

I doubt I will ever be lucky enough to work on a ‘digital library’ project similar to those described in Richard Gartner’s excellent book. Working to solve information administration, dissemination, and preservation problems from the ground up seems a world away from the quick fixes, opaque library management systems, and general necessity for a “good enough” attitude that make up academic librarianship as I have experienced it.<sup>1</sup> But, whilst this book is clearly a perfect practical guide for someone undertaking the creation of a digital library (containing, as it does, both step-by-step advice and worked examples), it is also much more than this, and I would recommend it to any librarian working directly with metadata.

The particular strengths of this book are, to my mind, its conceptual rigour, the author’s semantic precision, and his even-handed, holistic approach to the world of metadata. Firstly, the distinctions between descriptive, administrative, and structural metadata, and between the syntax, semantics, and content components of metadata, are clearly explained. Conceptual models such as CIDOC-CRM are also effectively introduced and described with the aid of well-chosen diagrams. The specificity of these definitions is an antidote to the woolly thinking it can be so easy to slip into when tackling metadata.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, and supporting the first strength, the choice of words is precise and consistent, and the writing style is clear and unobtrusive. The book isn’t an easy read, given the challenging concepts being covered, but the way in which it is written, as well as the structuring of the book (as covered below), make it as easy to read as, I would imagine, such a book could possibly be.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, the book, although explicitly aimed at librarians, neither privileges traditionally library-specific models and standards (such as MARC21 or RDA) over others, nor ignores them. Instead, they are discussed, alongside other alternatives, in their appropriate places within the framework of the book, their strengths and weaknesses are presented fairly, and their most likely use cases are given. Respectful de-centring like this of “library” metadata knowledge is essential to ensure the future-proofing of our profession, and this book provides an even-handed explanation of how our existing skill-set fits into (and in many cases effectively complements) the broader metadata picture. This alone would be enough to make it essential reading.

The structure of the book takes after the metadata strategies described within it – logical, conceptually rigorous, and semantically precise. The introduction explains how a ‘digital library’ is still very much a library, and the rules that underpin librarianship theory (such as Ranganathan’s ‘Five Laws’) are still very much applicable to the digital world. There then follows an outline of the rest of the book.

Chapter 2 effectively describes the fundamentals of metadata, and sets out the terminology for what is to follow. The next two chapters show how to plan a metadata strategy, respectively introducing and then applying a set of basic principles. Whenever a process is described later that supports one of the principles, the relevant part of this underlying strategy is explicitly referenced. Redundancy such as this is clearly intentional throughout the book, and the way in which different schemes or concepts can be accessed through different approaches to interrogating the book makes it a highly valuable – and literally multi-faceted<sup>4</sup> - reference work.

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<sup>1</sup> Not that I’m bitter or anything.

<sup>2</sup> By others, not by me, obviously.

<sup>3</sup> I found it all very straightforward, of course.

<sup>4</sup> Faceted classification, that is. It isn’t literally a diamond or something. It is literally figuratively faceted.

In chapter 5, XML is introduced as the recommended syntax, and tools for working with it are described. A possible criticism of the book would be that syntactic alternatives to XML are not given, compared with the range of options presented in other chapters. XML's obvious selling points arguably mean, however, that mentioning other options, whatever they might be, would be a pointless exercise, particularly as the recommended packaging schema described in the next chapter (Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard, or METS) explicitly uses XML.<sup>5</sup> METS is fundamental to the strategy outlined in the book, and, although alternatives are acknowledged, and the potential limitations of METS are admitted, recommended solutions do not involve abandoning METS for a different schema. Whilst I would hardly describe the books as prescriptive, a more expert reviewer than me might potentially take issue with its choice of focus.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 7 looks at semantic standards, focusing for the most part on Dublin Core, MARCXML, and MODS (the Metadata Object Description Schema), but also briefly describing a number of other options for different circumstances. Chapter 8 then explores content rules, including controlled vocabularies, name authorities, and cataloguing rules such as AACR2 and RDA. For me, it was in these two chapters that the true position – and continued importance - of “library” metadata began to fall fully into place.

The next chapter explores administrative and preservation metadata, recommending the PREMIS (PREservation Metadata: Implementation Strategies) set of schemes, but offering others that could supplement or replace it where needed. Chapter 10 then looks at interoperability, explaining the potential disadvantages of flexibility, and ways in which they might be mitigated, as well as briefly touching on OAI-PMH (Open Archives Protocol for Metadata Harvesting) and the semantic web. Finally, the book closes with two case studies from the author's own Warburg Institute, followed by a reiteration of the basic principles and conclusion, sample MODS file, useful resources, and a bibliography. Finishing with these worked examples, and repeating the principles again, helps to solidify and further clarify the information from the previous chapters.

Although numerous examples accompany the concepts and schemas presented within the book, I found it helpful on numerous occasions to try to find further examples of their use in practice. Interestingly, it was probably the Scholarly Communication aspect of my role that provided most of these, as our EPrints repository offers a number of export options in the formats described in the book.<sup>7</sup> This enabled me, in a limited way, to see what some relatively straightforward items looked like in different schemas. I would not criticise the book regarding my need to look beyond it – as mentioned, there are clear examples throughout on every major concept – but I would recommend attempting to find your own additional examples relevant to your role, if possible, whilst reading it.

This book is essential reading for anyone aiming to create a digital library from scratch. But it is also a clear, concise guide to core metadata concepts, and a handy reference for numerous schemas and technical tools, for any librarian working with metadata. I expect to be regularly referring to my copy for years to come, and I believe I will be a better librarian for it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Also the book's subtitle is “building an integrated strategy with XML”, so to expect anything else would be to take a very cynical view of title-page truthfulness.

<sup>6</sup> Were such a person to exist.

<sup>7</sup> Well, it was interesting compared to whatever else I was meant to be doing at the time, anyway.

<sup>8</sup> Were that possible.