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Title

Use your head to save your feet. Strategies and guidelines for documentation applied by MusIS – The South-Western German Museum Network

Introduction

Since the mid 1990s, MusIS (Museum Information System), a service of the Library Service Centre Baden-Wuerttemberg (Bibliotheksservice-Zentrum Baden Württemberg BSZ) runs a documentation network for museums. The network is supported by the Ministry of Science, Research and Art of Baden-Wuerttemberg. Among the members are the State Museums of the federal state of Baden-Wuerttemberg and several larger and smaller institutions from other branches. MusIS hosts a wide range of services for museum documentation and management

(for details see Schweibenz & Sieglerschmidt 2008). An important goal of the network is to create high quality documentation in a consistent form that can be used for multiple purposes inside and outside the participating museums. In order to achieve this goal, MusIS established a set of strategies and guidelines for quality control in museum documentation. Some of them are of a general nature and can be applied regardless of the documentation system used. Others are software specific – in our case imdas pro by Joanneum Research – using certain features of the system. The focus of this paper is on the general aspects of documentation. Before going into detail, we want to explain why we think it is necessary to apply strategies and guidelines in practical documentation work.

Why to use strategies and guidelines for documentation

From our experience, establishing strategies and guidelines for documentation in museums is a demanding and laborious task. However, it is worth the effort because it saves work and time in the long run as the resulting documentation is more consistent and of higher quality. This is of importance when data from the local database are either retrieved for internal purposes or delivered to cultural portals such as Europeana or the German Digital Library. Usually, errors in or inconsistency of data are discovered only at this point and have to be corrected in all related fields. This correction work requires a lot of time and effort – a lot more than when done at earlier stages during the data entry. From this perspective, the proverb “use your head to save your feet” seems to be quite accurate to describe efforts to improve data quality.

The following measures can be taken to achieve data quality:

- Quality measures during data migration
- Consulting in documentation
- Application of controlled vocabulary

- Rules for entering data from index cards or inventory catalogues
- Data revision

Data migration – quality from the start

The struggle for documentation quality starts when data are migrated from one system to the other. At the outset, the current and the future data structures are analyzed, field mappings between the old and the new data are created, and the data are transferred in a way that structures the new data in the most efficient way for future use. This procedure also prevents the loss of information during the transfer process. The next step is the matching of master data and controlled vocabularies of the documentation system. In this way, high data quality is laid as a foundation for the future work with the database. To keep up the initial level, MusIS emphasizes the concept of offering continuous consulting in documentation to the network's museums.

Consulting in documentation

MusIS offers to the network's museum continuous support in all questions regarding practical issues of documentation and their technical implementation. One method is the training of museum staff in the application of the software and the related documentation issues; another is a help desk for all questions related to museum documentation; a further is handouts and leaflets regarding specific aspects of documentation and technical issues.

To keep up with recent developments in the field of documentation, the MusIS staff participates in the different working groups of the special interest group Documentation of the German Museums Association (Deutscher Museumsbund).

Application of controlled vocabulary

A central part of the MusIS documentation strategy is to create and maintain a number of controlled vocabularies that are technically integrated in the documentation system. The following MusIS vocabularies consist of a number of general thesauri that are centrally maintained:

- an Object Name Authority File (Objektbezeichnungsthesaurus),
- a Materials Authority File (Materialthesaurus),
- an Epoch and Era Authority File (Epochen- und Zeiträumethesaurus).

An essential part of the MusIS thesaurus work is to cooperate with other institutions and incorporate existing vocabularies (Sieglerschmidt 2004: 4). For example, the Era Authority File is based on the previous work of the Museum of German History (Deutsches Historisches Museum), Berlin, and the terms of the Object Name Authority File are matched against the Integrated Authority File (Gemeinsame Normdatei) of the German National Library (Deutsche National Bibliothek). An example for a cooperative thesaurus project in which MusIS takes part is the translation of the Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) into German language.

In addition to the general thesauri, discipline specific thesauri are developed in cooperative projects between individual museums, for example for natural history or ethnography. Usually, one of the museums takes over the responsibility for a specific thesaurus and the lead in the development. The other participating museums contribute candidates for the thesaurus that are first discussed and then integrated. The resulting thesaurus is distributed among the project partners.

In order to share the network's thesauri with other institutions, MusIS takes part in the project "Vocabulary in Museum Documentation" (Museumsvokabular.de). This initiative collects and shares different kinds of museum vocabulary on a central platform.

Finally, controlled vocabularies play an important role in improving access to museum information provided in cultural heritage portals. Especially the identifiers associated with the

corresponding terms in the controlled vocabularies are excellent resources for relating information in a portal or a semantic Web.

Rules for entering data from index cards or inventory catalogues

The object documentation system imdas pro offers a lot of flexibility in creating entry masks. This allows MusIS to design masks that fit the specific needs of individual institutions. This high level of adaptability requires detailed regulations and guidelines regarding the way in which the different fields are filled with the suitable information in order to create homogeneous data. So called “writing rules“ describe not only in great detail what kind of information has to be entered in which field when data are transferred from cataloging cards or inventory catalogues but also the way the data are entered, especially for free text fields, focusing on features such as syntactical correctness, accurate orthography, and consistent structures. As the task of data entry is usually done by different staff members over a long period of time it is important to process the information with a high level of consistency in order to achieve retrievable data of high quality. Therefore MusIS actively supports the network’s museum in establishing specific institutional guidelines. Moreover, the achieved data quality offers a solid foundation for semantic relations in the content. This is essential for cultural portals and therefore an added value to data.

In addition to specific entry masks for individual institutions, MusIS tries to establish standard entry masks for specific purposes that should be handled in the same way by all museums of the network. The reason is that all the data produced in these fields by different museums have to be processed in the same way later on in order to aggregate them into a portal or another software. An example is the jointly used mask for numismatics that is centrally maintained by MusIS and used by all museums that want to describe the coins in their collections in a standardized way.

Revision of data and documentation

In order to improve the quality of museum documentation in general and the quality of data in particular, it is necessary to carry out both revisions of data and documentation strategies in certain intervals. The revision can be conducted by technical and intellectual means. The result can be either an "information check or shock" (Light 2000: 34) depending on the outcome. Regardless of the result of individual revision processes, this course of action is essential for achieving high quality data and consistent documentation strategies. Especially the earlier mentioned "writing rules" are an important tool for checking the overall data quality and revise the applied documentation strategies from bottom-up. What is important, is that the revision process is not done in isolation but involves the whole staff (Teh Eng Eng 2005: 6).

Conclusion

The measures, techniques, and strategies described above will lead to a certain degree of consistency and quality of data and documentation. The struggle for quality starts with the migration of data. This process is labor-intensive but provides a solid foundation for future documentation work. The work has to be kept up by applying continuous consulting in questions of museum documentation and its technical implementation. The application of controlled vocabulary will provide consistent data, so will do rules for entering data from index cards or inventory catalogues. The correct execution is verified by regular revisions of data and documentation strategies. The result of these efforts is high quality data and documentation. In order to achieve this goal, you have to plan in advance and use your head. If you don't use your head, you have to use your feet to run after all the errors and inconsistencies that could have been avoided if you had done it right from the start.

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