

Shared metadata, self-serve

Bryan Lawrence has pointed out [The relationship between collecting metadata, and the optimum size of a child's plate of food](#). Bryan says:

Ok, so I think I make a cogent argument about benefits [of metadata], so where does childrens eating behaviour come in? Well, I think when one is trying to gather metadata, we're in the same boat as parents are with young children: if you put too much food on the plate, kids just dabble round the sides and don't eat much. Put the right amount on the plate, and kids gobble it up. Too little, and you're back to "don't eat much".

So, when asking for metadata, it's crucial to ask for just the right amount, enough for a large proportion (but not all) the potential data consumers, but not so much that the task of producing it puts off the metadata producers, and you end up getting little or none of what you need. (And don't ask so little, that you end up getting little or none of what you need.)

http://home.badc.rl.ac.uk/lawrence/blog/2009/08/26/plate_size

I think this is a great analogy and it's really important for us to think about as we look at working towards with the Australian National Data Service (ANDS). How do we get the right serving size for metadata? I would like to explore this metaphor a bit more.

My kids are very keen for me to [sign up for MasterChef](#)¹. They only saw a little bit of it, because we were, you know preparing and eating our dinner together instead of watching it on TV, but like the rest of Australia they're now competing to make alternative dressings for the Sunday caesar salad. And they're using that hot phrase "plating up". Thing is, at our place we've evolved a *shared-food* approach, which from something I read in an airline magazine, I gather is even hotter than plating up; everyone picks what they want from a shared selection. We did this to avoid conflict around food.

It works – even though there is no parent stacking food on plates they get a reasonable amount and balance of food.

How?

It involves an ongoing conversation and negotiation about balance and which foods you should eat more or less of, and so on. Our experience is that the freedom to choose eventually results in something pretty close to what we would have chosen but with reduced conflict, and possibly much higher probability that habits will persist.

What I'm saying here is yes – Bryan is right about getting the portions in proportion and asking for the right amount of metadata, but beyond that we also need to have the kinds of conversation with the researchers that we have with our kids about why they need to eat the right amount of the right stuff / supply the right amount of good quality metadata.

1 I assume this is because am much better at cooking than their mother, and she's pretty good.

So, I'm curious about how we might work with our data providers to let them pick from a menu of metadata they might provide. Could we evolve a system which asked for, say, just a title, without all those blank metadata fields staring at them like a plate full of snack cabbages¹. (Could we bribe them? "If you add a couple of subject codes you can have some strawberries." Could we appeal to their vanity? "Filling out the *rights* field will make your hair go curly.")

We will try some of these ideas with our work on [The Fascinator](#); the idea is that if users enter some metadata they'll get something they want, like a backup, or their document will move through some kind of workflow that they actually care about, but along the way we'll be also working a lot on instilling healthy metadata management habits in our researcher communities that go beyond immediate gratification, because as Bryan notes, ultimately it will be peers who drive this and the whole point of collecting the metadata is to assist the research process.

¹ Brussels sprouts – Thanks [Maestro Mal Webb](#) for that meme.