

EAC-CPF Primer, y'all!

Jennifer Hecker, November 2013

The problem

I think we can all agree: “Since materials by or about a single entity might be found in many fonds or many repositories, there is much **redundant effort** in recording information about the same entity. In addition, these duplicative efforts can result in great **inconsistency**, which bedevils both users, in finding and interpreting materials, and archivists, in creating accurate and complete references to such entities.”¹

As we transition from an analog-based to a born-digital world, the way we approach some basic tasks may need to change. The good news is that we can reason is that we can harness this digital power to improve the usefulness (and reusfulness) of our descriptive data by parsing out certain of its component parts. This way, the machines we use for searching can search more precisely, but also more thoroughly.

Consider archival description, and specifically the finding aid, in this modern era of search: “...currently descriptions of people are intermixed with the description of records in a single apparatus, the finding aid. Archivists have advocated for several decades to separate the description of people from the description of records in order to make description more economic, flexible, accurate, and effective.”² But how?

The solution

Metadata standards to the rescue! In development since 1998³, and formally adopted by the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in 2011, **EAC-CPF**, or **Encoded Archival Context – Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families**⁴, is a communication standard for archival authority control. It is useful to archivists for identifying, standardizing, and sharing descriptions of record creators and subjects, and provides a mechanism for encoding their relationships to one another. It can provide context for understanding the creator, as well as new ways for users to search across collections.

EAC-CPF is both a step towards seeing description as data (the first step on the path toward *linking* data⁵), and a way to *unlink* descriptive data from contextual data. This provides an opportunity to link sets of records together using their contextual information as the common thread, an intellectual architecture that is much more organic and revelatory than the current, fonds-centric conception. To put it more simply, “...to make it possible to look at the Walt Whitman EAC entry, see all of the institutions that have Walt Whitman records, and compare...”⁶

In 2012, the first goal of the Building a National Archival Authorities Infrastructure project⁷ was realized: SAA began offering **EAC-CPF training workshops**, with the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) providing generous scholarship funding⁸. These trainings are to be held into 2014, though no upcoming dates appeared on SAA’s Continuing Education Calendar at press time⁹.

Over the past couple of years, a multitude of projects large and small have cropped up. The following is a *very* small sample:

1. **Connecting the Dots: Using EAC-CPF to Reunite Samuel Johnson and His Circle** – “A project between Harvard and Yale Universities to demonstrate the benefits of using [EAC-CPF] to describe creators of manuscript collections and encode meaningful semantic links between those creators

themselves and the primary sources that document their lives and work. The project will focus on lexicographer Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) and his circle of fellow writers, artists, political thinkers and friends, as well as collectors thereof.”¹⁰

2. An Archivist at Brown University is using a custom FilemakerPro database to create EAC_CPF records for **The Gordon Hall and Grace Hoag Collection of Dissenting and Extremist Printed Propaganda**.¹¹ (More on tools in the next section.)
3. The **National Library of Australia’s TROVE** “People and Organisations” interface is a fantastic example of the kind of exploration EAC-CPF makes possible. It allows users to “discover biographical information about significant people and organisations. Find resources by and about them and their relationships to other parties.”¹²
4. Something similar¹³ is taking shape here in the beautiful USA, thanks to **SNAC: The Social Networks and Archival Context Project**¹⁴. Definitely check this project out if you haven’t already – it’s the biggest project of its kind and it is shaping the way EAC-CPF records might be stored and shared here in America...

Oh, yeah? What’s cookin’?

What’s cookin’ is **the NAAC (National Archival Authorities Cooperative)**. The Building a National Archival Authorities Infrastructure project's second goal – the first was the afore-mentioned training workshops – is to “develop a set of recommendations addressing business, governance, and technological requirements for a sustainable NAAC. This blueprint will be shaped through a series of meetings at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, D.C. Using the Social Networks and Archival Context (SNAC) project as a demonstration of the feasibility and benefits of archival authorities...”¹⁵

I don’t have room to go into any more detail here, but I recommend the slides from their first meeting¹⁶, and the notes from their most recent¹⁷ meeting. A white paper is expected this fall.

While you wait for a national record repository to materialize, here are some ways you can go ahead and play with EAC-CPF in your shop:

1. SAA offers a 90-minute introductory **webinar**¹⁸ for \$119 (members) or \$159 (non-members). Invite your area colleagues to join you – and pitch in some funds!
2. Check out some **example EAC-CPF records**¹⁹, courtesy of the SNAC Project.
3. Generate some records by hand using your go-to EAD markup tool, or try out some of the tools your colleagues are building like: SNAC’s **MARC-to-EAC Web Service**²⁰, **RAMP**²¹, or **xEAC**²².

Drawbacks ☹

Despite the exciting possibilities, I don’t have to tell you that adding steps to archivist workflows is an unpopular proposition these days. However, it is possible that, in the interest of long-term sustainability, all stakeholders could benefit from allowing wider participation via a **wiki-like model**: “a broad, inclusive editing community, one comprising archivists, librarians, and scholars. The scholars, he pointed out, go into greater detail than is possible for librarians and archivists, and they could make substantial contributions to a “continuum of perfection.” The participants agreed with this expansive view of the community.”²³

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- ¹ “Development of the EAC-CPF Standard.” Accessed October 10, 2013. <http://eac.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/about/development.html>.
- ² “Report, Towards Establishing a National Archival Authorities Cooperative.” Accessed October 10, 2013. http://socialarchive.iath.virginia.edu/NAAC_meeting1_report.html.
- ³ “Society of American Archivists and the Berlin State Library.” Accessed October 10, 2013. <http://eac.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/about/development.html>.
- ⁴ “EAC-CPF.” Accessed October 4, 2013. <http://eac.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/>.
- ⁵ Pattuelli, Cristina. “Linked Data and Cultural Heritage.” Columbia University, November 2, 2011. http://66.228.36.119/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/pattuelli_scholarly-communication-program_columbia-university.pdf.
- ⁶ “Give the People What They Want – EAC and Whether We Should Care | the Patriarchive.” Accessed October 4, 2013. <http://patriarchive.wordpress.com/2010/08/10/give-the-people-what-they-want-eac-and-whether-we-should-care/>.
- ⁷ “Building a National Archival Authorities Infrastructure Project: Introduction.” Accessed October 10, 2013. http://socialarchive.iath.virginia.edu/NAAC_index.html.
- ⁸ “Building a National Archival Authority Infrastructure and Scholarship Program for EAC-CPF Workshops | Society of American Archivists.” Accessed October 4, 2013. <http://www2.archivists.org/news/2011/building-a-national-archival-authority-infrastructure-and-scholarship-program-for-eac-cpf->
- ⁹ “Society of American Archivists.” Accessed October 10, 2013. <http://saa.archivists.org/Scripts/4Disapi.dll/4DCGI/events/ConferenceList.html?Action=GetEvents>.
- ¹⁰ “Connecting the Dots: Using EAC-CPF to Reunite Samuel Johnson and His Circle | Office for Scholarly Communication.” Accessed October 4, 2013. <https://osc.hul.harvard.edu/liblab/proj/connecting-dots-using-eac-cpf-reunite-samuel-johnson-and-his-circle>.
- ¹¹ “EAC-CPF Creation | The Hall-Hoag Collection | Brown University.” Accessed October 4, 2013. <http://blogs.brown.edu/hallhoag/2013/02/05/eac-cpf-creation/>.
- ¹² National Library of Australia. “Trove: People and Organisations.” Trove: People and Organisations. Accessed October 10, 2013. <http://trove.nla.gov.au/people>.
- ¹³ SNAC Project. “Find Corporate, Personal, and Family Archival Context Records: SNAC Prototype.” Accessed October 4, 2013. <http://socialarchive.iath.virginia.edu/xtf/search>.
- ¹⁴ “SNAC.” Accessed October 4, 2013. <http://socialarchive.iath.virginia.edu/>.
- ¹⁵ “Building a National Archival Authorities Infrastructure Project: Introduction.” Accessed October 10, 2013. http://socialarchive.iath.virginia.edu/NAAC_index.html.
- ¹⁶ “Building a National Archival Authorities Infrastructure: Plenary Session Slides.” Accessed October 10, 2013. http://socialarchive.iath.virginia.edu/NAAC_meeting1_slides.html.
- ¹⁷ “National Archival Authorities Cooperative Meeting II Discussion Paper,” Accessed October 10, 2013. http://socialarchive.iath.virginia.edu/NAAC_meeting2_discussion.html.
- ¹⁸ “SAA Webinar: What Is EAC-CPF?” Accessed October 10, 2013. <http://saa.archivists.org/events/what-is-eac-cpf-web-seminar/222/>.
- ¹⁹ “EAC-CPF Examples.” Accessed October 4, 2013. <http://www3.iath.virginia.edu/eac/cpf/examples/list.html>.
- ²⁰ “Web EAC-CPF from MARC.” Accessed October 10, 2013. <http://socialarchive.iath.virginia.edu/dev/>.
- ²¹ “RAMP.” GitHub. Accessed October 9, 2013. <https://github.com/UMiamiLibraries/RAMP>.
- ²² Gruber, Ethan. “XForms for Archives: xEAC: XForms for EAC-CPF Beta Released.” XForms for Archives, July 27, 2012. <http://eaditor.blogspot.com/2012/07/xead-xforms-for-eac-cpf-beta-released.html>.
- ²³ “Report, Towards Establishing a National Archival Authorities Cooperative.” Accessed October 10, 2013. http://socialarchive.iath.virginia.edu/NAAC_meeting1_report.html.