Title: Standardizing Knowledge

Organizer(s): Jennifer Douglas, University of British Columbia; Fiorella Foscarini, University of Toronto; Heather MacNeil, University of Toronto; Bonnie Mak, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Gillian Oliver, Monash University

Key Participants: Same as above.

Abstract: Standards and standardized languages are frequently invoked as a reliable way to ensure consistency and interoperability in the management of information objects, from archives, libraries, and museums to the digital environment and beyond. However, embedded in these standards are particular values and perspectives that emphasize certain ways of representing and thinking about the materials. This panel seeks to explore how the infrastructure of standards can transmit values and biases, and how those perspectives are embodied in the description, management, interpretation, and use of resources. The discussion will also engage debates about convergence in the information sphere, and consider whether it is possible to reconcile the tension between representing a diversity of perspectives with institutional urges to treat all knowledge-making spaces as if they were the same.

Description

Purpose and Intended Audience: The purpose of the panel is to call explicit attention to how standards and standardized languages encode particular ways of seeing and understanding information worlds. It will provide a forum for examining the implications of standardization in an era of convergence in relation to the description and representation of current and historical records, museum objects, and other scholarly resources. The intended audience are scholars who teach, research, or simply are interested in any or all of these issues and who would like to contribute to a discussion about them.

Proposed activities: The format for this session is a panel followed by discussion. Each of the 4 panelists will be given 15 minutes to present a specific case (described below). The general question that will inform and frame each case is two-fold: what forms of knowledge and understanding do standards and standardized languages embody? What forms of knowledge and understanding do they constrain?

In her presentation, Jennifer Douglas will consider how an emerging archival descriptive standard – the International Council of Archives's Records in Contexts – Conceptual Model (RiC-CM) – attempts to reimagine the representation of the archival principle of provenance. The introduction to the new conceptual model promises a new and transformative approach to representing the relationships that define archival records; the presentation will investigate the extent to which the emerging standard, in its current iteration, fulfills that promise. The presentation will ask: in what ways do new models for archival representation continue to encode and embody traditional ideas about what it means to create a record?

In her review of standards and best practices for records management (RM), Fiorella Foscarini will highlight the different perspectives of the professional communities involved in their development. When the standards are implemented, local communities engage in various types of translation work with the aim of adapting them to their specific context. Foscarini will examine the cultural imperialism embedded in international standards by comparing ISO 15489-1:2001 with its Italian version, UNI ISO 15489-1:2006. What is lost and what is gained in translation? How can we develop standards that are mindful of the needs of different communities?

Museum object catalogues do not simply record information about objects and object collections; they embody and reinforce institutional, disciplinary, and professional ways of thinking about the meaning and value of those collections, the nature of the public whose interests the museum is intended to serve, and the roles and responsibilities of the museum in relation to that public. Drawing on historical and contemporary examples, Heather MacNeil will look at how museum object catalogues function as socio-historical texts and offer a different perspective on current discussions about the pros and cons of developing conceptual models directed toward standardizing and reconciling descriptive practices within and across museums, archives and libraries.

The metadata that help us navigate scholarly resources in the digital environment emerge from a long tradition of librarianship, but the correlation between such descriptions and the practices that support them is easily overlooked. Accretions in the inventories and catalogues of foregoing generations mark the shifting of perspectives through time. Similarly, the practices that underpin metadata of today are shaped by culture, history, and politics, but frequently obscured by glossy digital interfaces of the 21st century. In her presentation, Bonnie Mak will investigate how description influences our activities of meaning-making. Such descriptions, whether in a handwritten inventory, printed index card, or on-line catalogue, set the foundation for a certain kind of readerly use and scholarship. Drawing upon a range of examples, this presentation situates metadata as part of an infrastructure of information, and explores the role of descriptive practices in the production of knowledge.

The presentations will be followed by a moderated discussion among the panelists and with the audience, led by Gillian Oliver. We believe the content of the cases and the questions and issues they raise are sufficiently provocative to ensure lively discussion.

Relevance to the Conference/Significance to the Field: Although there has been some discussion of "values" in information systems, further and closer exploration, drawing on concrete examples, is warranted in order to grapple with the problem and seek out possible remedies. A particular strength of this panel is that it brings together a diverse range of perspectives from across the information fields, i.e., archival studies, records management, museum studies, and book history. Such forum is relevant and important to the broad iSchool community because it will:

- Familiarize the broad iSchool community with issues of critical concern that are shared by specific (and perhaps less well-known) constituencies within that community;
- offer critical perspectives on representational standards and their effects that can

contribute to the development and/or revision of such standards; and

- open up new ways of thinking about the real and potential impact of disciplinary, cultural, institutional and digital convergence on representational practices in and across the information fields

The topic of the proposed panel is timely and provocative, is explored from diverse perspectives and draws on concrete examples. Giving each presenter 15 minutes to flesh out a specific case within the frame of the general question will allow her to cover that case in a focused and nuanced way, thus laying a firm foundation for a more informed and productive discussion with the audience.

Duration: a single 90 minute session

Special Requirements: LCD projector