RDA for Reference Librarians

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Good morning, everyone. I’m a reference and instruction librarian at UC Santa Barbara. I’m also cataloger (only part time) of art materials. I feel lucky to be both a reference librarian and a cataloger, for I see the 2 sides (or many sides) of the conversation around the catalog-- from creating records, working with our systems or information technology people, and also interacting with the public on a regular basis as a reference librarian and also an instructor of our Library’s 1 unit course. First off, I have some questions for the audience, so if I could get a show of hands: are there any reference slash public services librarians here today? Ok, and I figure we have plenty of catalogers in the room today? Do we have any catalogers actively cataloging in RDA now?

I hope we all have or have started thinking about plans on how to handle the transition to RDA. For instance, my institution has been having biweekly RDA discussion groups and the original catalogers have finished our NACO training. We have also established a timeline of transition to RDA (adopt in the Fall). In addition, many of the catalogers in my library have gone to RDA trainings provided by various library associations and groups (Music Library Association, technical processing group, serials cataloging, etc.). But, my question to you now, have you or maybe your department head thought about how to train public services with all these changes? Have you had discussions already with your public services people? For instance, we have had RDA records in our system for quite some time now, and yes, we have discussed how and what to display in the records with our system people, but we have not explained any of this to our public services staff at all. What does the front line need to know about RDA and the changes from AACR2? How will our reference desks interact with patrons with these changes? How will our instruction librarians teaching methods change? And finally, what do our patrons need to know about RDA to use the library catalog? This presentation hopes to accomplish two things: for those new to RDA or unfamiliar (say if any reference librarians came), I will give some general introduction to RDA, while for the experienced cataloger, I will discuss the importance of our symbiotic relationship with the public services staff and librarians. Hopefully this presentation can combine these two goals: I hope to have organized my presentation so that catalogers can adapt from it and take it to your public services people as a training. And also if there are public services people in here today, I hope you learn something new about RDA. In this new environment, as catalogers, we hope to continue or even start an open conversation concerning the cataloging that is done behind the scenes with those who are in the public, where catalogers play an integral role with the catalog and dissemination of information.

So, let’s do a quick overview and history of RDA and how we got here. Don’t worry, it will be quick for those that have heard this over and over again. Mostly simply, RDA was created to update the cataloging rules by addressing ongoing issues with the current/previous content standard, while updating some
guidelines for newer or unaddressed formats. In addition, RDA addressed the 21st century concerns to become compatible to 21st century technologies. RDA is meant to take our data out of the library and into the rest of the world.

RDA is based on the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) and the Functional Requirements for Authority Data (FRAD). FRBR is based on the entity-relationship model. The model consists of different entities and their relationships (we hopefully remember the group 1 entities: work, expression, manifestation and item-- representing the object of intellectual activity). FRBR is trying to create a relationship with closely-related resources. I’m not going to go into an example of explaining works, expression, manifestation, and item- it’s easily google-able: hint: Harry Potter and Pride and Prejudice seem to be popular examples. I will go into some of the issues why we are heading to a FRBR model with RDA though-- Although library catalogs have become more complex and sophisticated in many ways, they still fall behind when comparing it to the internet (or World Wide Web). We and our users are all accustomed to the web with its very robust data and data retrieval systems, yet our catalog has not kept up. Most catalog data cannot be linked and manipulated like the web, therefore making library data not work well with the web. It also must be noted that the web is also changing (read: the semantic web) where the computers will find, exchange, and interpret information using the linked data structure (to define and find relationships between these “things”).

Ok, enough of what RDA is talk, let’s get on to what the changes from AACR2 to RDA mean to public services/reference staff and the public. Although some of the benefits of RDA won’t be noticed until other systems and standards are created, we will and already notice some changes to the records. There are around 3 basic changes that will be noticed by reference librarians: fewer abbreviations, and therefore no Latin abbreviations, changes to General Material Designation (GMD), and finally the rule of three. Before we discuss these changes, let’s actually look at a record and get some impressions from the audience (I know from being an instruction librarian, it can be deadly to just lecture for 20 minutes straight, so let’s get audience participation!) What do people notice first? What do people notice about the record. Let’s look at the MARC display. Now what do people notice?

Let’s discuss these 3 changes: First- the lack of abbreviations and lack of Latin abbreviations. AACR2 dictated the use of abbreviations to save card space, and also electronic storage space, which wasn’t cheap. One of RDA’s guiding principles is to “take what you see,” therefore abbreviations are not in need, and neither are Latin abbreviations. In an AACR2 record, you will oven see [s.l.: s.n.] for Latin: sine loco and sine nomine (without a place and without a name). But with RDA the information will now be [place of publication not identified] and [publisher not identified]. Yes for catalogers, we will have to type out longer words like illustrations, but I see a definite advantage for our public, since really, who knows what col. ill. means? (cm is a symbol and not an abbreviation, if curious)

Another change is the General material designation (GMD). Although we will not be changing from how we currently handle GMD’s at the moment, I just wanted to mention what this means if anyone is unclear. We are familiar with GMD’s being present in records of non-print materials-- for example the
bracketing [video recording] for a DVD record. AACR2 mistakenly combined content with the carrier (in this case a video recording) in one field. RDA has addressed this by taking out the GMD's in the title field and created new fields to describe content, media, and carrier types.

Finally, everyone remembers the rule of three from library school, well, it’s now optional and not the rule. AACR2 limited the number of added entries for a particular work. RDA allows for more access points-- which again follows RDA’s take what you see approach and transcribing information as seen on the source.

Ok, now let’s get to cataloger’s important role in the implementation of RDA for your library. Collaboration is key in the implementation of RDA, for catalogers work with systems/ information technology staff and reference librarians. While catalogers collaborate well with other catalogers, there has been the stereotype that cataloging is an isolated activity with little people interaction. While it has been noted frequently, this image of catalogers is untrue, for we support the public and have responded to the needs of the public. I see the implementation of RDA as a chance to renew our collaboration skills amongst systems and reference staff. We are at the center of this dialogue, and we can play the key role in RDA’s success. I see us as the important intermediary between systems and the public.

Like I said earlier, in my library, we already have RDA records in our catalog. While the cataloger’s import these records, we have had conversations with our systems/information technology staff. Luckily most of the changes from AACR2 to RDA won’t require major changes to the Integrated Library Systems (ILS) at the moment since we still rely on our compatibility with MARC. But with MARC, systems staff and catalogers need to discuss new MARC fields to be implemented, an example being the new fields were created for content type, media type, and carrier type. For instance, our library has decided to hide or suppress those new MARC fields for the content, media and carrier types to the public (show example), but in the MARC tags view, it is visible. The public does not need to see the 3 new MARC fields, which would only confuse them more. In addition new MARC fields will require different or new indexing. Therefore, catalogers need to work with systems or ILS providers to index these fields when needed. Catalogers have a complex understanding of the organization of information, and in MARC fields, therefore, we need to be work closely with systems in designing the online catalog.

As for the public services staff, most catalogers do not have a lot of time on the front line, and we catalogers need to take it upon ourselves to understand how the public uses the catalog, just like the reference staff. The catalog is only as good as its data, and public services staff need to understand the catalog and the records. I would suggest having a training or information type session for the reference and instruction staff, but I feel this would be more of a conversation and dialogue between the groups, for while the catalogers can describe the changes from AACR2 to RDA, the reference and instruction staff are the ones seeing the patrons information seeking needs and behaviors, which could lead to customization and display discussions. With these discussions, catalogers can learn from the public services, and take this back to the systems staff to discuss implementation of any updates or customizations. As I see it currently, reference librarians, instruction librarians and all public services staff
will see the current implementation of RDA as a logical next step. From the instruction perspective, it will be less confusing to teach how to read a catalog record, even though the records will be longer now. Especially for us art instructors— not having to explain what col. ill. or ports. means will be helpful.

As I see it, RDA is a chance to increase our (cataloger’s) role in the library. Yes, many of us still need to learn how to catalog in RDA (ahem, me), but we are adaptable and flexible, and we can handle the challenge. As cataloging departments get shipped off site and staff is dwindling, I see the cataloging department’s role expanding with collaborative activities concerning RDA. By working with both the systems and public services, catalogers play the crucial role between the back end of the system and the public display. We are the glue that holds together the catalog.