

Why Standards?

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An Internet search on “why standards” retrieves any number—about 89,300 on 12 December 2006—of laments and boasts about standards across nearly all industries. Here are just a few typical examples:

- “Why Standards Matter, And Why It’s Taking Our Industry So Long to Implement Them” <www.automatedbuildings.com>¹
- “Why Standards Still Matter. The last couple of years may have seen an increase in the level of interest and action around Web standards. But it still isn’t filtering down to the mainstream...” <www.thinkvitamin.com>²
- “MPDA is a non-profit organization here to provide qualified experience and research to those in the business. Without standards there is no guarantee of reasonable quality.” <www.paintinfo.com/assoc/mpda/standard.htm>³

Clearly, awareness of the need for standards is widespread. Indeed, the value of standards is so unambiguous and uncontested that to question the need for them seems unwarranted to say the least. We happily live by the rules governing our time zones, telephone codes, and Internet protocol addressing. And, where multiple standards are widely used concurrently, conversion tables are easy to find because they are essential in daily experience: metric and imperial units of measurement, national denominations of currency are just two examples. What underlies the value of any standard is that its use yields an advantage of some sort, and its absence involves a disadvantage. Standards are more frequently observed when these advantages and disadvantages are most obvious, regardless of whether they are mundane—“Was that electric current 110 or 220 volts?”—or vital—“Oops, I thought they drove on the right side of the road here.”

So the issue here cannot be as simple as the single question, “Why standards?” Instead, there are probably several closely related questions. Why these particular standards? Why in this context? And why now—that is, what is the new advantage or disadvantage of standards like CCO, controlled vocabularies and authorities, and shared metadata schemas, since cultural institutions seem to have gotten along fine without them up to this point?

What has changed and continues to change our institutional advantages and the place and value of standards is the Internet. It has a profound effect on the access we provide to collections as well as on the expectations on the part of our audiences and users, who will continue to drive change whether we like it or not.

This goes beyond merely making collections available in digital form. Using collections management software in a single museum or having an online catalog in a single library might make operations more efficient, but they do not fundamentally change the institutions or the way their collections are used and consulted. Absent the Internet in the single institution view, the value of standards for data format and content is exceedingly low; maybe something as simple as making sure everyone knows how to spell *Brueghel*, just so that paintings do not go missing. In the pre-Internet world, museums and libraries largely rely (yes, present tense, using “pre-Internet” as a set of habits and thinking patterns as much as the reality of the information universe we live in today) on “others” to maintain standards to enable sharing of information and surrogates that are delivered not over the Web, but by fax, post, courier, and interlibrary loan in the form of letters, photographs, photocopies, and hard-bound volumes. Researchers, scholars, and the general public have accepted the limitations on access and resource discovery that are inherent in the world of physical records and material works held in broadly distributed collections around the world. Things are hard to find, and one can never be completely confident of having found everything that is relevant to a particular inquiry or research question. Transactions are time-consuming and almost always have a more or less significant service cost associated with them—a cost that someone has to pay.

Some of the first changes brought about by the networked environment were in the way we work: union cataloging in libraries supported by real-time data exchange, for example, instead of locally produced paper catalog cards. These changes came earliest to things that are relatively easily to think of as data and that have immediate value in sharing, such as the short and simple texts contained in catalog records, and significantly later, digital surrogates of the resources themselves. In the realm of surrogates, changes came earlier to materials that were easy to digitize and later to those that are difficult to digitize well, if yet at all. At the time of this publication, we are still in the midst of these transformations. We are beginning to digitize and deliver for purposes of interaction as well as simply viewing resources that a few short years ago were difficult if not impossible to imagine being instantly available at any node on the network. These resources include faithful reproductions of works of art, the contents of entire libraries, and newer creative works that are born digital and released immediately into a networked environment. We are instigating change and we are subject to constant change, the depth of which we cannot pretend to know today.

But we can see some of the effects of these changes and we can begin to plan for them. One obvious effect of the availability of high-quality digital surrogates delivered with metadata is that the distinctive nature of the collecting institution begins to recede. If I find a digitized copy of a photograph on line, I do not really care that the digital surrogate emanates from a particular library, archive, museum, or relatively new type of virtual institution such as ARTstor. I might, because of my scholarly

training, consider the value of cataloging information and description differently depending on the reputation of the source of that information, but other things being more or less equal, the type or nature of the source is irrelevant.

This devaluing of institution type in online access should not concern us too much, since access is only one aspect of a broader scope of mission activities for any one of our institutions. What is interesting, however, is that the institution type as an organizing principle is being replaced in the online environment by the knowledge domain—when I am looking for Rembrandt, I am thinking art history, not dental care—and by the quality of digital surrogates and information as expected within that knowledge domain. A certain amount of information can be generic (this is the Dublin Core view), but we quickly move to descriptors and modes of presentation that are specific to a particular knowledge domain. If libraries, archives, and museums are the traditional first-line “containers” that determined our expectations for research, then knowledge domains are the new containers where our expectations for resource discovery are consistent, regardless of the resource provider.

In 1998 Boyd Rayward wrote:

Traditionally these [information organizations] have been created to manage different formats and media such as print and its surrogates (libraries), objects (museums), and the paper records of organizational activity (archives and records repositories). Differences in organizational philosophy, function, and technique have arisen from the exigencies presented by these different formats and media. These exigencies no longer apply in the same way when there is a common electronic format. It is clear that if electronic sources of information are to be effectively managed for future access by historians and others, differences between libraries, archives and museums will largely have to disappear and their different philosophies, functions and techniques integrated in ways that are as yet unclear.⁴

The ways in which the philosophies and functions of different types of cultural heritage institutions will be integrated, to which Rayward referred in 1998, are now beginning to become clear. This greater clarity was noted when the change from traditional resources to resources that are both digital *and* networked was described a few years ago in a concept paper entitled “Towards a Web of Culture and Science”:

... once information has been processed and transformed into a digital entity, it must no longer follow the fate of its physical support. There is thus no reason to store it according to the same systems used to preserve the object it emulates. On the Web, there are no buildings or walls, and we are not obliged to reproduce distinctions based on the topologies of material objects or on the various nature of their physical shells. It is possible—and indeed necessary—to reorganize digital records into a new cognitive architecture, where the strict constraints of the physical world no longer apply.⁵

Cataloging Cultural Objects—used in conjunction with the data standards and cataloging practices from the many institution types that are included in it by reference—embodies one facet of that cognitive architecture. The use of CCO will help to make our new collective advantages a reality. That these advantages and their achievement might look slightly different in a library than they do in a museum or archive or photo study collection is just fine. That they might make each of us re-assess a bit, understanding that we are knowledge managers in a shared domain that transcends our “local” roles as museum, library, archive, and visual resource professionals, is just fine, too. We are, after all, acting not in the interests solely of what we were trained to do, but also in the interests of generations who will look for—and, if we do our jobs right, find—our cataloged resources on line. ♻

Notes

1. Hoffmann, Terry. “Why Standards Matter and Why It’s Taking Our Industry So Long to Implement Them.” Automated Building Site. 12 December 2006. <http://www.automatedbuildings.com/news/mar00/articles/jclh/jclh.htm>.

2. Johansson, Roger. “Why Standards Still Matter.” Vitamin: Nourishment to Help the Web Grow Site. 12 December 2006. <http://www.thinkvitamin.com/features/design/why-standards-still-matter>.

3. Master Painters and Decorators Associate Site. 12 December 2006. <http://www.paintinfo.com/assoc/mpda/standard.htm>.

4. W. Boyd Rayward and George A. Miller, “Electronic Information and the Functional Integration of Libraries, Museums and Archives,” in *History and Electronic Artefacts*, ed. Edward Higgs, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 207-226.

5. *Towards a Web of Culture and Science*, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. Published without date, but referenced as a contribution to the WSIS meeting in Geneva in 2003: http://archimedes2.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/echo_Web/ECHO/home/dissemination/Publications.