Ric at Riga
Drawn from Notes for Remarks at the Closing Session ICA-SUV Conference
Cultural Heritage Materials – University, Research & Folklore Archives in the 21st Century
Riga, 21-24 August 2017

RiC is a conceptual model in search of a concept. But it's early days yet; there's time to get it right.

Many speaking at this Conference have made the point that the ISAD suite poorly supports their part of the "archival multiverse" referred to by Maryna Chernyavska, including (inter alia) archiving of traditional knowledge, folklore archiving, community archives, oral traditions, indigenous knowledge, audio-visual materials – and, I might add, geospatial archiving, digital archiving, and the archiving of maps/plans and images. Some of those speakers have welcomed RiC because of its "flexibility". The argument, as I understand it, is that too many assumptions that limit its flexibility were built into ISAD(G) about the kinds of material to be described, the methods to be used, and the purpose description is meant to serve. RiC's flexibility, these speakers have argued, will permit them to better adapt it to their special needs.

But flexibility is not the same as lack of direction. It is sometimes forgotten that ISAD(G) was meant to be the first in a series: ISAD(H), (I), (J), (K), and so on, I suppose. At least, that is how it was explained to me when I joined the drafting Commission in 1993:

> The areas of description covered by these general rules are those thought to have the widest applicability in an international archival context. This is only the beginning of a standardization effort. Further specific rules should be formulated to guide the description of special categories of material (such as cartographic materials, motion pictures, electronic files, or charters, notarial deeds, property titles).[1]

Indeed, to this day there are a few ancillary tools concerning "special materials" associated with ISAD(G), 2nd edition, on the ICA website. They recognised that the general standard was too narrow and the others (in the event, never drafted) would broaden its scope and purpose to provide that flexibility which is now attributed to RiC. So, flexibility (in that sense) is not new and has always been part of the picture, but ISAD failed to deliver on the promise. What happened?

When the first edition of ISAD (the Madrid draft) was distributed in Montreal in 1992 it was accompanied by a *Statement of Principles* and led to such an uproar, largely but not solely by Australians, that I was added to the drafting Commission. I came with two objectives:

1. To broaden ISAD to accommodate different ways of meeting common descriptive objectives – specifically what is now called the entity-relationship approach, widely practiced in Australia, in addition to the Fonds-down approach.
2. To redraft the *Statement of Principles* to reflect this change.

Stefano has told us earlier that the *Statement* was never published. There's more to it that. At the first meeting I attended in Stockholm in 1993, I was told – right out of the gate – that the *Statement* was now an "historical document" and would not be discussed further. The consequence was that the *Statement* could no longer provide a conceptual basis for the further development of ISAD or a statement of objectives for the project. Of course, for everyone else in the room but me, that is what it remained but it could no longer serve as a reference point against which to evaluate and correct steps taken to develop ISAD further or else to adjust the conceptual model in the light of subsequent developments.

Instead of drafting more ISADs, as originally intended, and while they were still drafting ISAD(G) in a form that pleased everyone else but me, they moved on to ISAAR(CPF) which conceptually should have been a standard for taxonomical control over data values to populate some of the fields in an ISAD description. But ISAAR metamorphosed into a standard for separated descriptions of

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[1] [ISAD(G) first edition](#) (Ottawa, 1994), Introduction, para, 7.

corporations, families, and persons. Perhaps it was felt that this was a way of meeting the requirements for an entity-relationship option within the ISAD suite.

As they warmed to this approach, they released, subsequent to my departure, ISDF (for functions) and the wholly superfluous ISDIAH (for archival institutions)[2]. If the *Statement of Principles* had been kept as a concurrent element in the project, none of this would have been possible without updating the *Statement* to reflect the changes of direction. That's the advantage of an explicit, concrete, well-founded statement of concept:

1. It makes clear what it is we think we are doing. If that's not said, we may think we all agree simply because we've never had to measure what we believe against what others think.
2. It tells us what's important and what's not. A lot has been said here about the concept of creation. I would agree that this is a first order issue. Taxonomical control, subject or thematic access, may be important but they're secondary.
3. It provides the bedrock if you decide to change direction. Instead of just lurching off down a new road without a map, ignorant of where you've been and uncertain about where you're going, you are forced back to basics, to rethink, to reconceptualise maybe.

One of the contributors to this morning's discussion made the comment that RiC, despite its flexibility and the absence of an explicit or formal statement of purpose, may be unintentionally importing preconceived assumptions from ISAD. This is not simply about providing more seamlessly for both Fonds-down and entity-relationship as well as any other possible descriptive approaches by failing to be explicit. It's also about the archival mind-set, the presumed descriptive posture, adopted by RiC's authors – how the authors of RiC assume it will be used and why. Such assumptions, unspoken and perhaps only vaguely apprehended, will shape how RiC develops. To take but one example alluded to by the contributor this morning who raised the issue: has the ISAD assumption that description takes place from the stand point of the institution-with-archival-holdings subliminally infected the way RiC is being drafted? If so, RiC will be in violation of Requirement 4 of my [Modest Proposal for Improving Access to Archives (and Other Records)](.).

Figure Twelve : The Wholistic Requirement

Setting out your requirements at the outset like that is the best way of evaluating whether or not you've achieved what you set out to do and whether or not what you set out to achieve was worth doing in the first place.   I have heard two arguments against doing so:

1. The authors of RiC claim that the underlying purposes of description are so well known and widely accepted that they do not need to be stated.

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[2] Of course, having already distorted the meaning of "authority record", they could just as easily have issued ISDF as ISAAR(FUN) and ISDIAH as ISAAR(IAH) but by that stage the project was beyond conceptual consistency.

2. Stefano has said that they change too often.

Neither of these statements is true. Earlier this morning, we began discussing some of the underlying purposes of description and the room exploded. We don't all agree, there is no consensus, and that is all the more reason for setting them out clearly. And if the conceptual principles do change, so what? You update them accordingly. It's easy. The real reasons, I suspect, are that the EGAD, RiC's authors, are simply unaware that the conceptual principles they suppose to be universally accepted are, in fact, contested or they want to avoid a showdown. If it is the latter, it may be good politics but it is bad policy.

But I don't think fundamental conceptual objectives, rightly understood and articulated, do change all that often. I would remind Stefano of the words of his countryman, Giuseppe Lampedusa, whose Prince in *The Leopard* reaches the conclusion that things will have to change in order that they may stay the same. The methodology used to implement a theoretical concept, its incidental and mutable application - that may change. But the underlying, abiding bedrock on which such applications are founded endures largely unaltered.

Jenkinson's *Manual* is highly regarded in Australia – at least by some of us. My friend and colleague, Frank Upward, whose contributions to the development of archival conceptual understanding have been amongst the most substantial in my lifetime, once said to me that when he reached some new insight he often found Sir Hilary around the corner, waiting for him to catch up. We do not, of course, apply the methods Jenkinson recommended; we do not even ask the same questions. But all of his writing is grounded in a well-articulated analysis of the underlying conceptual basis from which he proceeds. That is his basic strength. I have a great story about that. Jenkinson was sitting on an interview panel for young Oxbridge graduates wanting to be Assistant Keepers at what was then the PRO. One was asked what period he had studied for his degree. "The end of the 17th Century, sir", the candidate replied. Jenkinson growled: "Which end?" It's an archivist's question. He knew how important it is for us to be aware of our mind-set, our point of view. I don't think he would refer to it, as some speakers have, as a "bias" – something to be eliminated - but rather as something to be aware of and allowed for in our work. And that is the attitude I would wish the EGAD to adopt.

I invite you to join me in asking them to adopt two more conceptual principles. One is inclusionary: a clear understanding of what we intend to describe and why, a fundamental idea about who we are. The other is exclusionary: an equally important idea about who and what we are not.

Our stuff is different – not met by generic portals. It can be accessed by other portals (e.g. TROVE) but we want something they don't provide.

Figure Six : Descriptive Data In

Figure Seven : Descriptive Data Out

I have been distressed at the number of speakers referencing the kind of archival endeavour they undertake as being somehow marginal, apart from the mainstream. This sounds apologetic, but also prideful: look at me, aren't I special. The danger in this attitude is the temptation to drift between ours and other disciplines in the GLAM sector (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums). Don't

do it. Yes, we must work together to achieve integrated access and we have much to learn from them - they have always been better at discovery than we are. But be wary of picking up bad habits, de-contextualisation, mortification, head lice, that sort of thing. Our descriptive requirements are different from those of the rest of GLAM in several important ways, including our requirement for Depth (Requirement 1) and the Protean Requirement (Requirement 2).   These are marker pegs for the mind-set RiC must urged to adopt.

A colleague who is on the other side of this argument has ruefully commented that some of those he mixes with in the GLAM world think it stands for Galleries, Libraries, and Museums. He's distressed by that; me, not so much. Stop marginalising yourselves. Come and sit at the cool kids table. Make a fuss. Insist that you are just as much a part of the mainstream as anyone else. You'll find plenty of support. And if the old guard don't get it, at least you'll be marginalising them and not yourselves.

Stop calling yourselves collections. You're archivists. Be proud of that. Remember, under Requirement 3 of the *Modest Proposal …*, you belong just as much as government archivists or barefoot archivists (viz. those who work on an earthen floor under a tin roof, who have an uncertain electricity supply, and access to the Internet only on Fridays).

Our Requirements : (3) Inclusive
We don't want technical requirements some contributors cannot attain — e.g. the barefoot archives

Just Gorillas

Or

All of Creation

Figure Eleven : The Inclusive Requirement

You have a right to demand that your needs direct the path that RiC now takes. Forcing a debate on the scope and direction of description may not be easy, but that's no reason not to do it. Some archivists still find the distinction between requirements and methods hard to manage. Yes, I understand the difficulty in getting the old guard to change direction when some of them have spent a lifetime comfortably within a traditional framework. But there comes a moment in every change process when barriers, seemingly immutable, collapse very suddenly. Meanwhile, be kind - remember they're defending a principle also, it's just the wrong one.

Being included and working for change also means submitting to professional discipline and adapting to change yourself. But don't worry, Archives is the most undisciplined profession I know. So, what have you got to lose? Join me then in welcoming RiC for what is good about it and engaging in a full-blooded effort to drive its development in the right direction where it can be made better. In that task, I wish you …

All the best

Chris Hurley
www.descriptionguy.com