

Computers and Bibliography for the Social Sciences

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AT THE annual meeting of the American Historical Association in San Francisco in 1965, the Council of the association established a Joint Committee on Bibliographical Services to History, an action that reflected the concern of many historians about the bibliographical tools of their trade. The committee was funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and it included representatives of the major historical associations as well as bibliographers, librarians, and archivists. Prof. Oron J. Hale of the University of Virginia was its chairman. The task of the committee and of its staff was to survey the status of bibliographical services to history and to recommend possible innovations and improvements. To help the committee in this task, the staff conducted a survey of existing bibliographical tools and aids and of how these are used by historians. The survey was based on interviews with historians and on questionnaires sent to a sampling of members of the American Historical Association. The work of the committee culminated in a conference held in May 1967 in Belmont, Md., and in the publication of the conference proceedings.¹

The committee's examination included a survey of bibliographies of archives and manuscript collections, books and monographs, periodicals and serials, and research in progress. This examination made it clear that new technical developments in data processing and retrieval profoundly affect the bibliographical services of archives and libraries. Thus, inquiry into these technological developments became a significant aspect of the committee's work and formed a large part of the proceedings of the conference at Belmont.

The application of computers to the control of manuscripts is already in operation in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress and will in time be applied to the Presidential papers and other records preserved by the National Archives and Records Service. A similar system for the bibliographical control of books and monographs is being established at the Library of Congress. Thus, the new technology will cover a sizable amount of historical source material and secondary sources, and historians would be well advised to become familiar with this system if they intend to do research in either of these places.

The author, who was a member of the staff of the Joint Committee on Bibliographical Services to History, read this paper at a meeting of the American Historical Association in Toronto, Canada, December 1967.

¹ Dagmar Horna Perman, ed., *Bibliography and the Historian* (Washington, D.C., 1968).

The bibliographical projects of the Library were subjected to close scrutiny by the committee and evaluated for their potential contribution to historical research. The Library is experimenting with MACHine Readable Cataloging (Project MARC), a system of distribution of catalog information to libraries throughout the United States, and also with automation of its central cataloging apparatus. The procedures adopted by the Library in the past have had great impact on the standards of other libraries. This influence has been further strengthened by the Library's new monopoly in the cataloging of foreign publications and is likely to grow yet stronger with automation, which requires uniformity of standards and synchronization of procedures. Whatever system of bibliographical control is going to be accepted by the Library of Congress, the *de facto* national library, will become the standard. It is therefore disconcerting to realize that these pilot automation projects devote many entries to descriptions facilitating administrative control of books and monographs, but few to their contents. The interests of researchers thus seem largely ignored.

Librarians and archivists have often in the past developed catalogs and finding aids to facilitate locating, arranging, and describing their collections. Many of these systems were adapted for the use of the readers and at present they constitute the main aids for research. Historians have always gratefully used whatever card files, calendars, shelf lists, and catalogs they could find, but often they have discovered that these do not fulfill their needs. With automation still newer elements have entered the librarian-scholar relationship: the programmer and the computer. On the librarian's old catalog system is now superimposed a new methodology based on the computer. The basis of a computer program is a clear and precise process of identifying the indispensable bibliographical units and of anticipating their present and future use. Until now these decisions about what is necessary and what dispensable, what useful and what secondary, have been made by the librarians and the computer programmers; and the final bibliographical product will be determined by what *they* think the researcher needs and wants.

The Library of Congress and the National Archives are not the only governmental agencies experimenting with automation. Many branches of the Federal Government that produce and store records of interest to historians used computers originally for housekeeping chores but are now pressing them into service for control of records to facilitate their internal operations. There are many different systems, but there seems to be little concern with the fact that the machine-readable records of one agency do not mesh with those of other agencies. Thus the future historian, in order to gather materials for a single study, may have to cope with a number of systems and groups of records each coded in a different program. Consider, for example, the plight of the social scientist who will write a study of the "Economic Basis of the Great Society." He will find President Johnson's papers cataloged under the

National Archives computer system. To use the records of the Bureau of the Budget he will have to master the thesaurus of another system, and to use those of the Bureau of the Census, NASA, AEC, and so on, he will have to master still other systems.

In the case of periodical literature there are additional bibliographical problems. Within the last 25 years most historical journals have added to their function of printing new contributions the service of keeping their readers aware of current publications. The editors have expanded the book review sections and the lists of publications. The journals now encounter serious problems in both their publishing and bibliographical functions. Few of them have established up-to-date bibliographical control of their *own* contributions to historical literature; none of the four major historical journals (the *American Historical Review*, the *English Historical Review*, the *Révue Historique*, and the *Historische Zeitschrift*) have adequate cumulative indexes. Some system of bibliographical control of periodical literature in history and other related disciplines is long overdue.

Journals face serious difficulties in discharging their bibliographical tasks. To save space for articles, as the book reviews become more numerous, the reviews are rationed to such short quotas of words that, in the view of many, their evaluative and critical function is seriously curtailed. The lists of new publications are a burden on the small editorial staffs, yet they are often replete with duplications. In the survey of historians' bibliographical habits and needs, conducted by the staff of the joint committee, the most frequently voiced complaint was that periodical literature, in absence of adequate finding aids, is difficult to use. On the other hand, the surveyed historians unanimously testified to their dependence on professional journals in keeping themselves informed about current publications.²

The need to reconsider and review the role of the bibliographical sections of the journals seems obvious. Yet a survey of the policies of 12 leading historical journals in the United States, undertaken by the staff of the joint committee, revealed that while all of them experienced a steady increase in published material, none could suggest any solution to the problem other than cutting down the space allocated to book reviews and curtailing the intake of articles. The editor of the *American Historical Review* suggested a fifth issue a year as his way of meeting the problem. On the other hand, the *American Political Science Review* abolished its bibliographical section altogether while the Modern Language Association established an excellent separate computerized cumulative bibliographical service.

There is no systematic up-to-date bibliographical coverage of research in progress, an area in which historians have as active interest as in books and articles. Few journals list research or dissertations in prog-

² Perman, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

ress. Historians seem to rely primarily on the grapevine and professional newsletters to find out who is doing what, and they supplement this information by news picked up from colleagues at professional meetings. This may indeed be one of the most important reasons for such meetings. Some may question the reliability of information gathered in this way, but most historians use it.

The Joint Committee on Bibliographical Services recommended to the Council of the American Historical Association that another committee on bibliography be appointed to continue its work in planning a comprehensive bibliographical service for the historian. The committee's recommendations were only general, rather than an exact blueprint. A specific list of objectives and priorities must therefore now be worked out. Among these should be the following:

1. A thorough and systematic effort should be made to establish liaison with other professional organizations, associations, and agencies in the social sciences that face similar bibliographical problems and plan to do something about them. The possibility of an interdisciplinary approach to bibliography needs to be thoroughly explored. Although it can reasonably be assumed that other social scientists and humanists are considering similar problems, historians do not know what these colleagues' plans are and how they would fit in with those of the historical profession. The American Historical Association is well suited to take the lead in the formation of an Interdisciplinary Joint Committee on Bibliography.

2. An intensive effort should be made to determine the bibliographical techniques of the historians. Nobody really knows how historians search for materials and what bibliographical aids they use. Yet, in order to determine what historians want, it is necessary to find out how they work and what they use. The survey of the joint committee was only a first step in this direction and the sample of historians was too small to yield generally valid conclusions, but it defined the problem and indicated the direction of future research. On this foundation, a broader and more carefully executed study should be made. But before a new survey is undertaken, thought should be given to the possibility of a joint effort with other social science and humanities organizations or at least to the formulation of standards for parallel studies with the disciplines whose interests overlap or complement historical research. Political scientists use the Presidential papers as often as do historians, but nobody seems to know whether and in what way their research methods and needs differ. The economic historians use the census data, but precisely how their needs differ from those of the economists is not at all clear. The AHA might well take the lead in setting up a systematic exploration of these and related questions. Such a survey would accomplish two major purposes: it would provide solid data in an area where none now exist,³ and it would establish a basis for future collaboration with other social scientists and humanists in this field by defining the common bibliographical

³ The three or four studies of the use of bibliographical aids in social sciences that were conducted by librarians for their own purposes are based on such small samples that no safe generalizations can be drawn from them. See, e.g., "Bibliographical Services in the Social Sciences," in *Library Quarterly*, 20:81-82 (Apr. 1950); and John S. Appel and Ted Gurr, "Bibliographic Needs of the Social and Behavioral Scientists, Report of a Pilot Survey," in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 7:51-54 (June 1964).

interests and the areas of divergence of needs and requirements. This collaboration would also facilitate formulation of a common policy in matters of bibliography.

3. There is an urgent need to define what the social scientists really want in the way of bibliographical aids. Formulation of precise bibliographical standards must be based on a thorough study of the research requirements of the social scientists. A survey of the historians' research needs and habits brought out the fact that they did not know what they wanted. In response to questions about the depth and breadth of cataloging and indexing required they failed to formulate answers about the type of bibliographical information they considered indispensable, and they positively refused to define the minimum and maximum of acceptable identifying information.⁴ More work must be done in this area and some general standards formulated.

4. The bibliographical needs of the social scientists, once they are established, should be made known to those archives, libraries, and other Federal agencies that are engaged in establishing control systems for books and records. An examination of pilot automation projects brought a sobering realization that they were not designed with concern for the social scientists and humanists. The development of these systems is now well underway and it is doubtful whether the social scientists can influence it. But they should try to make their bibliographical needs known. Such action is particularly important with respect to the work of the Library of Congress. The automation pilot projects in the Library are now approaching completion of the first phases, but changes still can be made. Library representatives have professed willingness to meet "reasonable" demands, and these demands should be made before it is too late. The financial investment in these projects and the degree of uniformity they impose on the operations of other research libraries throughout the country make it probable that even an imperfect system will quickly harden into permanency.

5. A cooperative research project with the major depositories of manuscript and archival materials should be established. Archivists have been concerned for some time about their ignorance of how researchers use source materials, and, although some efforts have been made to interview the researchers, those interviewed show little interest in cooperating. The National Archives is interested in pursuing this inquiry, and a joint program with the American Historical Association and other social scientists could be worked out. Such a study might provide additional data on the research habits of historians and would clarify the use of primary sources.

6. A full exploration should be undertaken (before and not after the planning of a system) of the many kinds of bibliographical and information services now planned or in operation. To name just a few examples: Inter-University Communications Council, Modern Language Association's bibliographical publications, the National Library of Medicine system (now trying to branch out into social sciences), and others. A sustained effort is necessary to find out whether there is any common ground of interest or any possibility for collaboration of the social scientist with these programs.

7. The work of the President's National Advisory Commission on Libraries should also be examined carefully by the social scientists. The Commission has formulated for the President of the United States a series of recommendations dealing with the reorganization of libraries and information networks. The report received

⁴Perman, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

no publicity, but it might well become a blueprint for future Federal financing in bibliographical and record control.

New projects should be based on a careful study of all these fundamental facts. Many of the tasks mentioned above could be undertaken simultaneously and some of them will overlap. Undoubtedly, as these questions are explored, other problems and possibilities will emerge, but the tasks outlined would be a good starting point.

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