Archives context and discovery: hierarchy in the digital age

Are archival descriptive standards fit for purpose?

Christopher Hilton (c.hilton@wellcome.ac.uk) Wellcome Library, Wellcome Trust

Sarah Higgins (sjh@aber.ac.uk) Department of Information Studies, Aberystwyth University

Hypothesis: In the age of web based access, archival descriptive standards do not facilitate intellectual and physical access to archival material, while preserving context.

1990s: Standardisation
ISAD(G), with hierarchical context is developed in a paper paradigm just as:
- Personal computers proliferated
- The Internet arrived

2000s: Cataloguing revolutionised
- Mass uptake of ISAD(G)
- Retro-conversion of existing catalogues
- Standards based software developed
- Static and searchable catalogues mounted online
- Archival networks developed (facilitated by EAD)

Since 2000s
Transformation in how information is created, discovered and used:
- The ubiquitous Internet
- Personal computers
- Hand-held devices
- Digitised / born-digital material
But archival standards (apart from minor revisions) have remained static.

Research to date concentrates on: tracking standards uptake through single implementation case studies; software compliancy developments; and comparisons between different standards.

New research will test the hypothesis given to provide an overview of current archival descriptive practice and the methods and assumptions governing this in the UK, through a 3 stage mixed methods approach:
1. Documentary analysis will assess how ISAD(G) is used by UK repositories;
2. Quantitative research will identify cataloguing progress and resource;
3. Qualitative research will establish cataloguing selection processes, the impact of digital material on ISAD(G) implementation and whether standards help or hinder discovery.

Is the information in the right place?
Inheritance from above means information is split between levels and may not be at the level needed or accessed.

Is the information there at all?
- Google wants keywords
- Images need item level descriptions
  but
  Bulk means brevity and series level description (More Product Less Process!)

Is each level of the hierarchy independently understandable?
Information might be split across the hierarchy e.g.
“Marie Stopes correspondence”
- “Marie Stopes” at fonds level
- “Correspondence” at series level
- The actual file of digitised letters called “A-F”!

References