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ARK Identifier Scheme
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J. Kunze
University of California (UCOP)
R. P. C. Rodgers
US National Library of Medicine
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The ARK Persistent Identifier Scheme

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Abstract

The ARK (Archival Resource Key) naming scheme is designed to facilitate the high-quality and persistent identification of information objects. A founding principle of the ARK is that persistence is purely a matter of service and is neither inherent in an object nor conferred on it by a particular naming syntax. The best that an identifier can do is to lead users to the services that support persistence. The term ARK itself refers both to the scheme and to any single identifier that conforms to it. An ARK has five components:

[http://NMAH/]ark:/NAAN/Name[Qualifier]

an optional and mutable Name Mapping Authority Hostport, the "ark:" label, the Name Assigning Authority Number (NAAN), the assigned Name, and an optional and possibly mutable Qualifier supported by the NMA. The NAAN and Name together form the immutable persistent identifier for the object. An ARK is a special kind of URL that connects users to three things: the named object, its metadata, and the provider's promise about its persistence. When entered into the location field of a Web browser, the ARK leads the user to the named object. That same ARK, followed by a single question mark ('?'), returns a brief metadata record that is both human- and machine-readable. When the ARK is followed by dual question marks ('??'), the returned metadata contains a commitment statement from the current provider. Tools exist for minting, binding, and resolving ARKs.

1. Introduction

This document describes a scheme for the high-quality naming of information resources. The scheme, called the Archival Resource Key (ARK), is well suited to long-term access and identification of any information resources that accommodate reasonably regular electronic description. This includes digital documents, databases, software, and websites, as well as physical objects (books, bones, statues, etc.) and intangible objects (chemicals, diseases, vocabulary terms, performances). Hereafter the term "object" refers to an information resource. The term ARK itself refers both to the scheme and to any single identifier that conforms to it. A reasonably concise and accessible overview and rationale for the scheme is available at [\[ARK\]](#).

Schemes for persistent identification of network-accessible objects are not new. In the early 1990's, the design of the Uniform Resource Name [\[URNSYN\]](#) responded to the observed failure rate of URLs by articulating an indirect, non-hostname-based naming scheme and the need for responsible name management. Meanwhile, promoters of the Digital Object Identifier [\[DOI\]](#) succeeded in building a community of providers around a mature software system [\[Handle\]](#) that supports name management. The Persistent Uniform Resource Locator [\[PURL\]](#) was another scheme that has the unique advantage of working with unmodified web browsers. ARKs represent an approach that attempts to build on the strengths and to avoid the weaknesses of the other schemes.

A founding principle of the ARK is that persistence is purely a matter of service. Persistence is neither inherent in an object nor conferred on it by a particular naming syntax. Nor is the technique of name indirection - upon which URNs, Handles, DOIs, and PURLs are founded - of central importance. Name indirection is an ancient and well-understood practice; new mechanisms for it keep appearing and distracting practitioner attention, with the Domain Name System [\[DNS\]](#) being a particularly dazzling and elegant example. What is often forgotten is that maintenance of an indirection table is the overwhelming and unavoidable cost to the organization providing persistence, and that cost is equivalent across naming schemes. That indirection has always been a native part the web while being so lightly utilized for the persistence of web-based objects is an indication of how unsuited most organizations are to the task of table maintenance and to the overall challenge of digital permanence.

Persistence is achieved through a provider's successful stewardship of objects and their identifiers. The highest level of persistence will be reinforced by a provider's robust contingency, redundancy, and succession strategies. It is further safeguarded to the extent

that a provider's mission is shielded from marketplace and political instabilities. These are by far the major challenges confronting persistence providers, and no identifier scheme has any direct impact

on them.

Given the limited ability of any naming scheme to positively contribute to the considerable undertaking of digital permanence, it is legitimate to ask whether a given scheme might itself actually become a liability as the provider carries objects and infrastructure into the technologically evolving future. It is in response to this question that the ARK scheme tries to be simple, transparent, and free of proprietary components, vendor relationships, and special-purpose global infrastructure.

1.1. Three Reasons to Use ARKs

The first requirement of an ARK is to give users a link from an object to a promise of stewardship for it. That promise is a multi-faceted covenant that binds the word of an identified service provider to a specific set of responsibilities. No one can tell if successful stewardship will take place because no one can predict the future. Reasonable conjecture, however, may be based on past performance. There must be a way to tie a promise of persistence to a provider's demonstrated or perceived ability - its reputation - in that arena. Provider reputations would then rise and fall as promises are observed variously to be kept and broken. This is perhaps the best way we have for gauging the strength of any persistence promise. Note that over time, current providers have nothing to do with the intentions of the original assigners of names.

The second requirement of an ARK is to give users a link from an object to a description of it. The problem with a naked identifier is that without a description real identification is incomplete. Identifiers common today are relatively opaque, though some contain ad hoc clues that reflect brief life cycle periods such as the address of a short stay in a filesystem hierarchy. Possession of both an identifier and an object is some improvement, but positive identification may still be uncertain since the object itself might not include a matching identifier or might not carry evidence obvious enough to reveal its identity without significant research. In either case, what is called for is a record bearing witness to the identifier's association with the object, as supported by a recorded set of object characteristics. This descriptive record is partly an identification "receipt" with which users and archivists can verify an object's identity after brief inspection and a plausible match with recorded characteristics such as title and size.

The final requirement of an ARK is to give users a link to the object itself (or to a copy) if at all possible. Persistent access is the central duty of an ARK. Persistent identification plays a vital

supporting role but, strictly speaking, it can be construed as no more than a record attesting to the original assignment of a never-reassigned identifier. Object access may not be feasible for various

reasons, such as catastrophic loss of the object, a licensing agreement that keeps an archive "dark" for a period of years, or when an object's own lack of tangible existence confuses normal concepts of access (e.g., a vocabulary term might be accessed through its definition). In such cases the ARK's identification role assumes a much higher profile. But attempts to simplify the persistence problem by decoupling access from identification and concentrating exclusively on the latter are of questionable utility. A perfect system for assigning forever unique identifiers might be created, but if it did so without reducing access failure rates, no one would be interested. The central issue - which may be summed up as the "HTTP 404 Not Found" problem - would not have been addressed.

1.2. Organizing Support for ARKs

An organization and the user community it serves can often be seen to struggle with two different areas of persistent identification: the Our Stuff problem and the Their Stuff problem. In the Our Stuff problem, we in the organization want our own objects to acquire persistent names. Since we possess or control these objects, our organization tackles the Our Stuff problem directly. Whether or not the objects are named by ARKs, our organization is the responsible party, so it can plan for, maintain, and make commitments about the objects.

In the Their Stuff problem, we in the organization want others' objects to acquire persistent names. These are objects that we do not own or control, but some of which are critically important to us. But because they are beyond our influence as far as support is concerned, creating and maintaining persistent identifiers for Their Stuff is not especially purposeful or feasible for us to do. There is little that we can do about someone else's stuff except encourage them to find or become providers of persistence services.

Co-location of persistent access and identification services is natural. Any organization that undertakes ongoing support of true persistent identification (which includes description) is well-served if it controls, owns, or otherwise has clear internal access to the identified objects, and this gives it an advantage if it wishes also to support persistent access to outsiders. Conversely, persistent access to outsiders requires orderly internal collection management procedures that include monitoring, acquisition, verification, and change control over objects, which in turn requires object identifiers persistent enough to support auditable record keeping practices.

Although, organizing ARK services under one roof thus tends to make sense, object hosting can successfully be separated from name

mapping. An example is when a name mapping authority centrally provides uniform resolution services via a protocol gateway on behalf of organizations that host objects behind a variety of access

protocols. It is also reasonable to build value-added description services that rely on the underlying services of a set of mapping authorities.

Supporting ARKs is not for every organization. By requiring specific, revealed commitments to preservation, to object access, and to description, the bar for providing ARK services is higher than for some other identifier schemes. On the other hand, it would be hard to grant credence to a persistence promise from an organization that could not muster the minimum ARK services. Not that there isn't a business model for an ARK-like, description-only service built on top of another organization's full complement of ARK services. For example, there might be competition at the description level for abstracting and indexing a body of scientific literature archived in a combination of open and fee-based repositories. The description-only service would have no direct commitment to the objects, but would act as intermediary, forwarding commitment statements from object hosting to requestors.

1.3. Definition of Identifier

An identifier is not a string of character data - an identifier is an association between a string of data and an object. This abstraction is necessary because without it a string is just data. It's nonsense to talk about a string's breaking, or about its being strong, maintained, and authentic. But as a representative of an association, a string can do, metaphorically, the things that we expect of it.

Without regard to whether an object is physical, digital, or conceptual, to identify it is to claim an association between it and a representative string, such as "Jane" or "ISBN 0596000278". What gives a claim credibility is a set of verifiable assertions, or metadata, about the object, such as age, height, title, or number of pages. In other words, the association is made manifest by a record (e.g., a cataloging or other metadata record) that vouches for it.

In the complete absence of any testimony (metadata) regarding an association, a would-be identifier string is a meaningless sequence of characters. To keep an externally visible but otherwise internal string from being perceived as an identifier by outsiders, for example, it suffices for an organization not to disclose the nature of its association. For our immediate purpose, actual existence of an association record is more important than its authenticity or verifiability, which are outside the scope of this specification.

It is a gift to the identification process if an object carries its

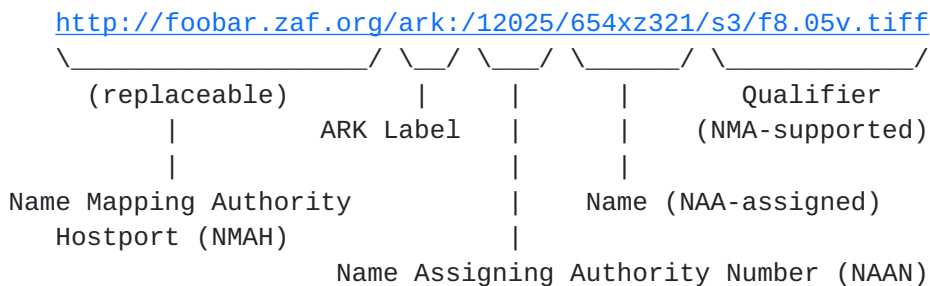
own name as an inseparable part of itself, such as an identifier imprinted on the first page of a document or embedded in a data structure element of a digital document header. In cases where the

object is large, unwieldy, or unavailable (such as when licensing restrictions are in effect), a metadata record that includes the identifier string will usually suffice. That record becomes a conveniently manipulable object surrogate, acting as both an association "receipt" and "declaration".

Note that our definition of identifier extends the one in use for Uniform Resource Identifiers [URI]. The present document still sometimes (ab)uses the terms "ARK" and "identifier" as shorthand for the string part of an identifier, but the context should make the meaning clear.

2. ARK Anatomy

An ARK is represented by a sequence of characters (a string) that contains the label, "ark:", optionally preceded by the beginning part of a URL. Here is a diagrammed example.



The ARK syntax can be summarized,

```
[http://NMAH/]ark:/NAAN/Name[Qualifier]
```

where the NMAH and Qualifier parts are in brackets to indicate that they are optional.

2.1. The Name Mapping Authority Hostport (NMAH)

Before the "ark:" label may appear an optional Name Mapping Authority Hostport (NMAH) that is a temporary address where ARK service requests may be sent. It consists of "http://" (or any service specification valid for a URL) followed by an Internet hostname or hostport combination having the same format and semantics as the hostport part of a URL. The most important thing about the NMAH is that it is "identity inert" from the point of view of object identification. In other words, ARKs that differ only in the optional NMAH part identify the same object. Thus, for example, the following three ARKs are synonyms for just one information object:

<http://loc.gov/ark:/12025/654xz321>
<http://rutgers.edu/ark:/12025/654xz321>
ark:/12025/654xz321

Strictly speaking, in the realm of digital objects, these ARKs may lead over time to somewhat different or diverging instances of the originally named object. In an ideal world, divergence of persistent objects is not desirable, but it is widely believed that digital preservation efforts will inevitably lead to alterations in some original objects (e.g, a format migration in order to preserve the ability to display a document). If any of those objects are held redundantly in more than one organization (a common preservation strategy), chances are small that all holding organizations will perform the same precise transformations and all maintain the same object metadata. More significant divergence would be expected when the holding organizations serve different audiences or compete with each other.

The NMAH part makes an ARK into an actionable URL. As with many internet parameters, it is helpful to approach the NMAH being liberal in what you accept and conservative in what you propose. From the recipient's point of view, the NMAH part should be treated as temporary, disposable, and replaceable. From the NMA's point of view, it should be chosen with the greatest concern for longevity. A carefully chosen NMAH should be at least as permanent as the providing organization's own hostname. In the case of a national or university library, for example, there is no reason why the NMAH should not be considerably more permanent than soft-funded proxy hostnames such as hdl.handle.net, dx.doi.org, and purl.org. In general and over time, however, it is not unexpected for an NMAH eventually to stop working and require replacement with the NMAH of a currently active service provider.

This replacement relies on a mapping authority "resolver" discovery process, of which two alternate methods are outlined in a later section. The ARK, URN, Handle, and DOI schemes all use a resolver discovery model that sooner or later requires matching the original assigning authority with a current provider servicing that authority's named objects; once found, the resolver at that provider performs what amounts to a redirect to a place where the object is currently held. All the schemes rely on the ongoing functionality of currently mainstream technologies such as the Domain Name System [DNS] and web browsers. The Handle and DOI schemes in addition require that the Handle protocol layer and global server grid be available at all times.

The practice of prepending "http://" and an NMAH to an ARK is a way of creating an actionable identifier by a method that is itself

temporary. Assuming that infrastructure supporting [[HTTP](#)] information retrieval will no longer be available one day, ARKs will then have to be converted into new kinds of actionable identifiers.

By that time, if ARKs see widespread use, web browsers would presumably evolve to perform this (currently simple) transformation automatically.

2.2. The ARK Label Part - ark:

The label part distinguishes an ARK from an ordinary identifier. In a URL found in the wild, the string, "ark:/", indicates that the URL stands a reasonable chance of being an ARK. If the context warrants, verification that it actually is an ARK can be done by testing it for existence of the three ARK services.

Since nothing about an identifier syntax directly affects persistence, the "ark:" label (like "urn:", "doi:", and "hdl:") cannot tell you whether the identifier is persistent or whether the object is available. It does tell you that the original Name Assigning Authority (NAA) had some sort of hopes for it, but it doesn't tell you whether that NAA is still in existence, or whether a decade ago it ceased to have any responsibility for providing persistence, or whether it ever had any responsibility beyond naming.

Only a current provider can say for certain what sort of commitment it intends, and the ARK label suggests that you can query the NMAH directly to find out exactly what kind of persistence is promised. Even if what is promised is impersistence (i.e., a short-term identifier), saying so is valuable information to the recipient. Thus an ARK is a high-functioning identifier in the sense that it provides access to the object, the metadata, and a commitment statement, even if the commitment is explicitly very weak.

2.3. The Name Assigning Authority Number (NAAN)

Recalling that the general form of the ARK is,

[http://NMAH/]ark:/NAAN/Name[Qualifier]

the part of the ARK directly following the "ark:" is the Name Assigning Authority Number (NAAN) enclosed in '/' (slash) characters. This part is always required, as it identifies the organization that originally assigned the Name of the object. It is used to discover a currently valid NMAH and to provide top-level partitioning of the space of all ARKs. NAANs are registered in a manner similar to URN Namespaces, but they are pure numbers consisting of 5 digits or 9 digits. Thus, the first 100,000 registered NAAs fit compactly into the 5 digits, and if growth warrants, the next billion fit into the 9 digit form. In either case the fixed odd numbers of digits helps reduce the chances of finding a NAAN out of context and confusing it with nearby quantities such as 4-digit dates.

2.4. The Name Part

The part of the ARK just after the NAAN is the Name assigned by the NAA, and it is also required. Semantic opaqueness in the Name part is strongly encouraged in order to reduce an ARK's vulnerability to era- and language-specific change. Identifier strings containing linguistic fragments can create support difficulties down the road. No matter how appropriate or even meaningless they are today, such fragments may one day create confusion, give offense, or infringe on a trademark as the semantic environment around us and our communities evolves.

Names that look more or less like numbers avoid common problems that defeat persistence and international acceptance. The use of digits is highly recommended. Mixing in non-vowel alphabetic characters a couple at a time is a relatively safe and easy way to achieve a denser namespace (more possible names for a given length of the name string). Such names have a chance of aging and traveling well. Tools exist that mint, bind, and resolve opaque identifiers, with or without check characters [[NOID](#)]. More on naming considerations is given in a subsequent section.

2.5. The Qualifier Part

The part of the ARK following the NAA-assigned Name is an optional Qualifier. It is a string that extends the base ARK in order to create a kind of service entry point into the object named by the NAA. At the discretion of the providing NMA, such a service entry point permits an ARK to support access to individual hierarchical components and subcomponents of an object, and to variants (versions, languages, formats) of components. A Qualifier may be invented by the NAA or by any NMA servicing the object.

In form, the Qualifier is a ComponentPath, or a VariantPath, or a ComponentPath followed by a VariantPath. A VariantPath is introduced and subdivided by the reserved character `.', and a ComponentPath is introduced and subdivided by the reserved character `/'. In this example,

<http://foobar.zaf.org/ark:/12025/654xz321/s3/f8.05v.tiff>

the string `"/s3/f8"` is a ComponentPath and the string `".05v.tiff"` is a VariantPath. The ARK Qualifier is a formalization of some current mainstream URL syntax conventions, but in ARKs the formalization specifically reserves meanings that permit recipients to make strong inferences about logical subobject containment and equivalence solely from the form of the received identifiers and without having to inspect metadata records in order to discover such relationships.

NMAs are free not to disclose any of these relationships merely by avoiding the reserved characters above. Hierarchical components and variants are discussed further in the next two sections.

The Qualifier, if present, differs from the Name in several important respects. First, a Qualifier may have been assigned either by the NAA or later by the NMA. The assignment of a Qualifier by an NMA effectively amounts to an act of publishing a service entry point within the conceptual object originally named by the NAA. For our purposes, an ARK extended with a Qualifier assigned by an NMA will be called an NMA-qualified ARK.

Second, a Qualifier assignment on the part of an NMA is made in fulfillment of its service obligations and may reflect changing service expectations and technology requirements. NMA-qualified ARKs could therefore be transient, even if the base, unqualified ARK is persistent. For example, it would be reasonable for an NMA to support access to an image object through an actionable ARK that is considered persistent even if the experience of that access changes as linking, labeling, and presentation conventions evolve and as format and security standards are updated. For an image "thumbnail", that NMA could also support an NMA-qualified ARK that is considered impersistent because the thumbnail will be replaced with higher resolution images as network bandwidth and CPU speeds increase. At the same time, for an originally scanned, high-resolution master, the NMA could publish an NMA-qualified ARK that is itself considered persistent. Of course, the NMA must be able to return its separate commitments to unqualified, NAA-assigned ARKs, to NMA-qualified ARKs, and to any NAA-qualified ARKs that it supports.

A third difference between a Qualifier and a Name concerns the semantic opaqueness constraint. When an NMA-qualified ARK is to be used as a transient service entry point into a persistent object, the priority given to semantic opaqueness observed by the NAA in the Name part may be relaxed by the NMA in the Qualifier part. If service priorities in the Qualifier take precedence over persistence, short-term usability considerations may recommend somewhat semantically laden Qualifier strings.

Finally, not only is the set of Qualifiers supported by an NMA mutable, but different NMAs may support different Qualifier sets for the same NAA-identified object. In this regard the NMAs act independently of each other and of the NAA.

The next two sections describe how ARK syntax may be used to declare, or to avoid declaring, certain kinds of relatedness among qualified ARKs.

2.5.1. ARKs that Reveal Object Hierarchy

An NAA or NMA may choose to reveal the presence of a hierarchical relationship between objects using the '/' (slash) character after

the Name part of an ARK. Some authorities will choose not to disclose this information, while others will go ahead and disclose so that manipulators of large sets of ARKs can infer object

relationships by simple identifier inspection; for example, this makes it possible for a system to present a collapsed view of a large search result set.

If the ARK contains an internal slash after the NAAN, the piece to its left indicates a containing object. For example, publishing an ARK of the form,

ark:/12025/654/xz/321

is equivalent to publishing three ARKs,

ark:/12025/654/xz/321
ark:/12025/654/xz
ark:/12025/654

together with a declaration that the first object is contained in the second object, and that the second object is contained in the third.

Revealing the presence of hierarchy is completely up to the assigning authority. It is hard enough to commit to one object's name, let alone to three objects' names and to a specific, ongoing relatedness among them. Thus, regardless of whether hierarchy was present initially, the assigning authority, by not using slashes, reveals no shared inferences about hierarchical or other inter-relatedness in the following ARKs:

ark:/12025/654_xz_321
ark:/12025/654_xz
ark:/12025/654xz321
ark:/12025/654xz
ark:/12025/654

Note that slashes around the ARK's NAAN (/12025/ in these examples) are not part of the ARK's Name and therefore do not indicate the existence of some sort of NAAN super object containing all objects in its namespace. A slash must have at least one non-structural character (one that is neither a slash nor a period) on both sides in order for it to separate recognizable structural components. So initial or final slashes may be removed, and double slashes may be converted into single slashes.

2.5.2. ARKs that Reveal Object Variants

An NAA or NMA may choose to reveal the possible presence of variant objects or object components using the '.' (period) character after the Name part of an ARK. Some authorities will choose not to disclose this information, while others will go ahead and disclose so that manipulators of large sets of ARKs can infer object

relationships by simple identifier inspection; for example, this makes it possible for a system to present a collapsed view of a large

search result set.

If the ARK contains an internal period after Name, the piece to its left is a base name and the piece to its right, and up to the end of the ARK or to the next period is a suffix. A Name may have more than one suffix, for example,

```
ark:/12025/654.24
ark:/12025/xz4/654.24
ark:/12025/654.20v.78g.f55
```

There are two main rules. First, if two ARKs share the same base name but have different suffixes, the corresponding objects were considered variants of each other (different formats, languages, versions, etc.) by the assigning authority. Thus, the following ARKs are variants of each other:

```
ark:/12025/654.20v.78g.f55
ark:/12025/654.321xz
ark:/12025/654.44
```

Second, publishing an ARK with a suffix implies the existence of at least one variant identified by the ARK without its suffix. The ARK otherwise permits no further assumptions about what variants might exist. So publishing the ARK,

```
ark:/12025/654.20v.78g.f55
```

is equivalent to publishing the four ARKs,

```
ark:/12025/654.20v.78g.f55
ark:/12025/654.20v.78g
ark:/12025/654.20v
ark:/12025/654
```

Revealing the possibility of variants is completely up to the assigning authority. It is hard enough to commit to one object's name, let alone to multiple variants' names and to a specific, ongoing relatedness among them. The assigning authority is the sole arbiter of what constitutes a variant within its namespace, and whether to reveal that kind of relatedness by using periods within its names.

A period must have at least one non-structural character (one that is neither a slash nor a period) on both sides in order for it to separate recognizable structural components. So initial or final periods may be removed, and double periods may be converted into single periods. Multiple suffixes should be arranged in sorted order (pure ASCII collating sequence) at the end of an ARK.

2.6. Character Repertoires

The Name and Qualifier parts are strings of visible ASCII characters and should be less than 128 bytes in length. The length restriction keeps the ARK short enough to append ordinary ARK request strings without running into transport restrictions (e.g., within HTTP GET requests). Characters may be letters, digits, or any of these six characters:

= # * + @ _ \$

The following characters may also be used, but their meanings are reserved:

% - . /

The characters ``/'` and ``.`` are ignored if either appears as the last character of an ARK. If used internally, they allow a name assigning authority to reveal object hierarchy and object variants as previously described.

Hyphens are considered to be insignificant and are always ignored in ARKs. A ``-'` (hyphen) may appear in an ARK for readability, or it may have crept in during the formatting and wrapping of text, but it must be ignored in lexical comparisons. As in a telephone number, hyphens have no meaning in an ARK. It is always safe for an NMA that receives an ARK to remove any hyphens found in it. As a result, like the NMAH, hyphens are "identity inert" in comparing ARKs for equivalence. For example, the following ARKs are equivalent for purposes of comparison and ARK service access:

```
ark:/12025/65-4-xz-321
ark:sneezy.dopey.com/12025/654--xz32-1
ark:/12025/654xz321
```

The ``%'` character is reserved for %-encoding all other octets that would appear in the ARK string, in the same manner as for URIs [[URI](#)]. A %-encoded octet consists of a ``%'` followed by two hex digits; for example, `"%7d"` stands in for ``}'`. Lower case hex digits are preferred to reduce the chances of false acronym recognition; thus it is better to use `"%acT"` instead of `"%ACT"`. The character ``%'` itself must be represented using `"%25"`. As with URNs, %-encoding permits ARKs to support legacy namespaces (e.g., ISBN, ISSN, SICI) that have less restricted character repertoires [[URNBIB](#)].

2.7. Normalization and Lexical Equivalence

To determine if two or more ARKs identify the same object, the ARKs

are compared for lexical equivalence after first being normalized.
Since ARK strings may appear in various forms (e.g., having different

NMAHs), normalizing them minimizes the chances that comparing two ARK strings for equality will fail unless they actually identify different objects. In a specified-host ARK (one having an NMAH), the NMAH never participates in such comparisons.

Normalization of an ARK for the purpose of octet-by-octet equality comparison with another ARK consists of four steps. First, any upper case letters in the "ark:" label and the two characters following a '%' are converted to lower case. The case of all other letters in the ARK string must be preserved. Second, any NMAH part is removed (everything from an initial "http://" up to the next slash) and all hyphens are removed.

Third, structural characters (slash and period) are normalized. Initial and final occurrences are removed, and two structural characters in a row (e.g., // or ./) are replaced by the first character, iterating until each occurrence has at least one non-structural character on either side. Finally, if there are any components with a period on the left and a slash on the right, either the component and the preceding period must be moved to the end of the Name part or the ARK must be thrown out as malformed.

The fourth and final step is to arrange the suffixes in ASCII collating sequence (that is, to sort them) and to remove duplicate suffixes, if any. It is also permissible to throw out ARKs for which the suffixes are not sorted.

The resulting ARK string is now normalized. Comparisons between normalized ARKs are case-sensitive, meaning that upper case letters are considered different from their lower case counterparts.

To keep ARK string variation to a minimum, no reserved ARK characters should be %-encoded unless it is deliberately to conceal their reserved meanings. No non-reserved ARK characters should ever be %-encoded. Finally, no %-encoded character should ever appear in an ARK in its decoded form.

2.8. Naming Considerations

The ARK has different goals from the URI, so it has different character set requirements. Because linguistic constructs imperil persistence, for ARKs non-ASCII character support is unimportant. ARKs and URIs share goals of transcribability and transportability within web documents, so characters are required to be visible, non-conflicting with HTML/XML syntax, and not subject to tampering during transmission across common transport gateways. Add the goal of making an undelimited ARK recognizable in running prose, as in ark:/12025/=@_22*\$, and certain punctuation characters (e.g., comma,

period) end up being excluded from the ARK lest the end of a phrase or sentence be mistaken for part of the ARK.

A valuable technique for provision of persistent objects is to try to arrange for the complete identifier to appear on, with, or near its retrieved object. An object encountered at a moment in time when its discovery context has long since disappeared could then easily be traced back to its metadata, to alternate versions, to updates, etc. This has seen reasonable success, for example, in book publishing and software distribution.

If persistence is the goal, a deliberate local strategy for systematic name assignment is crucial. Names must be chosen with great care. Poorly chosen and managed names will devastate any persistence strategy, and they do not discriminate based on naming scheme. Whether a mistakenly re-assigned identifier is a URN, DOI, PURL, URL, or ARK, the damage - failed access and confusion - is not mitigated more in one scheme than in another. Conversely, in-house efforts to manage names responsibly will go much further towards safeguarding persistence than any choice of naming scheme or name resolution technology.

Hostnames appearing in any identifier meant to be persistent must be chosen with extra care. The tendency in hostname selection has traditionally been to choose a token with recognizable attributes, such as a corporate brand, but that tendency wreaks havoc with persistence that is supposed to outlive brands, corporations, subject classifications, and natural language semantics (e.g., what did the three letters "gay" mean in 1958, 1978, and 1998?). Today's recognized and correct attributes are tomorrow's stale or incorrect attributes. In making hostnames (any names, actually) long-term persistent, it helps to eliminate recognizable attributes to the extent possible. This affects selection of any name based on URLs, including PURLs and the explicitly disposable NMAHs. There is no excuse for a provider that manages its internal names impeccably not to exercise the same care in choosing what could be an exceptionally durable hostname, especially if it would form the prefix for all the provider's URL-based external names. Registering an opaque hostname in the ".org" or ".net" domain would not be a bad start.

Dubious persistence speculation does not make selecting naming strategies any easier. For example, despite rumors to the contrary, there are really no obvious reasons why the organizations registering DNS names, URN Namespaces, and DOI publisher IDs should have among them one that is intrinsically more fallible than the next. Moreover, it is a misconception that the demise of DNS and of HTTP need adversely affect the persistence of URLs. At such a time, certainly URLs from the present day might not then be actionable by our present-day mechanisms, but resolution systems for future non-actionable URLs are no harder to imagine than resolution systems for present-day non-actionable URNs and DOIs. There is no more stable a

namespace than one that is dead and frozen, and that would then characterize the space of names bearing the "http://" prefix. It is useful to remember that just because hostnames have been carelessly

chosen in their brief history does not mean that they are unsuitable in NMAHs (and URLs) intended for use in situations demanding the highest level of persistence available in the Internet environment. A well-planned name assignment strategy is everything.

3. Assigners of ARKs

A Name Assigning Authority (NAA) is an organization that creates (or delegates creation of) long-term associations between identifiers and information objects. Examples of NAAs include national libraries, national archives, and publishers. An NAA may arrange with an external organization for identifier assignment. The US Library of Congress, for example, allows OCLC (the Online Computer Library Center, a major world cataloger of books) to create associations between Library of Congress call numbers (LCCNs) and the books that OCLC processes. A cataloging record is generated that testifies to each association, and the identifier is included by the publisher, for example, in the front matter of a book.

An NAA does not so much create an identifier as create an association. The NAA first draws an unused identifier string from its namespace, which is the set of all identifiers under its control. It then records the assignment of the identifier to an information object having sundry witnessed characteristics, such as a particular author and modification date. A namespace is usually reserved for an NAA by agreement with recognized community organizations (such as IANA and ISO) that all names containing a particular string be under its control. In the ARK an NAA is represented by the Name Assigning Authority Number (NAAN).

The ARK namespace reserved for an NAA is the set of names bearing its particular NAAN. For example, all strings beginning with "ark:/12025/" are under control of the NAA registered under 12025, which might be the National Library of Finland. Because each NAA has a different NAAN, names from one namespace cannot conflict with those from another. Each NAA is free to assign names from its namespace (or delegate assignment) according to its own policies. These policies must be documented in a manner similar to the declarations required for URN Namespace registration [[URNID](#)].

For now, registration of ARK NAAs is in a bootstrapping phase. To register, please read about the mapping authority discovery file in the next section and send email to ark@cdlib.org.

4. Finding a Name Mapping Authority

In order to derive an actionable identifier (these days, a URL) from an ARK, a hostport (hostname or hostname plus port combination) for a

working Name Mapping Authority (NMA) must be found. An NMA is a service that is able to respond to the three basic ARK service requests. Relying on registration and client-side discovery, NMAs

make known which NAAs' identifiers they are willing to service.

Upon encountering an ARK, a user (or client software) looks inside it for the optional NMAH part (the hostport of the NMA's ARK service). If it contains an NMAH that is working, this NMAH discovery step may be skipped; the NMAH effectively uses the beginning of an ARK to cache the results of a prior mapping authority discovery process. If a new NMAH needs to be found, the client looks inside the ARK again for the NAAN (Name Assigning Authority Number). Querying a global database, it then uses the NAAN to look up all current NMAHs that service ARKs issued by the identified NAA. The global database is key, and two specific methods for querying it are given in this section.

In the interests of long-term persistence, however, ARK mechanisms are first defined in high-level, protocol-independent terms so that mechanisms may evolve and be replaced over time without compromising fundamental service objectives. Either or both specific methods given here may eventually be supplanted by better methods since, by design, the ARK scheme does not depend on a particular method, but only on having some method to locate an active NMAH.

At the time of issuance, at least one NMAH for an ARK should be prepared to service it. That NMA may or may not be administered by the Name Assigning Authority (NAA) that created it. Consider the following hypothetical example of providing long-term access to a cancer research journal. The publisher wishes to turn a profit and the National Library of Medicine wishes to preserve the scholarly record. An agreement might be struck whereby the publisher would act as the NAA and the national library would archive the journal issue when it appears, but without providing direct access for the first six months. During the first six months of peak commercial viability, the publisher would retain exclusive delivery rights and would charge access fees. Again, by agreement, both the library and the publisher would act as NMAs, but during that initial period the library would redirect requests for issues less than six months old to the publisher. At the end of the waiting period, the library would then begin servicing requests for issues older than six months by tapping directly into its own archives. Meanwhile, the publisher might routinely redirect incoming requests for older issues to the library. Long-term access is thereby preserved, and so is the commercial incentive to publish content.

Although it will be common for an NAA also to run an NMA service, it is never a requirement. Over time NAAs and NMAs will come and go. One NMA will succeed another, and there might be many NMAs serving the same ARKs simultaneously (e.g., as mirrors or as competitors). There might also be asymmetric but coordinated NMAs as in the

library-publisher example above.

4.1. Looking Up NMAHs in a Globally Accessible File

This subsection describes a way to look up NMAHs using a simple name authority table represented as a plain text file. For efficient access the file may be stored in a local filesystem, but it needs to be reloaded periodically to incorporate updates. It is not expected that the size of the file or frequency of update should impose an undue maintenance or searching burden any time soon, for even primitive linear search of a file with ten-thousand NAAs is a subsecond operation on modern server machines. The proposed file strategy is similar to the /etc/hosts file strategy that supported Internet host address lookup for a period of years before the advent of DNS.

The name authority table file is updated on an ongoing basis and is available for copying over the internet from the California Digital Library at <http://www.cdlib.org/inside/diglib/ark/natab> and from a number of mirror sites. The file contains comment lines (lines that begin with `#') explaining the format and giving the file's modification time, reloading address, and NAA registration instructions. There is even a Perl script that processes the file embedded in the file's comments. As of February 2005, currently registered Name Assigning Authorities are:

12025	National Library of Medicine
12026	Library of Congress
12027	National Agriculture Library
13030	California Digital Library
13038	World Intellectual Property Organization
20775	University of California San Diego
29114	University of California San Francisco
28722	University of California Berkeley
15230	Rutgers University Libraries
13960	Internet Archive
64269	Digital Curation Centre
62624	New York University Libraries
67531	University of North Texas Libraries
27927	Ithaka Electronic-Archiving Initiative

A snapshot of the name authority table file appears in an appendix.

4.2. Looking up NMAHs Distributed via DNS

This subsection introduces a method for looking up NMAHs that is based on the method for discovering URN resolvers described in [NAPTR]. It relies on querying the DNS system already installed in the background infrastructure of most networked computers. A query is submitted to DNS asking for a list of resolvers that match a given

NAAN. DNS distributes the query to the particular DNS servers that can best provide the answer, unless the answer can be found more quickly in a local DNS cache as a side-effect of a recent query.

Responses come back inside Name Authority Pointer (NAPTR) records. The normal result is one or more candidate NMAHs.

In its full generality the [NAPTR] algorithm ambitiously accommodates a complex set of preferences, orderings, protocols, mapping services, regular expression rewriting rules, and DNS record types. This subsection proposes a drastic simplification of it for the special case of ARK mapping authority discovery. The simplified algorithm is called Maptr. It uses only one DNS record type (NAPTR) and restricts most of its field values to constants. The following hypothetical excerpt from a DNS data file for the NAAN known as 12026 shows three example NAPTR records ready to use with the Maptr algorithm.

```
12026.ark.arpa.  
;; US Library of Congress  
;;      order pref flags service regexp replacement  
IN NAPTR 0      0  "h"  "ark"  "USLC"  lhc.nlm.nih.gov:8080  
IN NAPTR 0      0  "h"  "ark"  "USLC"  foobar.zaf.org  
IN NAPTR 0      0  "h"  "ark"  "USLC"  sneezy.dopey.com
```

All the fields are held constant for Maptr except for the "flags", "regexp", and "replacement" fields. The "service" field contains the constant value "ark" so that NAPTR records participating in the Maptr algorithm will not be confused with other NAPTR records. The "order" and "pref" fields are held to 0 (zero) and otherwise ignored for now; the algorithm may evolve to use these fields for ranking decisions when usage patterns and local administrative needs are better understood.

When a Maptr query returns a record with a flags field of "h" (for hostport, a Maptr extension to the NAPTR flags), the replacement field contains the NMAH (hostport) of an ARK service provider. When a query returns a record with a flags field of "" (the empty string), the client needs to submit a new query containing the domain name found in the replacement field. This second sort of record exploits the distributed nature of DNS by redirecting the query to another domain name. It looks like this.

```
12345.ark.arpa.  
;; Digital Library Consortium  
;;      order pref flags service regexp replacement  
IN NAPTR 0      0  ""   "ark"  ""      dlc.spct.org.
```

Here is the Maptr algorithm for ARK mapping authority discovery. In it replace <NAAN> with the NAAN from the ARK for which an NMAH is sought.

(1) Initialize the DNS query: type=NAPTR,

query=<NAAN>.ark.arpa.

(2) Submit the query to DNS and retrieve (NAPTR) records,

discarding any record that does not have "ark" for the service field.

(3) All remaining records with a flags field of "h" contain candidate NMAHs in their replacement fields. Set them aside, if any.

(4) Any record with an empty flags field ("") has a replacement field containing a new domain name to which a subsequent query should be redirected. For each such record, set query=<replacement> then go to step (2). When all such records have been recursively exhausted, go to step (5).

(5) All redirected queries have been resolved and a set of candidate NMAHs has been accumulated from steps (3). If there are zero NMAHs, exit - no mapping authority was found. If there is one or more NMAH, choose one using any criteria you wish, then exit.

A Perl script that implements this algorithm is included here.

```
#!/depot/bin/perl

use Net::DNS;                # include simple DNS package
my $qtype = "NAPTR";         # initialize query type
my $naa = shift;             # get NAAN script argument
my $mad = new Net::DNS::Resolver; # mapping authority discovery

&maptr("$naa.ark.arpa");      # call maptr - that's it

sub maptr {                  # recursive maptr algorithm
    my $dname = shift;       # domain name as argument
    my ($rr, $order, $pref, $flags, $service, $regexp,
        $replacement);
    my $query = $mad->query($dname, $qtype);
    return      # non-productive query
        if (! $query || ! $query->answer);
    foreach $rr ($query->answer) {
        next      # skip records of wrong type
            if ($rr->type ne $qtype);
        ($order, $pref, $flags, $service, $regexp,
            $replacement) = split(/\s/, $rr->rdatastr);
        if ($flags eq "") {
            &maptr($replacement);    # recurse
        } elsif ($flags eq "h") {
            print "$replacement\n";  # candidate NMAH
        }
    }
}
```


The global database thus distributed via DNS and the Maptr algorithm can easily be seen to mirror the contents of the Name Authority Table file described in the previous section.

5. Generic ARK Service Definition

An ARK request's output is delivered information; examples include the object itself, a policy declaration (e.g., a promise of support), a descriptive metadata record, or an error message. The experience of object delivery is expected to be an evolving mix of information that reflects changing service expectations and technology requirements; contemporary examples include such things as an object summary and component links formatted for human consumption. ARK services must be couched in high-level, protocol-independent terms if persistence is to outlive today's networking infrastructural assumptions. The high-level ARK service definitions listed below are followed in the next section by a concrete method (one of many possible methods) for delivering these services with today's technology.

5.1. Generic ARK Access Service (access, location)

Returns (a copy of) the object or a redirect to the same, although a sensible object proxy may be substituted. Examples of sensible substitutes include,

- a table of contents instead of a large complex document,
- a home page instead of an entire web site hierarchy,
- a rights clearance challenge before accessing protected data,
- directions for access to an offline object (e.g., a book),
- a description of an intangible object (a disease, an event), or
- an applet acting as "player" for a large multimedia object.

May also return a discriminated list of alternate object locators. If access is denied, returns an explanation of the object's current (perhaps permanent) inaccessibility.

5.2. Generic Policy Service (permanence, naming, etc.)

Returns declarations of policy and support commitments for given ARKs. Declarations are returned in either a structured metadata format or a human readable text format; sometimes one format may serve both purposes. Policy subareas may be addressed in separate requests, but the following areas should be covered: object permanence, object naming, object fragment addressing, and operational service support.

The permanence declaration for an object is a rating defined with respect to an identified permanence provider (guarantor), which will

be the NMA. It may include the following aspects.

- (a) "object availability" - whether and how access to the object is supported (e.g., online 24x7, or offline only),
- (b) "identifier validity" - under what conditions the identifier will be or has been re-assigned,
- (c) "content invariance" - under what conditions the content of the object is subject to change, and
- (d) "change history" - access to corrections, migrations, and revisions, whether through links to the changed objects themselves or through a document summarizing the change history

One approach to a permanence rating framework, conceived independently from ARKs, is given in [\[NLMPPerm\]](#). Under ongoing development and limited deployment at the US National Library of Medicine, it identifies the following "permanence levels":

Not Guaranteed: No commitment has been made to retain this resource. It could become unavailable at any time. Its identifier could be changed.

Permanent: Dynamic Content: A commitment has been made to keep this resource permanently available. Its identifier will always provide access to the resource. Its content could be revised or replaced.

Permanent: Stable Content: A commitment has been made to keep this resource permanently available. Its identifier will always provide access to the resource. Its content is subject only to minor corrections or additions.

Permanent: Unchanging Content: A commitment has been made to keep this resource permanently available. Its identifier will always provide access to the resource. Its content will not change.

Naming policy for an object includes an historical description of the NAA's (and its successor NAA's) policies regarding differentiation of objects. Since it is the NMA who responds to requests for policy statements, it is useful for the NMA to be able to produce or summarize these historical NAA documents. Naming policy may include the following aspects.

- (i) "similarity" - (or "unity") the limit, defined by the NAA, to the level of dissimilarity beyond which two similar objects warrant separate identifiers but before which they share one single identifier, and

(ii) "granularity" - the limit, defined by the NAA, to the level of object subdivision beyond which sub-objects do not warrant

separately assigned identifiers but before which sub-objects are assigned separate identifiers.

Subnaming policy for an object describes the qualifiers that the NMA, in fulfilling its ongoing and evolving service obligations, allows as extensions to an NAA-assigned ARK. To the conceptual object that the NAA named with an ARK, the NMA may add component access points and derivatives (e.g., format migrations in aid of preservation) in order to provide both basic and value-added services.

Addressing policy for an object includes a description of how, during access, object components (e.g., paragraphs, sections) or views (e.g., image conversions) may or may not be "addressed", in other words, how the NMA permits arguments or parameters to modify the object delivered as the result of an ARK request. If supported, these sorts of operations would provide things like byte-ranged fragment delivery and open-ended format conversions, or any set of possible transformations that would be too numerous to list or to identify with separately assigned ARKs.

Operational service support policy includes a description of general operational aspects of the NMA service, such as after-hours staffing and trouble reporting procedures.

5.3. Generic Description Service

Returns a description of the object. Descriptions are returned in either a structured metadata format or a human readable text format; sometimes one format may serve both purposes. A description must at a minimum answer the who, what, when, and where questions concerning an expression of the object. Standalone descriptions should be accompanied by the modification date and source of the description itself. May also return discriminated lists of ARKs that are related to the given ARK.

6. Overview of the Tiny HTTP URL Mapping Protocol (THUMP)

The Tiny HTTP URL Mapping Protocol (THUMP) is a way of taking a key (a kind of identifier) and asking such questions as, what information does this identify and how permanent is it? [\[THUMP\]](#) is in fact one specific method under development for delivering ARK services. The protocol runs over HTTP to exploit the web browser's current pre-eminence as user interface to the Internet. THUMP is designed so that a person can enter ARK requests directly into the location field of current browser interfaces. Because it runs over HTTP, THUMP can be simulated and tested within keyboard-based [\[TELNET\]](#) sessions.

The asker (a person or client program) starts with an identifier, such as an ARK or a URL. The identifier reveals to the asker (or

allows the asker to infer) the Internet host name and port number of a server system that responds to questions. Here, this is just the

NMAH that is obtained by inspection and possibly lookup based on the ARK's NAAN. The asker then sets up an HTTP session with the server system, sends a question via a THUMP request (contained within an HTTP request), receives an answer via a THUMP response (contained within an HTTP response), and closes the session. That concludes the connected portion of the protocol.

A THUMP request is a string of characters beginning with a '?' (question mark) that is appended to the identifier string. The resulting string is sent as an argument to HTTP's GET command. Request strings too long for GET may be sent using HTTP's POST command. The three most common requests correspond to three degenerate special cases that keep the user's learning and typing burden low. First, a simple key with no request at all is the same as an ordinary access request. Thus a plain ARK entered into a browser's location field behaves much like a plain URL, and returns access to the primary identified object, for instance, an HTML document.

The second special case is a minimal ARK description request string consisting of just "?". For example, entering the string,

ark.nlm.nih.gov/12025/psbbantu?

into the browser's location field directly precipitates a request for a metadata record describing the object identified by ark:/12025/psbbantu. The browser, unaware of THUMP, prepares and sends an HTTP GET request in the same manner as for a URL. THUMP is designed so that the response (indicated by the returned HTTP content type) is normally displayed, whether the output is structured for machine processing (text/plain) or formatted for human consumption (text/html).

In the following example THUMP session, each line has been annotated to include a line number and whether it was the client or server that sent it. Without going into much depth, the session has four pieces separated from each other by blank lines: the client's piece (lines 1-3), the server's HTTP/THUMP response headers (4-7), and the body of the server's response (8-17). The first and last lines (1 and 17) correspond to the client's steps to start the TCP session and the server's steps to end it, respectively.


```
1  C: [opens session]
   C: GET http://ark.nlm.nih.gov/ark:/12025/psbbantu? HTTP/1.1
   C:
   S: HTTP/1.1 200 OK
5  S: Content-Type: text/plain
   S: THUMP-Status: 0.1 200 OK
   S:
   S: |set: NLM | 12025/psbbantu? | 20030731
   S:      | http://ark.nlm.nih.gov/ark:/12025/psbbantu?
10 S: here: 1 | 1 | 1
   S:
   S: erc:
   S: who:      Lederberg, Joshua
   S: what:     Studies of Human Families for Genetic Linkage
15 S: when:     1974
   S: where:    http://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/BB/A/N/T/U/\_/bbantu.pdf
   S: [closes session]
```

The first two server response lines (4-5) above are typical of HTTP. The next line (6) is peculiar to THUMP, and indicates the THUMP version and a normal return status. The balance of the response consists of a record set header (lines 8-10) and a single metadata record (12-16) that comprises the ARK description service response. The record set header identifies (8-9) who created the set, what its title is, when it was created, and where an automated process can access the set; it ends in a line (10) whose respective sub-elements indicate that here in this communication the recipient can expect to find 1 record, starting at the record numbered 1, from a set consisting of a total of 1 record (i.e., here is the entire set, consisting of exactly one record).

The returned record (12-16) is in the format of an Electronic Resource Citation [ERC], which is discussed in more detail in the next section. For now, note that it contains four elements that answer the top priority questions regarding an expression of the object: who played a major role in expressing it, what the expression was called, when it was created, and where the expression may be found. This quartet of elements comes up again and again in ERCs.

The third degenerate special case of an ARK request (and no other cases will be described in this document) is the string "??", corresponding to a minimal permanence policy request. It can be seen in use appended to an ARK (on line 2) in the example session that follows.


```
1  C: [opens session]
   C: GET http://ark.nlm.nih.gov/ark:/12025/psbbantu?? HTTP/1.1
   C:
   S: HTTP/1.1 200 OK
5  S: Content-Type: text/plain
   S: THUMP-Status: 0.1 200 OK
   S:
   S: |set: NLM | 12025/psbbantu?? | 20030731
   S:      | http://ark.nlm.nih.gov/ark:/12025/psbbantu??
10 S: here: 1 | 1 | 1
   S:
   S: erc:
   S: who:      Lederberg, Joshua
   S: what:     Studies of Human Families for Genetic Linkage
15 S: when:     1974
   S: where:    http://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/BB/A/N/T/U/\_/bbantu.pdf
   S: erc-support:
   S: who:      USNLM
   S: what:     Permanent, Unchanging Content
20 S: when:     20010421
   S: where:    http://ark.nlm.nih.gov/yy22948
   S: [closes session]
```

Again, a single metadata record (lines 12-21) is returned, but it consists of two segments. The first segment (12-16) gives the same basic citation information as in the previous example. It is returned in order to establish context for the persistence declaration in the second segment (17-21).

Each segment in an ERC tells a different story relating to the object, so although the same four questions (elements) appear in each, the answers depend on the segment's story type. While the first segment tells the story of an expression of the object, the second segment tells the story of the support commitment made to it: who made the commitment, what the nature of the commitment was, when it was made, and where a fuller explanation of the commitment may be found.

7. Overview of Electronic Resource Citations (ERCs)

An Electronic Resource Citation (or ERC, pronounced e-r-c) [[ERC](#)] is a simple, compact, and printable record designed to hold data associated with an information resource. By design, the ERC is a metadata format that balances the needs for expressive power, very simple machine processing, and direct human manipulation.

A founding principle of the ERC is that direct human contact with metadata will be a necessary and sufficient condition for the near

term rapid development of metadata standards, systems, and services. Thus the machine-processable ERC format must only minimally strain people's ability to read, understand, change, and transmit ERCs

without their relying on intermediation with specialized software tools. The basic ERC needs to be succinct, transparent, and trivially parseable by software.

In the current Internet, it is natural seriously to consider using XML as an exchange format because of predictions that it will obviate many ad hoc formats and programs, and unify much of the world's information under one reliable data structuring discipline that is easy to generate, verify, parse, and render. It appears, however, that XML is still only catching on after years of standards work and implementation experience. The reasons for it are unclear, but for now very simple XML interpretation is still out of reach. Another important caution is that XML structures are hard on the eyeballs, taking up an amount of display (and page) space that significantly exceeds that of traditional formats. Until these conflicts with ERC principle are resolved, XML is not a first choice for representing ERCs. Borrowing instead from the data structuring format that underlies the successful spread of email and web services, the first ERC format uses [\[ANVL\]](#), which is based on email and HTTP headers [\[RFC822\]](#). There is a naturalness to ANVL's label-colon-value format (seen in the previous section) that barely needs explanation to a person beginning to enter ERC metadata.

Besides simplicity of ERC system implementation and data entry mechanics, ERC semantics (what the record and its constituent parts mean) must also be easy to explain. ERC semantics are based on a reformulation and extension of the Dublin Core [\[DCORE\]](#) hypothesis, which suggests that the fifteen Dublin Core metadata elements have a key role to play in cross-domain resource description. The ERC design recognizes that the Dublin Core's primary contribution is the international, interdisciplinary consensus that identified fifteen semantic buckets (element categories), regardless of how they are labeled. The ERC then adds a definition for a record and some minimal compliance rules. In pursuing the limits of simplicity, the ERC design combines and relabels some Dublin Core buckets to isolate a tiny kernel (subset) of four elements for basic cross-domain resource description.

For the cross-domain kernel, the ERC uses the four basic elements - who, what, when, and where - to pretend that every object in the universe can have a uniform minimal description. Each has a name or other identifier, a location, some responsible person or party, and a date. It doesn't matter what type of object it is, or whether one plans to read it, interact with it, smoke it, wear it, or navigate it. Of course, this approach is flawed because uniformity of description for some object types requires more semantic contortion and sacrifice than for others. That is why at the beginning of this document, the ARK was said to be suited to objects that accommodate

reasonably regular electronic description.

While insisting on uniformity at the most basic level provides

powerful cross-domain leverage, the semantic sacrifice is great for many applications. So the ERC also permits a semantically rich and nuanced description to co-exist in a record along with a basic description. In that way both sophisticated and naive recipients of the record can extract the level of meaning from it that best suits their needs and abilities. Key to unlocking the richer description is a controlled vocabulary of ERC record types (not explained in this document) that permit knowledgeable recipients to apply defined sets of additional assumptions to the record.

7.1. ERC Syntax

An ERC record is a sequence of metadata elements ending in a blank line. An element consists of a label, a colon, and an optional value. Here is an example of a record with five elements.

```
erc:
who: Gibbon, Edward
what: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire
when: 1781
where: http://www.ccel.org/g/gibbon/decline/
```

A long value may be folded (continued) onto the next line by inserting a newline and indenting the next line. A value can be thus folded across multiple lines. Here are two example elements, each folded across four lines.

```
who/created: University of California, San Francisco, AIDS
              Program at San Francisco General Hospital | University
              of California, San Francisco, Center for AIDS Prevention
              Studies
what/Topic:   Heart Attack | Heart Failure
              | Heart
              Diseases
```

An element value folded across several lines is treated as if the lines were joined together on one long line. For example, the second element from the previous example is considered equivalent to

```
what/Topic: Heart Attack | Heart Failure | Heart Diseases
```

An element value may contain multiple values, each one separated from the next by a `|' (pipe) character. The element from the previous example contains three values.

For annotation purposes, any line beginning with a `#' (hash) character is treated as if it were not present; this is a "comment" line (a feature not available in email or HTTP headers). For

example, the following element is spread across four lines and contains two values:

```
what/Topic:
    Heart Attack
#   | Heart Failure  -- hold off until next review cycle
    | Heart Diseases
```

7.2. ERC Stories

An ERC record is organized into one or more distinct segments, where each segment tells a story about a different aspect of the information resource. A segment boundary occurs whenever a segment label (an element beginning with "erc") is encountered. The basic label "erc:" introduces the story of an object's expression (e.g., its publication, installation, or performance). The label "erc-about:" introduces the story of an object's content (what it is about) and "erc-support:" introduces the story of a support commitment made to it. A story segment that concerns the ERC itself is introduced by the label "erc-from:". It is an important segment that tells the story of the ERC's provenance. Elements beginning with "erc" are reserved for segment labels and their associated story types. From an earlier example, here is an ERC with two segments.

```
erc:
who:   Lederberg, Joshua
what:  Studies of Human Families for Genetic Linkage
when:  1974
where: http://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/BB/A/N/T/U/\_/bbantu.pdf
erc-support:
who:   NIH/NLM/LHNCBC
what:  Permanent, Unchanging Content
# Note to ops staff:  date needs verification.
when:  2001 04 21
where: http://ark.nlm.nih.gov/yy22948
```

Segment stories are told according to journalistic tradition. While any number of pertinent elements may appear in a segment, priority is placed on answering the questions who, what, when, and where at the beginning of each segment so that readers can make the most important selection or rejection decisions as soon as possible. To make things simple, the listed ordering of the questions is maintained in each segment (as it happens most people who have been exposed to this story telling technique are already familiar with the above ordering).

The four questions are answered by using corresponding element labels. The four element labels can be re-used in each story segment, but their meaning changes depending on the segment (the story type) in which they appear. In the example above, "who" is

first used to name a document's author and subsequently used to name the permanence guarantor (provider). Similarly, "when" first lists the date of object creation and in the next segment lists the date of

a commitment decision. Four labels appearing across three segments effectively map to twelve semantically distinct elements. Distinct element meanings are mapped to Dublin Core elements in a later section.

7.3. The ERC Anchoring Story

Each ERC contains an anchoring story. It is usually the first segment labeled "erc:" and it concerns an "anchoring" expression of the object. An "anchoring" expression is the one that a provider deemed the most suitable basic referent given the audience and application for which it produced the ERC. If it sounds like the provider has great latitude in choosing its anchoring expression, it is because it does. A typical anchoring story in an ERC for a born-digital document would be the story of the document's release on a web site; such a document would then be the anchoring expression.

An anchoring story need not be the central descriptive goal of an ERC record. For example, a museum provider may create an ERC for a digitized photograph of a painting but choose to anchor it in the story of the original painting instead of the story of the electronic likeness; although the ERC may through other segments prove to be centrally concerned with describing the electronic likeness, the provider may have chosen this particular anchoring story in order to make the ERC visible in a way that is most natural to patrons (who would find the Mona Lisa under da Vinci sooner than they would find it under the name of the person who snapped the photograph or scanned the image). In another example, a provider that creates an ERC for a dramatic play as an abstract work has the task of describing a piece of intangible intellectual property. To anchor this abstract object in the concrete world, if only through a derivative expression, it makes sense for the provider to choose a suitable printed edition of the play as the anchoring object expression (to describe in the anchoring story) of the ERC.

The anchoring story has special rules designed to keep ERC processing simple and predictable. Each of the four basic elements (who, what, when, and where) must be present, unless a best effort to supply it fails. In the event of failure, the element still appears but a special value (described later) is used to explain the missing value. While the requirement that each of the four elements be present only applies to the anchoring story segment, as usual these elements appear at the beginning of the segment and may only be used in the prescribed order. A minimal ERC would normally consist of just an anchoring story and the element quartet, as illustrated in the next example.


```

erc:
who:  National Research Council
what: The Digital Dilemma
when: 2000
where: http://books.nap.edu/html/digital%5Fdilemma

```

A minimal ERC can be abbreviated so that it resembles a traditional compact bibliographic citation that is nonetheless completely machine processable. The required elements and ordering makes it possible to eliminate the element labels, as shown here.

```

erc: National Research Council | The Digital Dilemma | 2000
    | http://books.nap.edu/html/digital%5Fdilemma

```

7.4. ERC Elements

As mentioned, the four basic ERC elements (who, what, when, and where) take on different specific meanings depending on the story segment in which they are used. By appearing in each segment, albeit in different guises, the four elements serve as a valuable mnemonic device - a kind of checklist - for constructing minimal story segments from scratch. Again, it is only in the anchoring segment that all four elements are mandatory.

Here are some mappings between ERC elements and Dublin Core [[DCORE](#)] elements.

Segment	ERC Element	Equivalent Dublin Core Element
-----	-----	-----
erc	who	Creator/Contributor/Publisher
erc	what	Title
erc	when	Date
erc	where	Identifier
erc-about	who	<none>
erc-about	what	Subject
erc-about	when	Coverage (temporal)
erc-about	where	Coverage (spatial)

The basic element labels may also be qualified to add nuances to the semantic categories that they identify. Elements are qualified by appending a '/' (slash) and a qualifier term. Often qualifier terms appear as the past tense form of a verb because it makes re-using qualifiers among elements easier.

```

who/published: ...
when/published: ...
where/published: ...

```

Using past tense verbs for qualifiers also reminds providers and recipients that element values contain transient assertions that may

have been true once, but that tend to become less true over time. Recipients that don't understand the meaning of a qualifier can fall back onto the semantic category (bucket) designated by the unqualified element label. Inevitably recipients (people and software) will have diverse abilities in understanding elements and qualifiers.

Any number of other elements and qualifiers may be used in conjunction with the quartet of basic segment questions. The only semantic requirement is that they pertain to the segment's story. Also, it is only the four basic elements that change meaning depending on their segment context. All other elements have meaning independent of the segment in which they appear. If an element label stripped of its qualifier is still not recognized by the recipient, a second fall back position is to ignore it and rely on the four basic elements.

Elements may be either Canonical, Provisional, or Local. Canonical elements are officially recognized via a registry as part of the metadata vernacular. All elements, qualifiers, and segment labels used in this document up until now belong to that vernacular. Provisional elements are also officially recognized via the registry, but have only been proposed for inclusion in the vernacular. To be promoted to the vernacular, a provisional element passes through a vetting process during which its documentation must be in order and its community acceptance demonstrated. Local elements are any elements not officially recognized in the registry. The registry [[DERC](#)] is a work in progress.

Local elements can be immediately distinguishable from Canonical or Provisional elements because all terms that begin with an upper case letter are reserved for spontaneous local use. No term beginning with an upper case letter will ever be assigned Canonical or Provisional status, so it should be safe to use such terms for local purposes. Any recipient of external ERCs containing such terms will understand them to be part of the originating provider's local metadata dialect. Here's an example ERC with three segments, one local element, and two local qualifiers. The segment boundaries have been emphasized by comment lines (which, as before, are ignored by processors).


```

erc:
who: Bullock, TH | Achimowicz, JZ | Duckrow, RB
    | Spencer, SS | Iragui-Madoz, VJ
what: Bicoherence of intracranial EEG in sleep,
      wakefulness and seizures
when: 1997 12 00
where: %{documents/disk0/00/00/01/22/index.html %}
in: EEG Clin Neurophysiol | 1997 12 00 | v103, i6, p661-678
IDcode: cog000000122
# ---- new segment ----
erc-about:
what/Subcategory: Bispectrum | Nonlinearity | Epilepsy
    | Cooperativity | Subdural | Hippocampus | Higher moment
# ---- new segment ----
erc-from:
who: NIH/NLM/NCBI
what: pm9546494
when/Reviewed: 1998 04 18 021600
where: http://ark.nlm.nih.gov/12025/pm9546494?

```

The local element "IDcode" immediately precedes the "erc-about" segment, which itself contains an element with the local qualifier "Subcategory". The second to last element also carries the local qualifier "Reviewed". Finally, what might be a provisional element "in" appears near the end of the first segment. It might have been proposed as a way to complete a citation for an object originally appearing inside another object (such as an article appearing in a journal or an encyclopedia).

7.5. ERC Element Values

ERC element values tend to be straightforward strings. If the provider intends something special for an element, it will so indicate with markers at the beginning of its value string. The markers are designed to be uncommon enough that they would not likely occur in normal data except by deliberate intent. Markers can only occur near the beginning of a string, and once any octet of non-marker data has been encountered, no further marker processing is done for the element value. In the absence of markers the string is considered pure data; this has been the case with all the examples seen thus far. The fullest form of an element value with all three optional markers in place looks like this.

```
VALUE = [markup_flags] (:ccode) , DATA
```

In processing, the first non-whitespace character of an ERC element value is examined. An initial '[' is reserved to introduce a

bracketed set of markup flags (not described in this document) that ends with `]`. If ERC data is machine-generated, each value string may be preceded by "[" to prevent any of its data from being

mistaken for markup flags. Once past the optional markup, the remaining value may optionally begin with a controlled code. A controlled code always has the form "(:ccode)", for example,

```
who: (:unkn) Anonymous
what: (:791) Bee Stings
```

Any string after such a code is taken to be an uncontrolled (e.g., natural language) equivalent. The code "unkn" indicates a conventional explanation for a missing value (stating that the value is unknown). The remainder of the string makes an equivalent statement in a form that the provider deemed most suitable to its (probably human) audience. The code "791" could be a fixed numeric topic identifier within an unspecified topic vocabulary. Any code may be ignored by those that do not understand it.

There are several codes to explain different ways in which a required element's value may go missing.

```
(:unac) temporarily inaccessible
(:unal) unallowed, suppressed intentionally
(:unap) not applicable, makes no sense
(:unas) value unassigned (e.g., Untitled)
(:unav) value unavailable indefinitely
(:unkn) unknown (e.g., Anonymous, Inconnue)
(:etal) too numerous to list (I<et alia>).
(:none) never had a value, never will
(:null) explicitly empty
(:tba) to be assigned or announced later
```

Once past an optional controlled code, the remaining string value is subjected to one final test. If the first next non-whitespace character is a `, ' (comma), it indicates that the string value is "sort-friendly". This means that the value is (a) laid out with an inverted word order useful for sorting items having comparably laid out element values (items might be the containing ERC records) and (b) that the value may contain other commas that indicate inversion points should it become necessary to recover the value in natural word order. Typically, this feature is used to express Western-style personal names in family-name-given-name order. It can also be used wherever natural word order might make sorting tricky, such as when data contains titles or corporate names. Here are some example elements.


```

who:    ,   van Gogh, Vincent
who:,,Howell, III, PhD, 1922-1987, Thurston
who:,, Acme Rocket Factory, Inc., The
who:,, Mao Tse Tung
who:,, McCartney, Paul, Sir,
what:,, Health and Human Services, United States Government
      Department of, The,

```

There are rules to use in recovering a copy of the value in natural word order, if desired. The above example strings have the following natural word order values, respectively.

```

Vincent van Gogh
Thurston Howell, III, PhD, 1922-1987
The Acme Rocket Factory, Inc.
Mao Tse Tung
Sir Paul McCartney
The United States Government Department of Health and Human Services

```

7.6. ERC Element Encoding and Dates

Some characters that need to appear in ERC element values might conflict with special characters used for structuring ERCs, so there needs to be a way to include them as literal characters that are protected from special interpretation. This is accomplished through an encoding mechanism that resembles the %-encoding familiar to [\[URI\]](#) handlers.

The ERC encoding mechanism also uses `%', but instead of taking two following hexadecimal digits, it takes one non-alphanumeric character or two alphabetic characters that cannot be mistaken for hex digits. It is designed not to be confused with normal web-style %-encoding. In particular it can be decoded without risking unintended decoding of normal %-encoded data (which would introduce errors). Here are the one-character (non-alphanumeric) ERC encoding extensions.

ERC	Purpose
----	-----
%!	decodes to the element separator ` '
%%	decodes to a percent sign `%'
%,	decodes to a comma `,'
%_	a non-character used as syntax shim
%{	a non-character that begins an expansion block
%}	a non-character that ends an expansion block

One particularly useful construct in ERC element values is the pair of special encoding markers ("%{" and "%}") that indicates a "expansion" block. Whatever string of characters they enclose will

be treated as if none of the contained whitespace (SPACES, TABs, Newlines) were present. This comes in handy for writing long, multi-

part URLs in a readable way. For example, the value in

```
where: http://foo.bar.org/node%{
      ? db = foo
      & start = 1
      & end = 5
      & buf = 2
      & query = foo + bar + zaf
      %}
```

is decoded into an equivalent element, but with a correct and intact URL:

```
where:
http://foo.bar.org/node?db=foo&start=1&end=5&buf=2&query=foo+bar+zaf
```

In a parting word about ERC element values, a commonly recurring value type is a date, possibly followed by a time. ERC dates use the [TEMPER] format, taking on one of the following forms:

```
1999                (four digit year)
2000 12 29          (year, month, day)
2000 12 29 235955   (year, month, day, hour, minute, second)
```

In dates, all internal whitespace is squeezed out to achieve a normalized form suitable for lexical comparison and sorting. This means that the following dates

```
2000 12 29 235955   (recommended for readability)
2000 12 29 23 59 55
20001229 23 59 55
20001229235955      (normalized date and time)
```

are all equivalent. The first form is recommended for readability. The last form (shortest and easiest to compute with) is the normalized form. Hyphens and commas are reserved to create date ranges and lists, for example,

```
1996-2000           (a range of four years)
1952, 1957, 1969    (a list of three years)
1952, 1958-1967, 1985 (a mixed list of dates and ranges)
20001229-20001231   (a range of three days)
```

7.7. ERC Stub Records and Internal Support

The ERC design introduces the concept of a "stub" record, which is an incomplete ERC record intended to be supplemented with additional

elements before being released as a standalone ERC record. A stub ERC record has no minimum required elements. It is just a group of

elements that does not begin with "erc:" but otherwise conforms to the ERC record syntax.

ERC stubs may be useful in supporting internal procedures using the ERC syntax. Often they rely on the convenience and accuracy of automatically supplied elements, even the basic ones. To be ready for external use, however, an ERC stub must be transformed into a complete ERC record having the usual required elements. An ERC stub record can be convenient for metadata embedded in a document, where elements such as location, modification date, and size - which one would not omit from an externalized record - are omitted simply because they are much better supplied by a computation. A separate local administrative procedure, not defined for ERC's in general, would effect the promotion of stubs into complete records.

While the ERC is a general-purpose container for exchange of resource descriptions, it does not dictate how records must be internally stored, laid out, or assembled by data providers or recipients. Arbitrary internal descriptive frameworks can support ERCs simply by mapping (e.g., on demand) local records to the ERC container format and making them available for export. Therefore, to support ERCs there is no need for a data provider to convert internal data to be stored in an ERC format. On the other hand, any provider (such as one just getting started in the business of resource description) may choose to store and manipulate local data natively in the ERC format.

8. Advice to Web Clients

This section offers some advice to web client software developers. It is hard to write about because it tries to anticipate a series of events that might lead to native web browser support for ARKs.

ARKs are envisaged to appear wherever durable object references are planned. Library cataloging records, literature citations, and bibliographies are important examples. In many of these places URLs (Uniform Resource Locators) currently stand in, and URNs, DOIs, and PURLs have been proposed as alternatives.

The strings representing ARKs are also envisaged to appear in some of the places where URLs currently appear: in hypertext links (where they are not normally shown to users) and in rendered text (displayed or printed). Internet search engines, for example, tend to include both actionable and manifest links when listing each item found. A normal HTML link for which the URL is not displayed looks like this.

```
<a href = "http://foo.bar.org/index.htm"> Click Here <a>
```

The same link with an ARK instead of a URL:

` Click Here <a>`

Web browsers would in general require a small modification to recognize and convert this ARK, via mapping authority discovery, to the URL form.

```
<a href = "http://a.b.org/ark:/14697/b12345x"> Click Here <a>
```

A browser that knows how to make that conversion could also automatically detect and replace a non-working NMAH.

An NAA will typically make known the associations it creates by publishing them in catalogs, actively advertizing them, or simply leaving them on web sites for visitors (e.g., users, indexing spiders) to stumble across in browsing.

9. Security Considerations

The ARK naming scheme poses no direct risk to computers and networks. Implementors of ARK services need to be aware of security issues when querying networks and filesystems for Name Mapping Authority services, and the concomitant risks from spoofing and obtaining incorrect information. These risks are no greater for ARK mapping authority discovery than for other kinds of service discovery. For example, recipients of ARKs with a specified hostport (NMAH) should treat it like a URL and be aware that the identified ARK service may no longer be operational.

Apart from mapping authority discovery, ARK clients and servers subject themselves to all the risks that accompany normal operation of the protocols underlying mapping services (e.g., HTTP, Z39.50). As specializations of such protocols, an ARK service may limit exposure to the usual risks. Indeed, ARK services may enhance a kind of security by helping users identify long-term reliable references to information objects.

10. Authors' Addresses

John A. Kunze
California Digital Library
University of California, Office of the President
415 20th St, 4th Floor
Oakland, CA 94612-3550, USA

Fax: +1 510-893-5212
EMail: jak@ucop.edu

R. P. C. Rodgers
US National Library of Medicine
8600 Rockville Pike, Bldg. 38A
Bethesda, MD 20894, USA

Fax: +1 301-496-0673

J. Kunze

10. Authors' Addresses

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E-Mail: rodgers@nlm.nih.gov

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12. Appendix: ARK Implementations

Currently, the primary implementation activity is at the California Digital Library (CDL),

<http://ark.cdlib.org/>

housed at the University of California Office of the President, where over 200,000 ARKs have been assigned to objects that the CDL owns or controls. Some experimentation in ARKs is taking place at JSTOR, the Digital Curation Centre, WIPO and at the University of California's San Diego, San Francisco, and Berkeley campuses.

The US National Library of Medicine (NLM) also has an experimental, prototype ARK service under development. It is being made available for purposes of demonstrating various aspects of the ARK system, but is subject to temporary or permanent withdrawal (without notice) depending upon the circumstances of the small research group responsible for making it available. It is described at:

<http://ark.nlm.nih.gov/>

Comments and feedback may be addressed to rodgers@nlm.nih.gov.

13. Appendix: Current ARK Name Authority Table

This appendix contains a copy of the Name Authority Table (a file) at the time of writing. It may be loaded into a local filesystem (e.g., /etc/natab) for use in mapping NAAs (Name Assigning Authorities) to NMAHs (Name Mapping Authority Hostports). It contains Perl code that can be copied into a standalone script that processes the table (as a file). Because this is still a proposed file, none of the values in it are real.


```
#
# Name Assigning Authority / Name Mapping Authority Lookup Table
#   Last change:    2004 12 14
#   Reload from:    http://ark.nlm.nih.gov/etc/natab
#   Mirrored at:    http://www.cdlib.org/inside/diglib/ark/natab
#   To register:    mailto:ark@cdlib.org?Subject=naareg
#   Process with:   Perl script at end of this file (optional)
#
# Each NAA appears at the beginning of a line with the NAA Number
# first, a colon, and an ARK or URL to a statement of naming policy
# (see http://ark.cdlib.org for an example).
# All the NMA hostports that service an NAA are listed, one per
# line, indented, after the corresponding NAA line.
#
#   National Library of Medicine
12025: http://www.nlm.nih.gov/xxx/naapolicy.html
      ark.nlm.nih.gov USNLM
      foobar.zaf.org UCSF
      sneezy.dopey.com BIREME
#
#   Library of Congress
12026: http://www.loc.gov/xxx/naapolicy.html
      foobar.zaf.org USLC
      sneezy.dopey.com USLC
#
#   National Agriculture Library
12027: http://www.nal.gov/xxx/naapolicy.html
      foobar.zaf.gov:80 USNAL
#
#   California Digital Library
13030: http://www.cdlib.org/inside/diglib/ark/
      ark.cdlib.org CDL
#
#   World Intellectual Property Organization
13038: http://www.wipo.int/xxx/naapolicy.html
      www.wipo.int WIPO
#
#   University of California San Diego
20775: http://library.ucsd.edu/xxx/naapolicy.html
      ucsd.edu UCSD
#
#   University of California San Francisco
29114: http://library.ucsf.edu/xxx/naapolicy.html
      ucsf.edu UCSF
#
#   University of California Berkeley
28722: http://library.berkeley.edu/xxx/naapolicy.html
      berkeley.edu UCB
```


Rutgers University Libraries
15230: <http://rci.rutgers.edu/xxx/naapolicy.html>

```
rutgers.edu RUL
#
# Internet Archive
13960: http://www.archive.org/xxx/naapolicy.html
      archive.org IA
#
# Digital Curation Centre
64269: http://www.dcc.ac.uk/xxx/naapolicy.html
      dcc.ac.uk DCC
#
# New York University Libraries
62624: http://library.nyu.edu/xxx/naapolicy.html
      nyu.edu NYUL
#
# University of North Texas Libraries
67531: http://www.library.unt.edu/xxx/naapolicy.html
      unt.edu UNTL
#
# Ithaka Electronic-Archiving Initiative
27927: http://www.ithaka.org/xxx/naapolicy.html
      ithaka.org ITHAKA
#
#--- end of data ---
# The following Perl script takes an NAA as argument and outputs
# the NMAs in this file listed under any matching NAA.
#
# my $naa = shift;
# while (<>) {
#     next if (! /^$naa:/);
#     while (<>) {
#         last if (! /^[#\s]./);
#         print "$1\n" if (/^\s+(\S+)/);
#     }
# }
#
# Create a g/t/nroff-safe version of this table with the UNIX command,
#
#     expand natab | sed 's/\\/\e/g' > natab.roff
#
# end of file
```

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