

Internationalisation of cataloguing in cultural institutions with RDA using the example of the German-speaking region

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Received: 2024.04.11.
Accepted: 2024.04.28.
Published: 2024.06.05.

Many modern models and standards for cataloguing collections in cultural institutions have an international approach and aim to be applicable across different cultural sectors. This is a goal that at first glance seems unlikely and has not yet been fully realized, but what are the chances of such a concept being realised? How can the balancing act between internationalisation and local requirements be achieved? What do new technologies offer us and what experiences are currently being made in practice? This article aims to answer these questions and describe them using the example of the implementation of the new Official RDA Toolkit in German-speaking libraries.

Resource Description and Access, RDA Toolkit, application profile, implementation of RDA in German-speaking libraries

Cataloguing at a turning point

One of the most controversial topics currently being discussed in libraries, museums and archives is the cataloguing of collections. How can it be continued in an efficient, cost-effective and high-quality manner and are these requirements still appropriate?

Ten years ago, the consensus was that the answer to these questions could only be found through increased international cooperation. For a while, international standards were seen as a panacea and magic bullet for the desired increase in efficiency. Reality quickly brought many advocates back down to earth. The original approach that the application of an international standard, developed independently of the user community, would make any local standardisation work superfluous and thus save enormous costs, quickly had to be revised.

Standardisation across language and national borders is not a new invention. Over a hundred years ago, librarians were already trying to find uniform rules for standards that could be applied in the same language area like the Preussische Instruktionen (Wikipedia 2024a) or the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (Wikipedia 2024b). However, until the end of the 20th century, standardisation across linguistic and cultural boundaries seemed impossible and unenforceable.

In the course of general globalisation and growing economic pressure, also in the library sector, the idea of international standards was discussed more and more frequently. This process ultimately led to international endeavours and a paradigm shift in practice. In addition, individual user communities, such as music libraries or audiovisual media collections, had long been involved in such endeavours and had more international networks at their disposal as the Music Library Association (MLA) (2024) or the Online Audiovisual Catalogers (OLAC) may show (OLAC Catalogers Network 2024).

Cite as: Behrens, R. (2024) Internationalisation of cataloguing in cultural institutions with RDA using the example of the German-speaking region, Central European Library and Information Science Review (CELISR), 1(1), p. 34-43.
<https://doi.org/10.3311/celistr.37098>

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA 2024) has always focused on internationality in its work and various IFLA standards have been used in practice for years in a wide variety of user communities.

Is it really so easy to work with international standards at local level and are these standards really international? These questions will be considered in the following sections.

RDA on the way to more internationalisation

Let's take a look at an example of a standard that claims a high degree of internationality. The standard Resource Description and Access (RDA Toolkit 2024) has been pursuing this claim for more than twenty years and has since been adopted by many user communities in the library sector.

RDA goes back to the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR2 2024). These were developed by librarians from the US, Great Britain, Canada and Australia, first published in 1967 and regularly updated. The second edition (AACR2), which was published in 1978, became one of the most widely used sets of rules for formal cataloguing and was also used outside the Anglo-American community. The changed publication conditions and the requirements of the increasingly digital environments made a clearer internationalisation fundamentally necessary. The possibilities of online databases instead of the previous catalogue cards and monolithic records opened the way to more information through groupings of bibliographic data records and the relationships between works and their intellectual creators. This process had already been initiated at the international level by new IFLA models, such as the family of Functional requirements (Riva, Le Boëuf, Žumer 2016). In addition, concepts and standards outside the library community, such as Dublin Core (DCMI 2024)¹ and ONIX², were also used and awareness of collections from other cultural heritage institutions and their cataloguing in an international environment was raised.

The resulting first draft of RDA was presented in 2008 and promised to be internationally applicable. However, it was precisely this point that was criticised during the initial commenting phase. In many places, the RDA fell short of what was required of an international standard. Too many traditions from the Anglo-American context had been adopted from the AACR2, which made it difficult or, in some cases, impossible for other communities to adopt them in their area of application. This was particularly true for the rules and regulations for religious texts, information on times, places and measurements, but also in the area of specialised materials. The criticism was taken seriously by the responsible committees and led to an extensive amendment process for the standard (known within the RDA community as the 3R project (3R Project Final Report 2024)). This has been formally completed, but is only the beginning of a comprehensive change management process for the standard itself and for its users.

Thanks to the experience of previous years, it became clear that the claim of complete internationality of a standard cannot be achieved. None of the RDA user communities worldwide, not even the Anglo-American ones, have managed without additional regulations (often referred to within the RDA cataloguing community as Policy Statements). These are often due to technical circumstances or are necessary for institutional work processes.

"...the claim of complete internationality of a standard cannot be achieved."

¹ DCMI 2024 Toronto, Canada, Available at: <https://www.dublincore.org/>

² BIC 'ONIX advanced plus' training course, Available at: <https://www.editeur.org/3/Events/Event-Details/674>

"It will not always be possible to find very specific instructions for practical use."

In the area of specialised materials, it is self-explanatory that a standard as general and model-like as RDA must be supplemented by specific regulations. What is noteworthy here is that these communities are in turn strongly internationally orientated and are much more likely to reach joint decisions. There are great expectations that these rules for specialised areas such as music, audiovisual resources, manuscripts and many others will be given a suitable area in the planned Community Resources Zones within the RDA Toolkit (RDA Community Resources Plan 2024) and can be used and further developed jointly from there.

RDA as a framework standard

With the revision of the RDA Toolkit as part of the 3r project, RDA has been fundamentally changed and made much more international. But what does this mean? According to the conventional understanding, it is no longer a set of rules in the true sense of the word, but must be understood as a framework standard. On the one hand, this is due to its international nature, but also to the realisation that there can no longer be universally valid regulations at this level. This necessitates a major rethink on the part of the user communities. The new RDA (referred to as Official RDA) consistently follows the fundamental principles, such as the International Cataloguing Principles (ICP 2009) and the IFLA Library Reference Model (Riva, Le Bœuf, Žumer 2017). It takes full account of all the resulting requirements, but remains at a more general level. It will not always be possible to find very specific instructions for practical use.

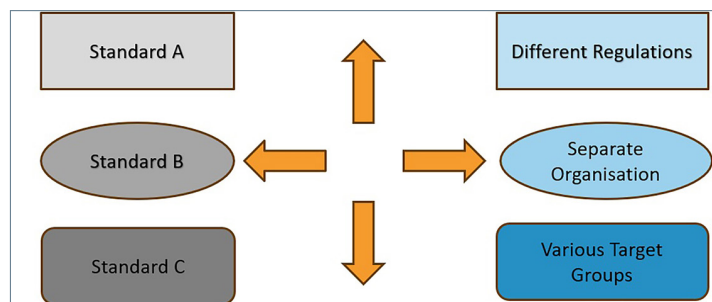


Fig. 1: How does it all fit together?

When we speak of RDA as a framework standard, we should put this in context. We said in the previous section that RDA follows the IFLA principles and models in their entirety. They therefore represent an adaptation of these principles and models for cataloguing, albeit at a highly theoretical level. It is logical that practical application standards are now required that are based on these guidelines. If we visualise this, a hierarchical sequence of principles, models, framework standards and application standards emerges.

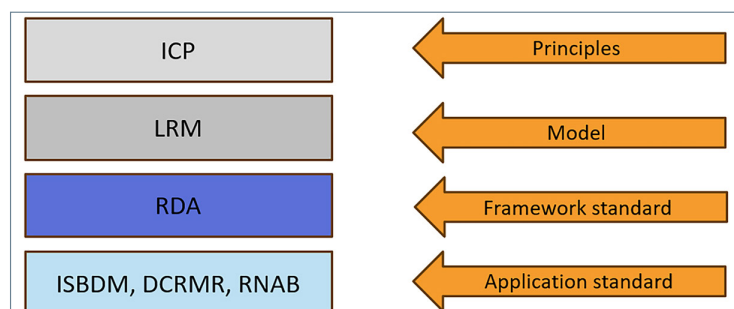


Fig. 2: Principles, Models, Standards – a Hierarchy

In the context of cataloguing, we find the International Cataloguing Principles at the highest level, then the Library Reference Model, followed by RDA as a framework standard and finally the application standard here with the examples of the International Standard for Bibliographic Description for Manifestation (ISBDM 2024) the Descriptive Cataloguing of Rare Materials (RDA Edition), (DCRMR 2022) and the (RNAB 2024), an application standard for literature archives in German-speaking countries.

"...different application profiles are needed for such different requirements."

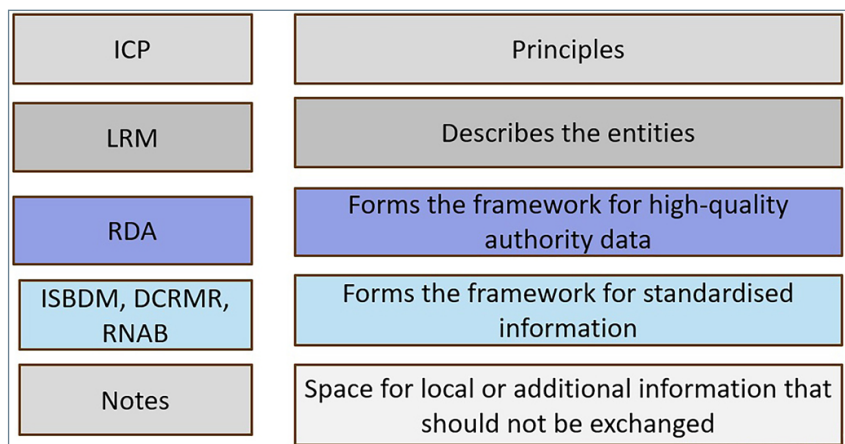


Fig. 3: Principles, models, standards – a hierarchy for metadata

Application profiles

In the traditional understanding of cataloguing, there is a set of rules for the relevant sector, like monographs or serials, that is used in practical work and followed by all users. This consistent application has made a comprehensive exchange of data possible and successful.

However, the internationalisation of cataloguing and the increasing collaboration between cultural institutions has led to a significant change in understanding and frequently we are faced with completely different requirements and challenges. The number of resources available and to be catalogued has multiplied, primarily through digital forms of publication. This change in publication options and the associated multitude of technical challenges must also be taken into account at this point.

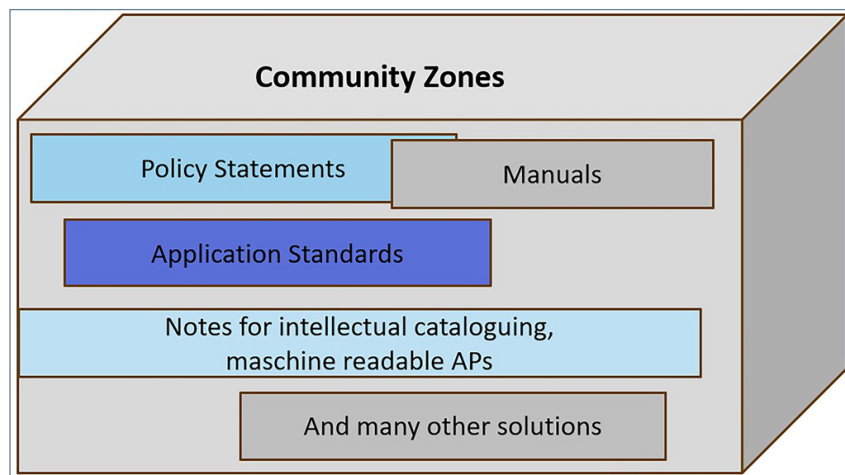


Fig. 4: Application Profiles in the Toolkit

"In Europe, numerous application profiles have been developed that regulate local conditions."

It is therefore only logical that different application profiles are needed for such different requirements. In the Original RDA Toolkit, it was still sufficient to supplement the standard with so-called policy statements to cover local requirements. In the new Official Toolkit, the web tool of the new RDA framework standard, this is no longer so simple or is not expedient for some communities. In the years following the publication of the new Official Toolkit, various types of application profiles have therefore evolved, which have been developed by local communities themselves, adopted by others, combined with each other and supplemented.

Application profiles in practice

In the time since the first publication of the new Official Toolkit, various user communities have tackled this topic and developed application profiles that are suitable for their purposes and local circumstances. The approaches could not be more different, but they are all based on the RDA as a framework standard and the data created with it is compatible.

The British Library followed its previous approach and revised the policy statements already contained in the Original Toolkit. However, this seemingly simple process was also time-consuming, as all the options contained in the new Official Toolkit had to be looked at and provided with a usage note.

The National Library of New Zealand has adopted a similar approach and the National Library of Australia is also planning to do so.

The Library of Congress has chosen a hybrid form. Here, too, the existing policy statements have been and are being revised, while at the same time further information and regulations are described in the Metadata Guidance Documentation (MGDs 2024), which are held externally, i.e. outside the Toolkit.

In Europe, numerous application profiles have been developed that regulate local conditions. For most of them, this is the starting point for the implementation of RDA as a whole.

What all these application profiles actually have in common is that they focus very strongly on local circumstances and needs and, for example, initially leave out the new RDA concepts (such as diachronic works or aggregates) and only want to incorporate them at a later stage. We would like to illustrate this approach with an example. It is due to the author's origin that this example comes from a German-speaking country.

The RDA-DACH manual

In the German-speaking countries (also known as the DACH region), the RDA was first introduced for authority data in 2014 and from 2016 also for bibliographic data. The three countries involved, Austria, Germany and the German-speaking part of Switzerland, have an organisational structure that has been tried and tested for many years. At its head is the Committee on Standards, which is made up of members from the various major cultural institutions and is responsible for all strategic decisions. Traditionally, this body is made up purely of librarians. In recent years, however, it has become more open and representatives from other cultural institutions, such as archives and museums, have been added. The work is carried out in subordinate working groups with equal representation.

The tasks of this committee also include deciding on the standards to be used in German-speaking countries. It should be mentioned here that the standardisation committee can only make recommendations, as all three countries involved have a federal structure and decisions on cultural matters lie with the federal states or cantons. However, as all relevant organisations have members on the Committee on Standards, its decisions are generally binding and accepted in practice.

With the changes in RDA during the 3R project (2015–2020), decisions had to be made in the Committee on Standards on how to proceed. With the new Official Toolkit (since December 2020), RDA was given a new technical platform, a completely different documentation structure and changed content concepts. This had far-reaching effects on the use of the Toolkit and the specifications in German-speaking countries. As RDA should continue to be the basis for cataloguing in the future, extensive adaptation work was necessary. Since the initial implementation of RDA in 2014, the role models of the British Library and the Library of Congress had been followed and local requirements had been incorporated directly into the RDA Toolkit by means of policy statements. Due to the complexity of the new Toolkit, this seemed difficult and no longer expedient for practical work. It was therefore decided to create a joint cataloguing manual for the libraries in the DACH region and thus take a new approach with a significantly more complex application profile than the previous policy statements. A separate project was set up for the implementation.

The „3R for DACH libraries” project was carried out between March 2020 and December 2022 by the working groups of the Committee on Standards under the leadership of the German National Library. Numerous experts from the three participating countries worked together with the aim of developing a common cataloguing manual that can be used in practice by all institutions. The focus here was on practical implementation in cataloguing with as few changes as possible. For this reason, the project must also be seen as a first step. All new concepts of the new RDA were not implemented initially. They will be examined as part of the regular work of the Expert group for Cataloguing over the next few years and, if necessary, implemented into the DACH manual. The only exception made is the use of „Representative Expression” for music resources like key or instrumentation, which already corresponds to current practice.

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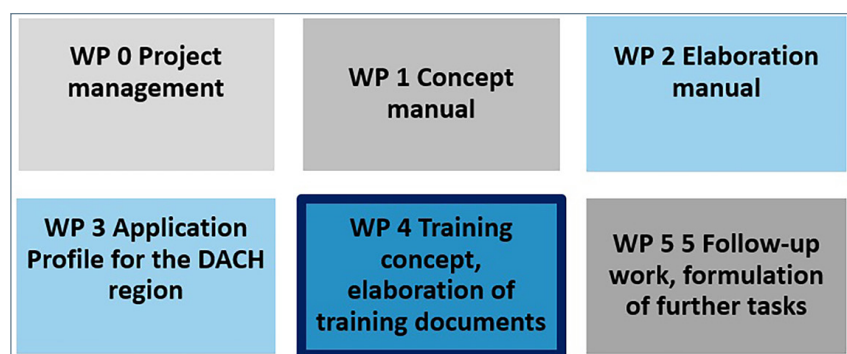


Fig. 5: Work packages

In a first work package, a concept for the cataloguing manual was developed by mid-September 2020, which was to contain three parts. Two of these parts provide an introduction to cataloguing, firstly by describing the elements

"All new concepts of the new RDA were not implemented initially."

(e.g. publisher and place of publication) and secondly by describing specific resource types (e.g. university publication, serial collection). These parts are supplemented by a general part that deals with fundamental issues. By the end of 2021, almost all elements for formal cataloguing and some of the general texts had already been completed. The element descriptions for the authority data and the resource descriptions followed in the first half of 2022.

Parallel to the element and resource descriptions, a tabular application profile was created for German-speaking countries, which is based on an existing standard element set and defines binding elements with their core properties (RDA DACH 2023). Information on special materials, in particular the areas of music and old prints, could have been included. In principle, all special materials should be represented in the DACH cataloguing manual in the near future.

The documentation platform of the Committee on Standards

In addition to creating the RDA manual for cataloguing in German-speaking countries, another goal was to redesign the documentation of all regulations. The aim here was to make the previously scattered documentation for cataloguing freely accessible to all interested parties at a central location. This project was organised and carried out by the German National Library (Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, DNB) (RDA DACH 2024).

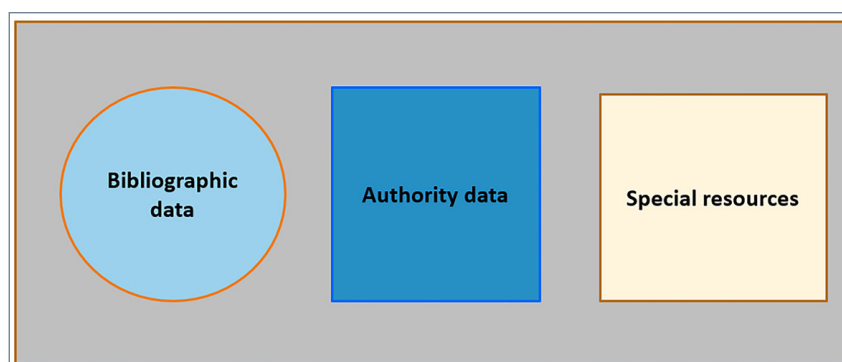


Fig. 6: Documentation platform



Fig. 7: Documentation platform <https://sta.dnb.de/doc>

In the current project phase of the 3R for DACH libraries project, all work results were initially documented in a DNB wiki. At the same time, a separate project dealt with the documentation of all regulations on the basis of Wikibase, as the previous distributed documentation was to be replaced by complete storage in a central location. The documentation was to be aimed at experts as well as beginners and users from non-library areas. At the same time, it should provide a sufficient basis for training and be able to be expanded modularly by working groups to include their own rule additions and refinements.

Thanks to the very successful and proven cooperation, the project could be implemented as planned and the first adaptation training courses based on a jointly developed training concept would already be carried out last year.

"As many common regulations as possible, as few local or specific regulations as necessary."

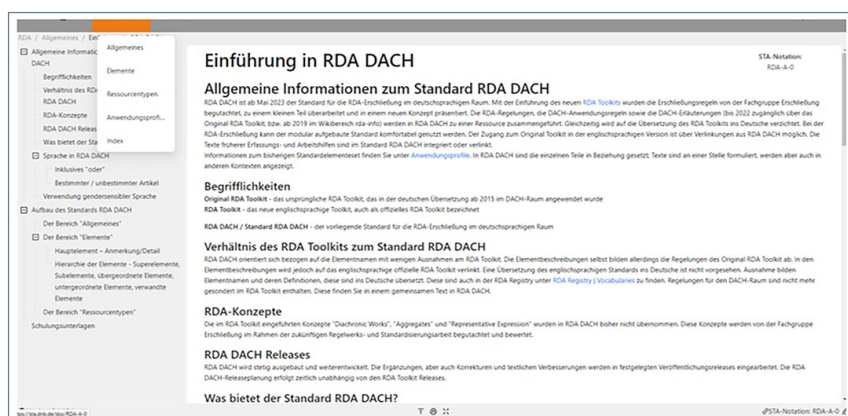


Fig. 8: RDA DACH

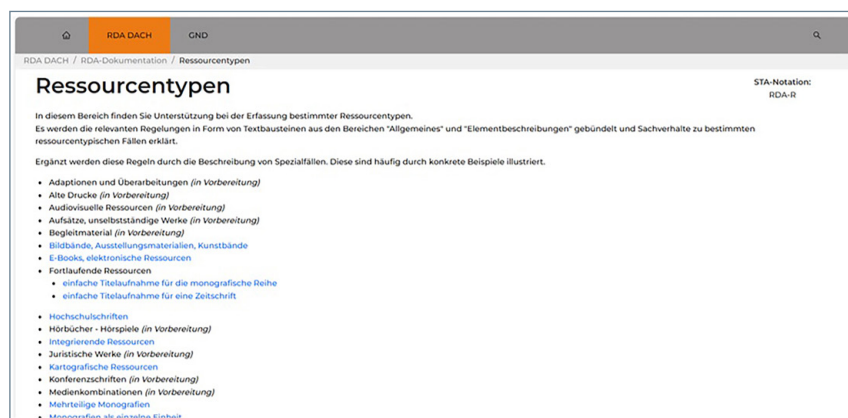


Fig. 9: Resource types

Conclusion

Following these two very successful projects, the cataloguing process in German-speaking countries was reorganised and adapted to the new Official Toolkit. This was done with the background that the effort for practical work should remain as low as possible. For this reason, only the regulations already required in practice were revised and incorporated into the new documentation. All new RDA concepts were not initially taken into account and will only be reviewed and, if necessary, finalised at a later date as part of the ongoing work on standards.

All work was carried out in close co-operation with those responsible for the RDA Toolkit and the bodies responsible for the RDA. ALA Digital Reference (2024),

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"Machine or machine-assisted processes will complement traditional cataloguing in cultural institutions."

which is responsible for the RDA Toolkit, deserves special mention here and is available for all questions relating to copyright for original texts from RDA.

In addition, the German-speaking user community continues to participate in the further development of the RDA standard and thus contributes to the desired internationalisation of the standard. The new Community Zones in the RDA Toolkit announced by the RSC, which are expected to be released this year, will also be an important building block for the DACH community. In conclusion, it can be said that the RDA DACH manual represents a first step towards local implementation within the framework of an international standard. Previous experience with international standards has shown that there cannot be a one-fits-all and that it should therefore not even be attempted. Instead, the focus must be on compatibility. As many common regulations as possible, as few local or specific regulations as necessary.

Internationalisation is therefore not a myth, but is already being put into practice by various communities, bodies and institutions in the cultural heritage sector. However, it has also become very clear in recent years that international standards can certainly be applied, but that this requires a great deal of mutual understanding and patience. Simple and quick solutions are not to be expected. In Europe in particular, however, there is a great deal of understanding for this approach. The experience gained due to the diversity of languages and cultures helps. At the same time, the standardisation bodies, which were initially very Anglo-American in character, have opened up and are ready for real cooperation on an equal footing.

The committees responsible for RDA, the RDA Steering Committee, RSC (2023) and the RDA Board (2023), have decided to go down this path in recent years and have taken the first steps by setting up international working groups. It has already been shown that many regulations from local applications ultimately lead back to common regulations if the user communities are provided with a suitable platform for exchange as planned with the Community Zones in the RDA Toolkit.

Artificial intelligence will be an important topic for the future in this context. Machine or machine-assisted processes will complement traditional cataloguing in cultural institutions. With appropriate regulations and standards, preferably international ones, this will be an enrichment.

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