring that a broad base of experts would contribute to the overall decision making. When considering revisions, the RSC ensured "that most of the outcomes of applying the instructions are the same as the outcomes of applying the instructions from the original Toolkit."[20] We also kept elements currently used by catalogers, even if that meant some redundancy. For example, see the "details of. . . " elements, which refer to the preferred element to use. As the project continued, the RSC released a beta version of the new *Toolkit* for review and discussed whether the standard needed a new name, such as "*RDA 2.0*." Ultimately, the decision was no; after all, *RDA* has always been an integrating resource. Instead, at the conclusion of the 3R Project in December 2020, the new text became "official" *RDA*, while its predecessor became known as "original" *RDA*.

The structural changes reflected in official *RDA Toolkit* transformed the standard from essentially an e-book to more of a data dictionary with full online functionality. With more than 3,000 elements and no set organizational structure, *RDA* will no longer be issued in print. Because this approach breaks from the cataloging manual model of previous Anglo-American cataloging codes, some have expressed concerns about the transformation, including its organization and wording as well as the relocation of important instructions outside of the base *RDA* text. However, *RDA Toolkit* can still accommodate regional guidance through policy statements, shared documents, and the still-evolving "Community Resources" section. As a result, the official *Toolkit* offers a great deal of flexibility as many libraries envision a linked data future. The RDA Registry, which contains "linked data and Semantic Web representations of the entities, elements, and terminologies approved by the RDA Steering Committee (RSC)," is freely available and forms a key part of that future. [21]

Designing an Operational Framework for Future Development

In 2019, in the midst of the governance changes and the 3R Project, I began my four-year term as RSC Chair, overseeing the development and future of the standard. During my tenure, I have led the effort to establish the "new normal" for RSC work in the post-3R period. We have updated or created eight operations documents in the past four years.[22] These build on the best aspects of our past operational practices, including consultation with experts and transparent decision making, while limiting efforts that had little added value. The RSC is now more of an executive body, relying on the expertise from the regional groups. Our meeting schedule shifted from annually to quarterly, in order to reduce the time between discussing and implementing proposals. We held our first asynchronous meeting in September 2019 and thus had procedures in place when the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to abandon the annual in-person meetings well into the future.[23] Through all of these experiences, I am grateful for the support and contributions of my RSC colleagues, along with the lifelong friendships we have built as part of this shared endeavor.

Further development of *RDA* is inevitable, thanks to the ever-changing nature of the resources libraries acquire, the evolution of encoding standards, and the never-ending quest to balance internationalization with more local practices. These have been some of the driving forces behind the creation of other cataloging codes. Indeed, the first JSC Chair, Peter R. Lewis observed in 1980, "Sooner or later, we have to find a better way of organizing the international standardizing effort and coordinating it with our valid national and regional requirements."[24] After all these decades, I believe that the official *RDA Toolkit* has made significant strides toward this goal.

References and Notes

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2. See, for example, Seymour Lubetzky, "Development of Cataloging Rules," *Library Trends* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1953): 179-186, and Michael Gorman, "After AACR2R: The Future of the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules," in *Origins, Content, and Future of AACR2 Revised*, ed. Richard P. Smiraglia (Chicago: American Library Association, 1992), 89-94. Antonio Panizzi's 91 rules appear in: British Museum, "Rules for the Compilation of the Catalogue," in *The Catalogue of Printed Books in the British Museum* (London: The Museum, 1841), 1:v-ix.; reprinted in *Foundations of Cataloging: A Sourcebook*, edited by Michael Carpenter and Elaine Svenonius, 1-14 (Littleton, CO.: Libraries Unlimited, 1985).
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6. Jennifer Bowen, ALA Representative, to Joint Steering Committee, March 28, 2005, "ALA Response to 5JSC/AACR3/1," www.rda-rsc.org/archivedsite/docs/5aacr3-part1-alaresp.pdf (accessed Sept. 15, 2022).
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9. *RDA: Resource Description and Access* (Chicago: American Library Association; Ottawa: Canadian Library Association; London: Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, 2010-2017) was published in print and online as the major component of *RDA Toolkit—RDA Toolkit: Resource Description and Access* (Chicago: American Library Association; Ottawa: Canadian Library Association; London: Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals; Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA; American Library Association, 2010-). Note that the official name change from the original working title "Resource Description and Access (RDA)." For more information, see RDA Steering Committee, "RDA Frequently Asked Questions," last modified

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10. See the ALA response: Jennifer Bowen, ALA Representation, to Joint Steering Committee for Revisions of AACR, March 20, 2005, "Draft of Part 1 of RDA," www.rda-rsc.org/archivedsite/docs/5rda-part1-alaresp.pdf (accessed Sept. 14, 2022).
11. As evidenced in: John Meyers, Chair, ALA/ALCTS/CC Committee on Cataloging: Description and Access (CC:DA), to Mary Woodley, Chair, Cataloging and Classification Section, "Report of Strategic Comments on *Resource Description and Access,"* www.libraries.psu.edu/tas/jca/ccda/docs/chair46.pdf (accessed Sept. 14, 2022).
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16. See numerous 6/JSC documents listed at: Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA, "Working Document," www.rda-rsc.org/archivedsite/workingnew.html, and RDA Steering Committee, "New RSC Documents Jun-December 2015," http://rda-rsc.org/node/552 (both accessed Sept. 15, 2022).
17. *RDA Toolkit: Resource Description and Access* (Chicago: American Library Association; Ottawa: Canadian Federation of Library Associations; London: Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals; Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA; American Library Association, 2010-).
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21. RDA Registry, last updated Aug. 22, 2022, www.rdaregistry.info (accessed Sept. 15, 2022).
22. RDA Steering Committee, "RSC Operations Documents," updated May 13, 2022, http://rda-rsc.org/node/608 (accessed Sept. 15, 2022).
23. The RSC's last in-person meeting was Oct. 21-25, 2019, in Santiago, Chile. We will not resume meeting in person until 2023 at the earliest.
24. Peter R. Lewis, "The Politics of Catalog Code Revision and Future Considerations," in *The Making of a Code: The Issues Underlying AACR2*, ed. Doris Hargrett Clack (Chicago: American Library Association, 1980), 3-15. p. 11.

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From Carlen Ruschoff, "Reality Check" column editor:

In this column, Kathy Glennan has underscored the expertise, negotiating skills, and level of effort needed to develop and revise an internationally accepted cataloging code. We thank Kathy and the American Library Association representatives before her for their remarkable skill and contributions to the advances of the Anglo-American catalog rules and *RDA*.