Encoding Reparative Description: Promoting Archival Metadata Repair through Visualization and ArchivesSpace

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Abstract

Over the past few years, more archives and archivists have been working on enhanced description projects that can address past inequities, erasure, or incorrect representations in description. Stemming from the "ReConnect/ReCollect" project at University of Michigan, which has surveyed the extent and legacy of colonial collections extracted from the Philippines since the late nineteenth century, we report on work to analyze more than two hundred finding aids with the development of Python-based analysis tools. We demonstrate how automation can help to expand the project of reparative description. The poster reports on how archivists, faculty, and students, worked across the University to aggregate finding aid metadata and analyze that descriptive information. We present information about the code that we used, and the work to update and implement computational tools to work with the open-source archives information management application, ArchivesSpace, in order to aid the goals of reparative description workflows in archives.
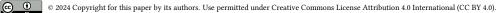
Keywords

archival description, reparative description, metadata visualization, finding aids, archivesSpace, APIs

1. Poster Background

Over the past few years, more archives and archivists have been working on enhanced description projects that can address past inequities, erasure, or incorrect representations in description. This work has been variously described as reparative description, mindful description, conscious editing, and by other names. Whatever it is called, while this work is typically grounded in slow, relationship-based work within and outside of archives, the identification of problems and addressing of changes can benefit from computational approaches. Due to the highly contextual, historicized, and variable needs for making changes to archival description, however, computational tools beyond mere find and replace are needed. Our project demonstrates how we have used automation tools to process metadata from archival finding aids, across multiple management systems, to develop useful reports and visualizations that may aid in identifying problems and addressing them in ethical, community-sensitive ways.

Stemming from the "ReConnect/ReCollect" project (RCRC) at University of Michigan, which has surveyed the extent and legacy of colonial collections extracted from the Philippines since the late nineteenth century, we report on work to analyze 247 finding aids across three repositories at the University of Michigan. We analyzed these using a list of potentially harmful terms developed by the RCRC team. Data was gathered and processed using custom Python scripts; then, analyzed and visualized using the pandas data analysis library and multiple visualization libraries.

2. Project Methods, Data, and Goals

The project does not advocate for technical solutions to fundamental problems. We, instead, aim to show how coding and automation may help to support reparative description. Our poster will report on research at the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library (Bentley) and School of Information with archivists and RCRC to aggregate finding aid metadata, and then to analyze that descriptive information for potentially harmful, outdated, or problematic terminology and tone. We are now working to develop more useful reports and visualizations that can aid archivists in auditing their metadata and systems, as well as producing visualizations that can support conversations with various stakeholders, including source communities and other researchers. These tools will be reusable by other organizations working to remediate archival finding aids.

Our poster will present our current work and next steps. This includes:

- Explanation of scripts and parsing functions we have developed, including parsing JSON responses from the open-source archives information management application, ArchivesSpace, via its API. ArchivesSpace is an open-source finding aid management system, homed at Lyrasis, used by more than 450 archival organizations.
- Gathering feedback from archivists at the Bentley on the analysis tools and consultation possibilities, as well as report on their efforts to use these tools and visualizations to develop reparative archival workflows aided by technology. This entails a combination of interviews and work process explanations.
- Figuring out how to adapt and implement new tools, including coding and automation of metadata analysis, to support reparative archival workflows.

3. Conclusion

We see this work as critical to move reparative metadata analysis beyond "find and replace" and the use of term lists of potentially harmful words and phrases. While useful, these approaches do not recognize the importance of dialogue, nor the varied relationships and context-dependent language that must be considered in reparative description work. We understand that reparative work must be careful and considered, but we also know the scale and complexity of archival metadata that should be addressed, so our work aims to develop new approaches and tools that support reparative metadata work at a wider scale.