

# Software, hardware and the web: reviews

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**SPECTRUM-Terminology for museums**, downloadable free from the MDA's website, <http://www.mda.org.uk/spectrum-terminology/>

MDA, formerly the Museums Documentation Association, maintains the parent product SPECTRUM, which is an internationally recognized standard for managing the processing and documentation of objects in museum collections. This standardization role has been recognized by the UK's MLA (Museums Libraries and Archive Council), which makes implementing several of SPECTRUM's recommendations a requirement for participation in its Museum Accreditation Scheme, and the standard is either already used by or currently being 'localized' for several EU member states (including the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany).

SPECTRUM's 350-page second edition is now available online, either for viewing in HTML or for download in PDF format at no charge on acceptance of the appropriate licence terms, from <http://www.mda.org.uk/>. It comprises two interrelated parts. The first provides best practice recommendations for 21 different activities in the management of museum collections, a chapter being devoted to each and ending with a list of data elements called 'units of information'. The second part defines these units of information.

MDA's most recent initiative is the SPECTRUM-Terminology service, to which the December 2005 issue of their *Collections News* (<http://www.mda.org.uk/news.htm>) is wholly given over. This grew naturally from SPECTRUM's units of information requirements (which advise the maintenance of lists of standard terms), and aims to provide the heritage community (museum workers, other collection holders, software suppliers, funding bodies, trainers and educators) with 'interoperability' through knowledge sharing. The hope is that sharing knowledge will feed into increasing the mobility of the objects described. The project has three strands, linked from the Spectrum-Terminology main page:

- terminology essentials, about museum terminology generally
- a terminology workshop, which provides guidance on thesaurus construction
- a terminology bank, which brings together references to existing standard terminologies.

The first of these explains the project and offers a very brief overview of the main types of controlled vocabulary system. A series of information sheets aimed at specific user groups is planned.

The museum sector has no shortage of competent guides to thesaurus construction and the workshop strand reproduces two of these (Stuart Holm's 'Guidelines for constructing a museum object name thesaurus' and Leonard Will's 'Thesaurus principles and practice', with Liz Orna's 'Build yourself a thesaurus' likely to join them soon). They are supplemented by a short standards bibliog-

raphy and a brief set of guidelines for recording the names of persons and organizations (based on, and referring to, AACR2).

The terminology bank, intended for those planning to use or extend existing terminologies or develop their own, brings together references to seven thesauri and a wordlist set, all published by MDA. Available terminologies are also accessible via SPECTRUM units of information. The review of other sources of information at present contains just two items: the CIDOC (International Documentation Committee of the International Council of Museums) Directory of Thesauri for Object Names, available from the Getty Information Institute, and a Geosciences dictionary from the University of Arizona Library.

This review was somewhat hindered by various parts of the MDA website displaying a Work In Progress screen, with the slightly unnerving invitation to revisit 'in a few days', so development is clearly going on in several areas. Though the initial aim of SPECTRUM-Terminology seems to be providing guidance on and training in thesaurus compilation, MDA asks users of the free service to upload their own terminologies and help establish a worthwhile resource. Eventually, the site should contribute directly to terminology development and it is clear that MDA are well aware of the potential future application both of XML-based technologies (as the structural complement to standard formats and controlled vocabularies in data interoperability) and the possible integration of their product set with longer-term developments like the Semantic Web. The only area that seemed to be missing from this wealth of online, free-access material and advice was a link page to reviews and details of available thesaurus management software.

Intoxicated as we often are by today's high-speed, natural-language searching of full-text, where the enquirer's aim is supposed to be the retrieval of just enough relevant documents to solve an immediate problem, support a product choice or complete a school homework assignment, it is easy to overlook controlled vocabulary indexing. Yet, this issue of *The Indexer* includes Caroline Barlow's review of BS8723, a major new standard that updates the established thesaurus standard, BS5723/6723 (mirrored as ISO 2788/5964 and all suitably deferred to in SPECTRUM-Terminology's guidelines), to reflect the wider role of controlled vocabularies in the computer age. There are still occasions when total recall is needed: where only standardized vocabularies can allow meaningful interchange or where no full text exists in machine-readable form, including catalogue descriptions of non-text material in art galleries, picture libraries and museums. The last of these sectors at least seems to be getting itself properly organized to meet future challenges.

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[See also Heather Hedden's article on p. 32 on Software for HTML indexing – *Ed.*]