

From Washington (DC) where I am attending the SAA Conference.

Technical Debt

Technical debt (also known as **design debt**^[1] or **code debt**) is a concept in **software development** that reflects the implied cost of additional rework caused by choosing an easy solution now instead of using a better approach that would take longer.^[2] Technical debt can be compared to monetary **debt**.^[3] If technical debt is not repaid, it can accumulate 'interest', making it harder to implement changes later on. Unaddressed technical debt increases **software entropy**. *Wikipedia*

Attended a panel session where a group of young archivists (well, they seemed young to me) explored how this concept, applied to quick-and-dirty methods, migration of digital assets and poor preservation, can be used in cost/benefit analysis, prioritisation of work programmes, and in speaking to management (it is a concept they understand apparently). It enables you to identify a present cost of taking short-cuts by identifying future requirements (difficult to quantify but real all the same). Particularly useful, I imagine, when dealing with the we'll-worry-about-it-tomorrow argument. Also, when handling legacy problems, you can use the concept to balance a once-only work-around solution against one that also takes care of future possibilities.

A good session and one which I hope will be of value in my own work.

An idea whose time has come?

Attending the description sessions hasn't been the depressing experience I expected. They are making good progress in adapting the relational model (applied to three entity-types) to their descriptive ideas - cf. draft DACS Principle 4. They seem to think of it as three-entity model (with relationships). Dear me. They think it is an innovative concept developed by RiC. I decided that arguing the provenance of the idea would be counter-productive. So I bit my tongue. Sigh.

The [existing Principle Four](#) repeats the frightful multi-level rule

an archival description may consist of a multilevel structure that begins with a description of the whole and proceeds through increasingly more detailed descriptions of the parts, or it may consist only of a description of the whole.

But the [new draft](#) says

Archivists expose contextual significance by describing records, agents, events, and the relationships between them.

Yay!

They're still very collection focussed and vestiges of ISDIAH remain. But green shoots are appearing in the manure. There is comfort with de-accessioning. And even talk of documenting the archivist's work as part of the descriptive endeavour. Yay again!

The only earthly certainty is oblivion (Mark Twain)

Chatted over lunch with some v. young, bright, enthusiastic graduates – brimming with hope and ideas but (typical of their generation) tinged with hard edged realism and scepticism. Not yet soured though, like me. In discussion, it astonished me that they were wholly ignorant of the name and the work of David Bearman – until I remembered he is a prophet not honoured in his own country. I expounded a little and (being bright) they were intrigued, slightly appalled their teachers hadn't mentioned him, took notes, and said they'd be looking him up. A good day's work.

GLAM and the Search for Truth

The last session I attended was a panel – mostly about obstacles to GLAM-orous co-operation (routine stuff: funding, prioritisation, professional differences, etc.). My worry remains that we'll be asked to surrender our speciality in pursuit of common ground. Sure enough, the archivist suggested

we may have to relax descriptive standards in order to get along. He was an EAD guy, so perhaps his grasp of descriptive principles wasn't that secure to start with.

The best presentation was from the museum guy (Robert Stein). His argument was that the prior problem we face is public mistrust of information providers (including us) – the fake news, climate denying, flat earth, alien abduction, birther, antivax conspiracy theorists trust nothing and get their ideas from obscure Internet pages. Everyone else is confused by the noise. He argued that more than ever we can't take trust in our institutions for granted and that we need to work at restoring it for the resources we manage before useful co-operation can occur. I agree. I asked him afterwards if he thought this should be done globally (in the abstract) or granularly case by case. He thought this was a good question. So did I. I don't think it can be done in the abstract – that is beyond our power and our remit. But authenticity, reliability, accuracy are in our DNA, they are our core values, ones we share with curators and librarians. We can all make common cause presenting a shared persona as truth-tellers, insisting that accuracy matters and that we strive for it.

Michael Piggott has a great story about Bob Hawke and the reflecting pool at University House, Canberra. It's his story and I'll let him tell it. My example is James Thurber's *The Night the Dam Broke*¹. It tells how, one night, panic overtook the small town in which he grew up when a cry of alarm was raised that the dam had broken. People rushed from their beds and ran for the hills. But it was the Mid-West and there were no hills. If the dam had burst (it hadn't) the water would have risen only one inch. But in their panic people didn't stop to think about it. Michael's story also involves measuring the depth of the water.

My take out is this: GLAM can work collectively and aggressively to assert our shared credentials as truth tellers. When people are panicking, we need to be there for them, carrying rulers in our back pockets. PS. I'm not, of course, suggesting that our truths are settled and immutable. A professionally inspired process of revision is one of the things that makes them trust-worthy. Other sessions explored re-description and the exposure of flawed archival narratives.

¹ I posted to the List from a hotel room in Washington without access to a decent library. In the service of accuracy and to forestall critics who know their Thurber, let me acknowledge that my memory of *The Day the Dam Broke* was pretty woeful. In the story, panic starts in the day not the night-time and most of the other details are wrong. But I think I captured the spirit of the story all the same.