RDA: enabling discovery of content

Gordon Dunsire, Chair, Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA

The times are challenging for RDA: Resource Description and Access, as they are for many of the bibliographic metadata standards used in UK libraries. The strategic issues for the development of RDA are articulated in the RDA Governance Review [1], albeit within the context of management rather than the application of the instructions and vocabularies for metadata content and its use in resource discovery services. The three main issues are internationalization, the wider cultural sector, and linked data. This article describes some of the ways that the Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA (JSC) is currently taking action on these issues.

Internationalization

The RDA instructions, or self-contained component parts such as the RDA Glossary and controlled vocabularies, are now in use around the world [2]. Full translations have been published in Chinese, French, German, and Spanish, with partial translations made in several other languages, and more on the way; many will be made available as parallel versions in RDA Toolkit [3]. The JSC gets valuable feedback from translators about ambiguities in the original English text of RDA that can be clarified by amending the wording or adding terms to the glossary using a "fast track" process so that RDA Toolkit is updated as quickly as possible.

The JSC has benefitted since 2012 from the addition of a member from the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (DNB), representing the German-speaking library communities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. This augments the longstanding representation of French-speaking communities by the Canadian Committee on Cataloguing, and further reinforces the need to avoid unnecessary English bias which can range from the simple, for example the alphabetization of lists embedded in the instructions, to the more complex such as support for inflected languages. English will remain the first language of RDA; it is flexible enough to allow the JSC to improve the wording for an international audience without impairing its meaning.

Anglo-American bias in the RDA instructions is also being exposed by the DNB, sometimes in surprising places, such as the "first or last issue" practice for describing serials [4]. We say "first issue" and they say "last issue" (or is it the other way round?). This particular issue (sorry!) is complicated by support from the International Standard Bibliographic Description (ISBD) and International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) for our way of doing it – but the JSC intends to generalize RDA so that both ways become "localizations"; options that can be applied at national or trans-national level without affecting the overall utility and integrity of RDA at a global level.

The input of communities from beyond the JSC constituencies has been increasing in the last few years, with formal proposal and discussion papers submitted from the ISBD Review Group, ISSN International Centre, European RDA Interest Group (EURIG), and International Association of Music

Libraries (IAML). In addition, the JSC has liaison representatives on EURIG, the FRBR Review Group, and the ISBD Review Group. A protocol for communication and sharing documentation between the JSC and ISBD Review Group was agreed in 2014, and a similar protocol with the FRBR Review Group is under discussion. RDA and ISBD share historical roots, while Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) and the supplementary Functional Requirements for Authority Data (FRAD) are the models on which RDA is based. All three of these standards are maintained by IFLA and are undergoing various stages of review, so it is important that the JSC is able to communicate effectively with their parent bodies.

The JSC expanded the number and composition of its working groups in 2014. A new Places Working Group, RDA/ONIX Framework Working Group, and Technical Working Group were set up in addition to the existing Music Working Group. New terms of reference [5] allow the groups to accept members from outside the JSC constituencies, and they now include representatives nominated by EURIG and the ISBD Review Group. The old Examples Group was replaced by an honorary JSC post of Examples Editor, who is better able to coordinate RDA examples at international level.

GLAM

Although rooted in the creation of metadata for library resources, RDA has always been intended to cover a wider range of resources from the archives, museums and galleries sectors. Such resources often reside in "library" collections, where they have to be described using integrated systems and standards. Digitization projects, irrespective of sector, usually result in document-type resources which share many characteristics with bibliographic resources. As a result, RDA Toolkit contains very general instructions and placeholders for metadata for resources such as objects, events, and collections. The JSC is now considering the expansion of these areas of RDA, and ensuring that the needs of cultural heritage resource description are accommodated. One example is an ongoing discussion about the RDA designator for "curator" which can mean different things in library, archive, and museum contexts. Another current topic is the treatment of unpublished resources: in the library world, these are mainly manuscripts, but they cover the vast majority of museum objects and significant proportions of many archival collections.

Linked data

The JSC has been working with linked data communities since 2007 [6]. Many of the RDA controlled terminologies were published as linked data value vocabularies from 2011 onwards. The RDA entities, elements, and relationship designators were published as linked data element sets in early 2014. Every RDA element attribute and relationship has a URI which can be used in linked data versions of RDA; some have already been used in 20 million records in the Research Libraries UK Linked Open Data dataset and 10 million records from Sudoc, the French academic libraries union catalogue. The RDA Registry [7] also contains versions of the RDA elements that can be used in non-FRBR environments, as well as full examples of RDA linked data. There are also linked data maps from RDA to related elements such as the MARC relator codes. The ISBD Review Group has recently approved a linked data map from ISBD to RDA and the JSC is developing an inverse map from RDA to ISBD; these will allow applications to use a mix of RDA and ISBD data triples.

Conclusions

These strategic topics are interconnected. The JSC Places, RDA/ONIX Framework, and Technical working groups are focussing on many linked data issues for RDA. Translations of Glossary terms and vocabularies will be added to the RDA Registry, which is constructing a multilingual environment for linked data developers. The FRBR models have been integrated into the CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model (CRM) for museum information, and discussions about extension to archival description are underway. The JSC expects to develop linked data maps from RDA to FRBR and CRM in due course. We live in times of clouds and crowds, webs and nets, the local in the global, and RDA has a clear vision of its goal - RDA: the global standard enabling discovery of content.

References

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