This is the first article in a three-part series introducing the reader to the new cataloging code, Resource Description and Access (RDA).

Introduction
Published in late June 2010, the new rules of RDA aim to supplant yet achieve backwards compatibility with the present edition of the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR2), while possessing enough flexibility to incorporate future methods of expressing and encoding descriptions of library resources for the catalog user. This is a high-minded achievement, certainly, but one that has evoked strong emotions both pro and con among catalogers, especially in this climate of economic insecurity. The parties behind Resource Description and Access, however, have pushed ahead with its publication, and the United States national libraries and volunteer institutions are now testing its viability in the real-world cataloging environment.

History/Background
If inevitability is the watchword here, then the first step in coming to terms with RDA is to explore the incentives behind its birth. To that end a short historical survey is necessary. With the age of the World Wide Web then dawning, the International Conference on the Principles and Future Development of AACR, held in Toronto, Canada, in 1997, brought to the foreground some of the issues and shortcomings with AACR2 as it stood at that time:

- Catalog descriptions based foremost upon a resource’s format (its tangible or intangible carrier) rather than on its intellectual and/or artistic content (Lynne C. Howarth)
- The ambiguity of what constitutes a work, especially those stemming from mixed authorship, and its representation in bibliographic records (Martha M. Yee)
- The applicability of AACR2 principles in an ever-increasing digital world that offers content in multifarious forms and provides a greater number of options for housing, manipulating, and displaying bibliographic data in library systems (Tom Delsey)

AACR2 saw updates in the first half of the last decade to address some of these problems; still, these and other

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2 Pre-conference papers by the authors listed here and others are available on the Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA website: [http://www.rda-jsc.org/intlconf1.html](http://www.rda-jsc.org/intlconf1.html)
observations made over the years spurred the Joint Steering Committee for Revision of AACR (JSC) to retool the present cataloging guidelines. It was during this recasting process that the JSC announced, based on feedback from library constituents on an early draft of AACR3, the need for a new direction. The Committee proposed aligning the new cataloging rules—rechristened Resource Description and Access—more closely with the exploration of the bibliographical universe and the intent of its users as described in the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions’ (IFLA) documents Functional Requirements for Bibliographical Records (more widely known as FRBR) and Functional Requirements for Authority Data (FRAD). Coordination with the recent Statement of International Cataloguing Principles also came to pass. Moreover, this new code would limit its instruction to the recording of bibliographic data and their relationships, leaving the matter of informing the display of that data in the catalog to other standards, such as the International Standard Bibliographic Description (ISBD), the model upon which AACR2’s rules for punctuation and arrangement of bibliographic components is built.

The JSC also took pains to devise RDA for the digital environment. The organization of the text reflects the constructs of object-oriented or relational databases, wherein relationships between and among groups of data interact in such a way as to provide users the information they desire: an author is linked to a title, which in turn is linked to a publication statement and subject headings, all to form a bibliographic record, one record among many, each a ring in the chain mail of the catalog. Though such associations are present in our current MARC 21 cataloging records, many are implied rather than explicitly notated. For instance, a 500 note in a single record stating the probable composer of an anonymous musical work pertains not only to the score in hand being cataloged, but to all versions and editions of that work published and performed. These relationships play a vital role in the bibliographic data—more so, the bibliographic web—RDA instructs the cataloger to create.

RDA Online
The digital-leading approach extends to the act of publishing the text itself, for RDA was released online as the hub in a suite of interactive cataloging applications dubbed the RDA Toolkit. (The co-publishers of the text will be offering a print version of the manual in late 2010.) In the future, this electronic manual will incorporate itself into cataloging applications and local library systems to provide contextual help to catalogers within their record editing environment.

Conclusion
After several rough drafts and considerable feedback from libraries and catalogers, RDA implementation may be approaching. Grafting new modes of thinking about library resources and user needs in the world of the internet onto traditional cataloging practices has proved a challenge for its creators—and will be so for catalogers too. Whether RDA becomes a success remains to be seen; it is certainly a work in progress.

This was a brief account of RDA’s development background. In the next article I will review FRBR and touch lightly upon FRAD, two pillars that support the foundation of RDA, and examine the new structure and vocabulary these bring to the new cataloging manual.

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3 Later the Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA


About the Author
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