

Collection-level metadata: needs and solutions

Workshop report by Maja Žumer, Genevieve Clavel-Merrin and Peter Noerr

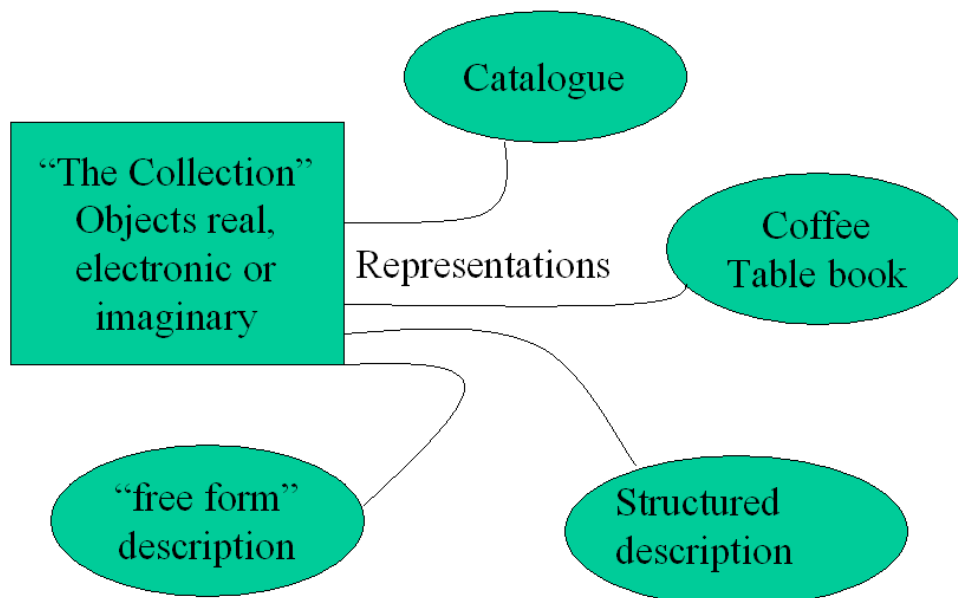
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A collection is an aggregate of real, electronic or imaginary objects, which can be represented (described) in many ways:

- unstructured free-form description
- structured description
- catalogue
- pictorial ('coffee-table book')
- ...

Structure of a collection



What is a collection?

The term 'collection' can be applied to any aggregate of physical, digital or imaginary items. It is collected to fulfil a purpose. It can be defined as a listing of all its elements or by defining the rule, according to which an element becomes a part of the collection.

Purposes of collection metadata

Collection descriptions allow the owners of collections to provide information about their existence and availability to interested users. Libraries, for example, have traditionally described their materials (i.e. collections) in the form of unstructured text. It is now very common to find information about library collections on Web pages, including opening hours and terms of availability.

In some cases collection description can be seen as a substitute for individual item descriptions when those are not available or would not be practical (well known practice for ephemera, e.g.)

Collection descriptions should enable:

- discovery of collections of interest,
- location of collections of interest,
- targeting for search or analysis,

- evaluation of collections,
- management of collections.

It is obvious that two purposes of metadata use can be detected: searching and management.

Audiences for metadata

According to the two purposes, two audiences for collection metadata can be defined: searchers and managers.

Searchers can be further divided into:

- human users (end-users, librarians, information specialists...)
- machines
 - acting on behalf of a human
 - performing processing

Metadata characteristics

In general metadata can be in free form, intended only for human use. It may be structured, intended both for human and machine use. If structured, some of the elements may be authority controlled.

Attributes of collections (metadata elements)

In order to fulfil the purpose(s) of collection descriptions, several attribute groups were identified:

- **identification** (title, location...)
- **accessibility** (physical address, opening hours, electronic address, terms of access...)
- **ownership** (current, previous owner, custodian...)
- **physical characteristics** (format, size, type)
- **content**
 - **subject**
 - **description**
 - **language**
 - **intended audience**
 - **temporal aspects**
 - **spatial aspects**
 - **'Conspectus' metadata** (strength of collection, completeness...)
- **relationships with other collections**
- **rights**
- **curatorial/administrative metadata** (state of collection, performed or planned conservation and preservation procedures...)

Most (all?) metadata elements have to be also access points to enable effective searching

Existing schemas/models

There are several well known existing schemas, e.g.:

- E-Lib Simple Collection Description (<http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/metadata/cld/simple/>)
- RSLP (<http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/metadata/rslp/>)
- DC CD (<http://dublincore.org/groups/collections/>)
- TEL (http://www.europeanlibrary.org/tel_handbook/metadata_handbook/metadata_ha_nbook.html)

Interestingly, none of those cover any aspects of curatorial/administrative needs. During the workshop, Petra Otten made a presentation of an ADLIB collection-description application, prepared for Dutch museum collections.

How to proceed?

Collection description is a relatively new area, but becoming increasingly important for distributed searching with portals. Some portals provide access to many very heterogeneous collections, therefore, in order to perform more focused searching, some tools have to be available. Collection-level descriptions enable users to narrow down the list of collections, which at the second step become targets of a (more precise or focused) search.

Owners and curators of collection should therefore aim at high quality descriptions, and portal designers should enable efficient ways of collection searching. Prototypes and testing is needed to develop the best models.