Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid

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A b s t r a c t

The authors argue that finding aids present only singular perspectives of the collections they describe and fail to represent the impact of archivists' work on records and subsequentreinterpretations of collections by archivists and researchers. The authors place these criticisms within the burgeoning postmodern discourse in archival studies and make two concrete suggestions for finding aids that would allow practicing archivists to acknowledge the inherent subjectivity of archival work and to incorporate multiple perspectives into the description of records.

T he finding aid has long held a central and often unquestioned place as an access tool for archival materials. While the development of EAD and other Web technologies has brought great changes to how finding aids are discovered, accessed, delivered, and structured, the types of information in finding aids and the underlying assumptions regarding their creation have gone largely unchallenged.[1] This is partially true because finding aids do an excellent job. They provide important contextual information about the collections they describe and represent the cohesive nature of records in a collection or record group.[2]

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[1] While the scope of what is meant by a "finding aid" can be construed broadly, we have limited our definition of the finding aid to that of archival inventories and registers, generally including the components and structures defined in standards such as EAD, RAD, or ISAD(G).

[2] In its development, EAD embraced the "familiar and functional" design of traditional finding aids, partly in an attempt to accommodate legacy data, while also seeking to impose greater structural uniformity and consistent informational elements. While EAD was not meant to be a data content standard, its developers recognized that certain key features should be part of any finding aid. See Janice E. Ruth, "Encoded Archival Description: A Structural Overview," *American Archivist* 60 (Summer 1997): 313–14. Hence, EAD has challenged some repositories to reexamine the components and structure of their finding aids. For example, the Minnesota Historical Society discovered that "our previous finding aids did not explain themselves, their purpose, or their contents well enough to permit a reasonably intelligent customer to understand and use them effectively without the intercession of an archivist." Dennis Meissner, "First Things First: Reengineering Finding Aids for Implementation of EAD,"