

Subject Definition Analysis 1

Inclusive Arrangement and Description for the past, present, and future

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Subject Definition

Arrangement and description are comprised of many series of steps that help identify and clarify a collection. The archivist is essentially creating a voice for the collection through the arrangement and description process. However, another crucial aspect of arrangement and description is the archivist taking on the supporting role of curating a collection in a way that recognizes voicing or describing a community or marginalized group the archivist may not be familiar with but is a valuable part of the community the collection originates from. The archivist is arranging and describing an archive or collection that suits the needs of the past, present, and future through language that is crucial to the development of finding aids for users.

The goal of this essay is to explore two characteristics of arrangement and description that are fundamental to collection development. First, recognition of community and their role in curating a collection. Secondly, using descriptive words that avoids bias and harmful language, while engaging users of today and the future. However, language used today may be obsolete or considered offensive tomorrow. The archivist first and foremost has the duty to adhere to the tenants of arrangement and description, while being inclusive.

Subject Analysis

Arrangement and description are a crucial part of developing finding aids for a collection. An archivist is burdened with the task of providing descriptions that the standards of arrangement and description but also taking the archivist out of their realm of knowledge by coming up with terms that maybe unfamiliar to them. In the article *Conscious Editing-Driven Metadata for Archives and Digital Collections: A Case Study* encourages the archivist to seek out and use terms that are relevant and culturally acceptable. Subject based vocabularies are one way to achieve this goal:

Over the past two decades, librarians and information professionals have begun developing subject-area specific controlled vocabularies like Homosaurus, an international LGBTQ+ linked data vocabulary, or the Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus to address nuances related to highly specific areas of study, as well as race, gender, and sexual orientation. For finding aid description, archives have more flexibility and are able to crowd-source new terminology, subject headings, and community-driven vocabularies (sometimes referred to as folksonomies) for collections by using web resources (Peters & Becker, 2009). (Ann Abney 2024)

Subject controlled vocabularies act to respect a community or marginalized group by using terms that are current and relevant from a finding aid perspective. An archivist may ask members of the LGBTQ+ community to offer their insight on a collection and ask them what words they would use to describe their community that can serve as finding aids also.

Conscious editing and reparative description are new approaches to a long-standing conversation around controlled vocabularies in libraries. With new advances in digital libraries,

cross-linked catalogs using Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) to improve access, and search-engine optimized solutions, librarians and archivists are able to consider new approaches to how materials are collected, arranged, described, and presented. Conscious editing and reparative description are practices that libraries can engage in during all the stages of organization of knowledge (Ann Abney 2024)

Controlled vocabularies could help with the arrangement of the collection by respecting provenance and the order of materials, and ownership of the material. Controlled vocabulary could help with MPLP when dealing with a collection specific to a group. It should be noted that archivists should still use established guidelines for arrangement and description. For example, in the article *More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing*, (Meissner 2005) the following passage supports controlled vocabularies:

A couple of simple rules can guide us. First, following from arrangement itself, description should proceed in a top-down manner from the most general level to the most specific. Second, we should record at each hierarchical level the information pertinent to that level and not repeat information from level to level. ¹¹⁴ Following these principles, we can create a finding aid structure that will maximize user access with the least amount of effort. The first objective is to describe the whole of the materials at a level of detail appropriate to that level of arrangement (p246)

The “practicalities of arrangement” should still be considered when arranging a collection according Laura Millar in her book *Archives, Principles and Practices* (millar 2017):

Before examining the archives in any detail, and certainly before making any physical changes, the archivist should gather as much information as possible about the archives and the agency or agencies responsible for them, including historical and background

information, archival appraisal report or analyses, relevant reports or publications, or information gleaned from conversations with the donor or creator. (p229) Millar makes a valid point that an archivist still must do their due diligence with the initial creation of a collection. Yet, the extra step of speaking with the creator or agency/agencies of the archive is a great way to gain access to specific or controlled vocabulary and makes the archivist aware of harmful or biased language. Again, this provides the archive and archivist with more flexibility when creating the collection and finding aids and giving the collection a voice.

Considering archives or collections as voices is a thought explored in the article *Archives as Spaces of Memory* (Ketelaar 2008):

Nor is the archive ever finished. The openness of the archive outweighs the closure of a trial. The file may have been closed, but it will be reactivated again and again. Every interaction, intervention, interrogation, and interpretation by creator, user, and archivist is an activation of the record.²² Each activation leaves fingerprints which are attributes to the archive's infinite meaning. All these activations are acts of co-creatorship determining the record's meaning. In the conceptualization of the records continuum, recordkeeping objects 'are marked out by their processes of formation and continuing formation.'²³ A record is never finished, never complete, the record 'is always in a process of becoming.'²⁴ (p 12) This quote brings up the idea of a different type of community where the creator, user, and archivist can shape an archive's meaning. If a record is in a constant state of fluidity in the future, then an archivist must be aware of the fact the descriptions they choose today may no longer be relevant or morph into a different meaning in the future.

Archives, arrangement, and description are subject to future communities, which may share information through social spaces and technology. Ketelaar states, *Communities of records*

need spaces. Archives as social spaces can help forming and hosting these communities. Archives serving as spaces of memory, where people's experiences can be transformed into meaning. Archives as a place of shared custody and trust. Archives as places where records are preserved through time, long enough perhaps to destroy the agony and heal the community (p 21) Ketelaar is thinking of an archive as a community record that provides a space for shared community spaces where the past and present can be reconciled in the future.

Community plays a vital role in shaping archives. Arrangement and description can be seen as a community activist by ensuring the voice of the community is archived in the community's truth. Archivist must go beyond recording dates, collection size, photographs, and organization. While these things are crucial, if an archivist is unsure of how to "voice" a collection from the community, it is imperative to speak to creators, or the community itself. Especially when the experience of the creator or the community is alien to the archivist.

If arrangement and description are shaping finding aids and providing information for future users, it is imperative see inclusive language not as a burden or extra work, but instead embrace inclusive language as another tool that supports finding aids and user experience. Arrangement provides the framework for the foundation of the archive, while description houses all the attributes of the archives. Ketelaar puts this this train of thought in another way that gets to the heart of what this paper states about community and arrangement and description.

Aren't archivists and other record professionals such non-lawyers engaged in memory-practice? What could they and what could the records do to compensate for the weaknesses of memory-justice? 'Archives are often themselves acts of commemoration.'³⁷ I would propose to refigure preservation and access to records, weaving them into private and public memories as a healing ritual of commemoration. (p 13)

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Viewing arrangement and description as being part of a record that never dies, justifies the need to always make a valiant effort to include the value of community in the creation of an archive. The idea of a record as an eternal document that has no end really changes the perspective on arrangement and description. To achieve with the goal of speaking to the user or community of the future is an interesting concept to ponder. The archivist can try to make this happen using inclusive language which would benefit us all in the present and future, while making sure archivist did what they could in the past.

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