

COLLECTIONS NEWS

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Lost for Words?

Gordon McKenna, Standards & Systems Manager, introduces a new MDA service: *SPECTRUM-Terminology*.

Enquirers to MDA's *AdvicePoint* service often ask, "Where can I find a terminology on...?" With this in mind, MDA is launching, this month, a new section of our popular website – *SPECTRUM Terminology*. It's an important development of our mission to be the UK's lead organisation on documentation and information management for museums.

Why *SPECTRUM Terminology*?

SPECTRUM states in the definition for many of its Units of information that an organisation should "maintain a list of standard terms." This resource offers dynamic support for this requirement.

However its main aim is to aid 'interoperability' – knowledge sharing – for the heritage community and its users. To do this there is a need to have a single point of access for information relating to terminology.

What does it provide?

At launch, *SPECTRUM Terminology* will have three strands:

Terminology Essentials – general information about terminology for museums.

Terminology Workshop – guidance on creating thesauri.

Terminology Bank – a set of existing standard terminologies.



Who is it for?

Museum workers – a reference and learning resource.

Museums, Subject Specialist Networks and other collections holders – a source of standard terminologies supporting *SPECTRUM Units*.

Collections management software suppliers – a source of standard terminologies for inclusion in systems.

Funding bodies – a source of standard terminologies to specify in the projects they support.

Trainers and educators – reference and training resources.

How much does it cost?

The resource is free to all users of the MDA website. However we would like you to 'pay' with your time, both in using it and in providing feedback. Please submit the terminologies you are using or have created so that *SPECTRUM Terminology* will become a living resource.

Future developments?

As the service grows, more content will be added. For example, MDA is in conversation with Liz Orna to make her publication *Build Yourself a Thesaurus* available to users online.

SPECTRUM Terminology will be the first port of call for user-friendly training in terminology creation.

Finally it may also become an environment for the development of terminologies.

How can it be accessed?

Just enter the web address:

www.mda.org.uk/spectrum-terminology/

It's just a click away!

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Special MDA Members-Only Offer

The *Glossary of Conservation I* is a new reference tool for conservators, curators, archivists and collections professionals.

This dictionary of conservation and restoration terms is edited by art historian and conservator, Mireia Xarrie of Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Published by Balaam Art of Barcelona, it is available to members of MDA at the reduced price of £23.50 (€35) + shipping costs.

To receive discount, order online from:

www.balaam-art.com

"Standards are a pain but you can't do without them; they're fundamental!"

**Prof Roger Needham
(1935 - 2003)
MDA Conference 1997**



Photograph by Jim DeLillo

Practically Speaking

Rachael Rogers, Curator, Abergavenny Museum, has just completed her MA dissertation. From the results of her work she challenges some of the accepted norms of terminology use by curators.

Curators know that for the public to be educated and entertained in museums, information needs to be provided in such a way that it is understood. As a result, as curators, we are often encouraged to use non-specialist language when we communicate with the public.

Many of us, for example, will have rewritten academic text labels or information in catalogue records to make them more "accessible". I think that, whilst the results may be easy to read, they can be bland: detail and knowledge is sometimes lost.

Are we being too quick to simplify information?

In order to describe things accurately it is sometimes necessary to use terms unfamiliar to non-specialists. Objects often have colourful and varied regional names and it is essential that we preserve this knowledge and communicate it to our users.

If we try to simplify information too much, knowledge can be lost or at least not communicated. Let's use specialist terms in our text labels and public catalogue records - we can always provide glossaries, thesauri and pictures to facilitate the learning process.

Do museum staff and museum users actually need different levels of information?

We differentiate unnecessarily between the needs of staff and users. Modern career patterns often mean staff begin museum jobs with no prior knowledge of the collection and stay for a short time.

Staff do not always possess specialist knowledge about a collection.

The idea persists that online catalogues used by the public must be bland versions of richer catalogues used by curatorial staff. We perhaps should consider that sometimes it is the public who require the detail, and the museum staff who need simple information.

Alongside this is the thirst the public have for history, which can be satisfied in part by self-study, including museum visits. This is not a traditional academic path, but it means that, without wishing to undermine the knowledge and expertise of curators, sometimes visitors know more about a subject than museum staff.

We must realise that providing access to information about collections is not a question of curators producing academic catalogue records which then need to be turned into simplified text for users, with no requirement on the part of the user to learn anything new.

Our audiences are not to be underestimated, they are actively looking for new knowledge which is surely which is why they visit museums.

I believe that a new approach to terminology, how we use it and who it is for, will increase access to collections and encourage a dialogue between specialists and non-specialists. It will also actively increase knowledge within museums.

Desperately Seeking Uniformity!

Phil Carlise, English Heritage, explains their terminology work.

The Data Standards Unit (DSU) was established to develop and maintain data standards and controlled vocabularies for the recording of archaeological and architectural information held in National Monuments Record (NMR) databases.

Our main work is the creation, development and maintenance of the NMR Thesauri, which have been incorporated into the software developed by exeGesIS SDM Ltd for use by Historic Environment Records. These are made freely available in digital and paper form by contacting the unit, or online at:

<http://thesaurus.english-heritage.org.uk>



Increasingly the unit is focusing on developing standards in partnership with other interested bodies for use by the whole heritage sector, e.g. the *MDA Archaeological Objects Thesaurus*.

The DSU was also instrumental in the development of the *Monument Inventory Data Standard* (MIDAS) providing a common framework for the development of any inventory recording the historic environment. MIDAS is currently under revision and MIDAS 2 will include new information groups specifically designed to bring MIDAS into line with SPECTRUM.

The unit also has a growing international reputation, representing the UK in the development of a multilingual thesaurus for heritage legislation. The European Heritage Network (HEREIN) thesaurus provides multi-lingual access to the National Heritage Reports of the member states. For more information visit the HEREIN website at:

www.european-heritage.net/sdx/herein/thesaurus/introduction.xsp

Always on the lookout for new challenges, we are currently working on a thesaurus of *Landscape Characterization* as well as tackling the ever difficult issue of how to record 'time', but that is a whole different kettle of worms!

Tech Tips

In this issue we focus on the how you might protect your digital content and some of the terminology you will come across.

Text based methods of protecting content:

Credit or captions – these detail ownership of the content's rights. Online, they can be linked directly by URL to the website of the content provider.

Copyright notices – most websites have copyright notices outlining, for example:

- Contact address in the organisation for any queries
- Permitted usage of the content
- Prohibited usage of the content

Terms and Conditions – before access to any content is permitted, a set of these for the use of the content may have to be acknowledged by the user.

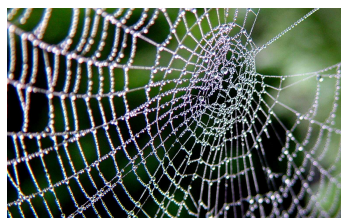
Technical methods of protecting content:

Providing images at low resolution – gives a limited degree of protection against inappropriate download of images for offline usage (such as print and products). Resolution of images at 72 dots per inch (dpi) is high enough for the image to retain an accurate likeness on screen, but makes print use unlikely.

Scarring – can be achieved by superimposing text over the base image, in an 'embossed' manner. This text usually gives the message of who owns the image and is subtle enough not to detract from its use in a website environment. This technique may not be satisfactory, as works of art still in copyright would be visually altered.

Encryption, watermarking and fingerprinting – these are encoded rights messages hidden in the content data but invisible to the reader. Movement of the content over the Internet can then be tracked and information can be provided about the identity of the users of the content, and therefore providing possible evidence to prosecute them

Spinning the Semantic Web



Mike Lowndes, Natural History Museum, London, gives his view of a Web that documents itself.

What is the Semantic Web?

Tim Berners Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web defines it as:

"... an extension of the current Web in which information is given well-defined meaning, better enabling computers and people to work in co-operation."

The Semantic Web could make the personal experience of the web more intelligent, directed and accurate. However it will need to be flexible in the levels of 'structure' it deals with.

How do we get there?

There are number of developments that need to take place:

- Content on the Web has to be associated with structured information ('metadata') that describes it. This information must be able to work globally ('interoperate'), so standards are at its heart.

- Structures ('ontologies') that map information together into conceptual groups have to be defined. These could be tricky to understand, if one is not an information scientist!
- Reasoning tools to make meaningful queries of all this information have to be created. We are still at quite a primitive stage. They require the use of advanced artificial intelligence technology.
- Profiling – the Semantic Web 'knowing' who you are (or who you want to be...) has to be enabled. Again, this is at an early stage, but projects like *Friend Of A Friend* point the way.

What about Museums?

Our role is potentially huge. We have huge amounts of content to share, and are good at structuring it. Our users trust us, but mostly deal with us on an individual level.

We deal with standards in collections management; these help us structure data for organisational use. Part of this can also be used for making the objects accessible to the Semantic Web.

Standards like Dublin Core are already used to link collections. These together with the use of established tools like thesauri and taxonomies mean that the sector is set to enter the Semantic Web.

The Semantic Web will enable people to experience culture and science in ways that accurately reflect their needs, and not always the wishes of the individual organisation that owns the content.

Folksonomies – taxonomies from the underside?

Patrick Towell, founder of Simulacra, gives an historical perspective on this trend.

With the recent publication of *The Lore of the Land – A Guide to England's Legends* by Penguin, folklore may move a couple of notches up the collective consciousness. But what is the difference between history and folklore?

"History is often the official record of the rich and the powerful – those that directed events. Folklore is what ordinary people remember, mostly passed down through stories," explains Jennifer Westwood, one of the book's authors.

The advent of the printing press heralded the tyranny of the printed word, with such versions of stories regarded as the 'official text'. In contrast, the web is an analogue of spoken communication – and therefore encapsulates a plurality of views on every historical event or cultural artefact.

Taxonomies, controlled vocabularies and other top-down ways of organising information, come from the 'iron fist' of the librarian and subject matter experts. They are, or become, a codification of an officially endorsed worldview and, as a result, people's search and discovery of information is located within the hierarchies of ideas they contain.

By contrast, 'folksonomies' represent a community-driven approach where users pick their own terms in an uncontrolled way. For example:

www.flickr.com

The problem is, whilst uncontrolled 'tagging' can represent multiple world views, each with a local consensus, information systems won't differentiate between the multiple meanings of 'set', they won't know that Cornish means 'from Cornwall' or know that 'trees' are a kind of 'plant'.

So, for the Semantic Web to work with folksonomies, there's got to be some fancy footwork going on under the bonnet enabling systems to understand and enable users to traverse these connections in meaning. I have some views on how this is going to work – have you?

Bluffers' Guide to Terminology Confused? Here's the world of words demystified.

Wordlist – a simply structured set of terms, often organised alphabetically and created 'in house' for a particular purpose. For example the *Hertfordshire Simple Name List*.

Classification – an hierarchical organisation of subjects using codes and numbers, rather than words. For example, the *Social History and Industrial Classification* (SHIC)

Knowledge Organisation System (KOS) – a systematically structured collection of terms including dictionaries, term lists, glossaries, taxonomies, ontologies and thesauri.

Ontology – the structuring of a set of things, events and relationships in order to exchange information. A heritage sector example is the *CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model* (CIDOC CRM).

Thesaurus – terms arranged in a hierarchy, allowing the selection of more general or specific words. For example *the MDA Archaeological Object Names Thesaurus*.

Delving deeper into thesauri you'll find:

Narrower Term – a more specific instance of the term. For example, 'broadsword' is a narrower term of 'sword'. It's possible for a term to have none, or many, narrower terms.

Broader Term – a less specific instance of the term. For example, 'brush' is a broader term of 'paint brush'. A term can have one, or many, broader terms.

Related Term – a term related to another term in a non-hierarchical way. For example, 'bow (weapon)' is related to 'arrow'.

Non-preferred Term – it's possible for more than one term to refer to the same concept. When this happens, a choice is made of one of the terms to be part of the hierarchy of the thesaurus. The other related terms are said to be non-preferred for the thesaurus. This does not imply the chosen term is in any way better in the 'real world'.

Subject Specialist Networks

Helen Ashby, National Railway Museum, reports on the work of one network.

Better care of inland transport collections and enhanced public access – that's the possible result of MLA's Renaissance in the Regions plan to develop Subject Specialist Networks.

In 2004 MLA provided an exploratory grant as part of the initiative to develop a Subject Specialist Network for Inland Transport (SSNIT). It's all about getting people together to share knowledge and information.

The plan generated plenty of interest and SSNIT was launched at a packed workshop on 14 May 2004 at the National Railway Museum, York. There's a small steering group, not just from railway museums. At the launch, complementary copies of the MDA Railway Object Names Thesaurus set the scene for sharing specialist information and encouraging consistent standards across public transport collections.

As a result of research, the steering group now includes inland waterways collections. Next moves include increasing geographic scope, with representatives from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man.

MDA Membership Update

MDA is delighted to announce that the Federation of Museums and Art Galleries of Wales has made a successful bid to CyMAL: Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales, to buy MDA membership and training services on behalf of Welsh museums.

Under the terms of the agreement all registered museums in Wales have been given a free Standard Membership, enabling them to use MDA's telephone and e-mail advisory services, members-only online services and to benefit from discounts on publications and manual systems.

In addition, MDA will increase its Accreditation support for Welsh museums with the provision of three *Documentation for Accreditation* training days by March 2006, which will be delivered by an approved MDA trainer.

Meanwhile, over 100 Scottish museums have taken up the offer of

free membership since the signing of a partnership agreement with the Scottish Museums Council in August. MDA would like to welcome them to the scheme and encourage the few remaining museums not yet signed up to return their application forms so they can begin taking advantage of membership benefits.

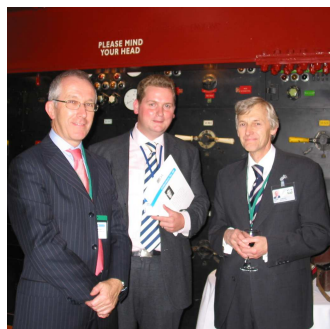
Our thanks go to SMC, CyMAL and the Welsh Federation for their ongoing support under these agreements.

Altogether, more than 560 museums and individuals have become MDA members since the launch of the Standard Membership scheme in April 2005.

For more information about joining, visit:

www.mda.org.uk/members.htm

or call Eleanor Lovegrove on 01223 415760.



24 Hour Museum - success brings new challenges

Jon Pratty, Editor, 24 Hour Museum.

For the month of October 2005 we counted over one million visitor sessions in our logfiles. A great success, possibly a seasonal blip, but we'd like to see this level of use reached consistently every month by the end of 2006.

However, there's an interesting story behind these figures. Most museum websites, indeed most web publishers, count (and include in their visitor figures) everything that visits the site and sniffs around. And that includes so-called 'robot' visitors. There are now almost as many search engine spiders, software robots and data miners slinking around the web as there are human web users. So if we remove web robots from our statistics, the number of monthly visitor sessions goes down to 826,439. Quite a drop, but not that surprising if you look at these things regularly.



What are the key issues to draw from this? It's time the cultural sector adopted some common definitions and standards for the visitor figures we present to our public, and our funders. Some of the other National museums are now looking into presenting stats 'without robots' and 24 Hour Museum will do this too. It would be great if there could be a wider debate about this issue.

Collections for All

Collections for All is the advocacy campaign led by MDA in partnership with SEMLAC, MLA, NMDC, MA and a range of other organisations. The aim is to highlight the social, economic, professional and intellectual impact of effective collections management.

Following a successful launch in September, MDA has been working to take forward the main strands of the campaign. Work to date includes:

- Launching *Documentation for Diversity* in partnership with ALM London.
- Promoting collections and diversity through the London Assembly's Collections Working Group.
- Working with Proud Heritage to build a joint approach to standards and terminology.
- Discussing with the Museums Association to take forward their *Collections for the Future* report.
- Developing proposals for research and evidence gathering.

Further information about the development of the campaign is available online at:

www.collectionsforall.org.uk

MDA Partners News

Adlib has announced a free version of their collection management software, named "Adlib Museum Lite". See: www.adlibsoft.com

KE has successfully implemented KE EMU at the Mineralogy department of the Natural History Museum. Feel free to contact KE to discuss any current project or your own requirements. See: www.kesoftware.com

MODES Users Association is launching a new XML-based version of its software 'MODESXML'. It offers multi-user, sharing and web publishing capabilities. See: www.modes.org.uk

System Simulation has reported that AssetIndex+, their new digital asset management system, is being installed at the Victoria & Albert Museum, providing centralised access to multimedia assets. See: www.ssl.co.uk



MDA Training Programme

MDA offers a range of documentation, copyright and licensing courses which are delivered by approved MDA Trainers.

Forthcoming courses include:

Licensing Essentials

Venue: to be confirmed
Tuesday 17 January 2006
Offered by Hertfordshire County Council with MDA Trainer Naomi Korn.

Copyright Essentials

The Charity Centre, London
Tuesday 24 January 2006
Offered by MDA with MDA Trainer Naomi Korn.

Documentation for Accreditation

Venue: Haslemere Educational Museum
Tuesday 13 February 2006
Offered by Surrey Museums Consultative Committee with MDA Trainer Jayne Austin.

For the full Training Programme and details of how to book, see

www.mda.org.uk/trainpro.htm

To discuss your training needs or for further information, contact Eleanor Lovegrove: eleanor@mda.org.uk or 01223 415760

If you would like to contribute a news article to *Collections News* please contact Nick Poole, MDA, nick@mda.org.uk



Supported by



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