Manuscript Catalogs and Other Finding Aids: What Are Their Relationships?

By RICHARD C. BERNER

BACKGROUND

DURING the past 10 years I have visited about 20 manuscript repositories, primarily to learn about their processing and descriptive programs. Consistently they have shared a common feature—two descriptive systems: card catalogs and other finding aids. Furthermore, there had been no deliberate attempt to unite the systems in a single descriptive one and to integrate them as consciously conceived parts of a comprehensive descriptive system. In general most thinking and practice have tended to treat the systems as two mutually exclusive categories, and in the archival field as elsewhere in life segregated thinking has lead to *de facto* segregation.

At the University of Washington there were two partly integrated descriptive systems until Theodore R. Schellenberg asked some challenging questions about them while presenting an archives management course in 1962. I concluded that our card catalog was chiefly serving as a cumulative index to our inventory/guides (each collection[1] had either a preliminary or final one). As a cumulative index our catalog had too much information and tended to parallel much of the description in the inventory/guides; i.e., it was redundant to an unjustifiable extent. Although conclusions drawn concerning subject headings might be the subject of another paper, they certainly should be of concern to appropriate committees in both the Association of College and Research Libraries and the Society of American Archivists.

Concern about the phenomenon of two parallel descriptive systems

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The author, head of the University Archives and Manuscripts Division, University of Washington Library, has written other articles for readers of the *American Archivist:* "The Arrangement and Description of Manuscripts" and "Archivists, Librarians, and the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections."

[1] The word "collection" has traditionally been used in two different ways, in referring to the manuscript collection as a whole and to individual accessions.

prompted the formulation of a questionnaire, which was distributed to about 50 manuscript repositories early in 1970.[2] There were 44 replies by June 1970, providing a broader and more consistently organized basis for analysis than had my personal observations. The purpose and scope of the survey was to learn the relationships existing between card catalogs for manuscript collections and internal finding aids (registers, guides, inventories, calendars, and so on); the extent to which the two systems are parallel and independent descriptions of the same collections; and the extent to which the two are integrated into a single descriptive system.

Of the respondents, 32 had catalog entries for each collection. Of the 12 that did not, 3 considered their shelf lists comprehensive listings, 4 had recently published guides describing substantially all of their collections, and 4 reported that their published annual lists served this function.[3] The National Archives, which is outside the library world, had no catalog and apparently saw no use for one; it does, however, frequently publish a list of finding aids. All but two respondents also had finding aids of one kind or another. Although there were few clear-cut answers to the question, ". . . to what extent do you believe that the catalog serves as an index to the finding aids," it was possible to interpret most of the answers as "leaning" one way or the other on the basis of answers to other questions. Only 16 respondents leaned toward the answer that the catalog largely served as an index to the finding aids, and another 4 clearly stated that it did. Interestingly the answers to this question indicated that it seemed novel to the respondents. Apparently few, if any, had thought about the relationship and what it could or should be. In addition, only 17 respondents indexed their finding aids. Apart from the four repositories consciously using the catalog as an index to finding aids, most indexes were limited to subjects, names of the important correspondents, or chronological periods. There were 25 repositories, however, that had some form of cumulative index: five had general published guides; some had more limited indexes to selected subjects, major correspondents and names, chronological periods, and the like; and some viewed their card catalog as serving the purpose. That function of the catalog, however, seemed to have been discovered rather than preconceived.

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2 The University of Washington has been excluded from the respondents. Its system is described by Richard C. Berner and M. Gary Bettis, "Description of Manuscript Collections: A Single Network System," in *College and Research Libraries,* 30:405–416 (Sept. 1969).

3 As many of the answers were ambiguous the tabulation is not clear cut. For example, another tabulation gives 37 yes and 7 no answers, but the trend seems clear nonetheless.

COMMENTARY

In my opinion the subject of this questionnaire is of the utmost importance to descriptive work in the manuscript field.   Because the relationships between manuscript card catalogs and other finding aids have not been and are not presently of general concern, it is urgent that something be done about the situation before more time passes, before more fruitless effort is expended.[4]   Judging from answers to the questionnaires most respondents did not think there were any necessary or desirable connections between the two descriptive systems.   The general tendency seems to let them stand separate and unintegrated, with the card catalog being the primary descriptive tool and the other finding aids serving as bonus features for "more important" collections and for searchers using those collections.   Careful consideration should be given to: (1) whether the separation serves any useful purpose and (2) what role the concept of cumulative indexes should play as an integrative tool.   As was already noted, four repositories consciously think of the catalog as being basically an index to finding aids.   In brief they lean toward the conception of a single descriptive system instead of toward two systems having only casual relationships.   Also leaning toward that conception, but only weakly, is the larger group using the catalog to refer searchers to existing finding aids.   Although that practice is not the same as "indexing finding aids," its followers do recognize that most finding aids contain more detail about the contents and organization of the manuscripts than catalogs do.   Nevertheless, most catalog cards (even those of repositories that use them as indexes to finding aids) contain a great deal of information; some even give fairly detailed descriptions of selected items.

How much information is really necessary in card catalogs?   For repositories using catalogs only and those using catalogs supplemented by finding aids to some collections, there obviously is a need for most, and probably all, of the information on the cards.   It still may be questioned, however, whether such descriptive systems are efficient ones, leading to comprehensive bibliographic control of entire manuscript collections.   My own observation is that compre-

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[4] Frank G. Burke confirms this judgment in his introduction to the as yet incomplete and unpublished report on the SPINDEX II project.   He writes, ". . . it was soon realized that the shortcomings of finding aids are directly attributable to lack of understanding on the part of many archivists of the purpose of such a tool, and lack of standards within the profession of producing this most basic of all archival descriptive devices." In his April 14, 1970, report, he states that SPINDEX II is written "to index finding aids [and] will conversely produce finding aids from indexes."   Also see his articles "Computer Techniques for the National Archives," in *Computers and the Humanities,* 4:11–18 (Sept. 1969) and "Automation and Historical Research," in *Libri,* vol. 19, no. 2:81–91 (June 1969).

hensiveness is usually sacrificed to the descriptive glorification of selected items; such practices cannot be justified if the searcher is not led to the riches of the entire collection. Repositories consciously using catalogs as indexes to finding aids also place a great deal of information on the cards. But again, how much information is really needed to serve a normal indexing function? Only rarely do book indexes abound with comparable information; seldom do they contain the detail of catalog cards. In this context is it not possible to learn something from book indexes? Can we in the manuscript field not learn some general principles from the indexing of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections and the SPINDEX II project?

NUCMC, whose success should be instructive to all repositories, whatever their descriptive system, uses the index in the traditional way of providing skeletal clues in the form of mere names and subject headings—no narrative. For narrative the reader is referred to the actual entry and from there to the repository owning the original manuscripts. NUCMC, a single integrated system leading toward comprehensive bibliographic control, uses index entries based, and in practice working, on at least one major assumption: all the researcher needs is the elemental clues provided in the index entries. Furthermore, an implied assumption is that the scholar has the maturity and background to move forward from there. As repositories have not benefited from this part of NUCMC experience, some positive lessons should be derived from further examination of the unstated premises that seem to underpin it. For example, a survey is long overdue to learn how the users of NUCMC have been led to their material, by indexed names on one hand and indexed subject headings on the other. Another good control experiment concerns the Presidential libraries system, which combines features of typical "archives" with those of "manuscript collections." How do scholars approach such material? By my own analysis more than 90 percent of the approaches are based on researchers' prior knowledge of personal and organizational names, names that they have associated in highly specific ways with their subjects. If my observation is valid, the whole matter of bibliographic control should be radically revised; but as long as the inertia continues in initiating such a study, bibliographic control will remain at a primitive level.

SPINDEX II, also an experiment with a single integrated system using cumulative indexes, aims at a different kind of subject control than does NUCMC. Though the latter uses a relatively fixed list of headings, SPINDEX II controls key words that appear more or less randomly and then allows for permutations of the key words by cross-referencing. The system, which has a great capacity to handle names,

holds much promise.   Neither NUCMC nor SPINDEX II, however, will be meaningful in advancing our theories and techniques until we learn how researchers approach manuscripts and archives.   That such a basic investigation has not yet been done is its own commentary on the state of the archival art.

In general the practice in compiling card catalogs is to describe too little material in too much detail.   If this is done at the expense of establishing comprehensive bibliographic controls for the entire manuscript collection of the repository, the practice is difficult to justify—at least in the eyes of the scholarly community that is being served.   Scholars would prefer being led to all relevant material, regardless of how completely it might be cataloged or described. They can proceed very well from the kind of skeletal clues in a NUCMC index and can do remarkably well from that point on.   Why describe the material in more detail than is sufficient to lead the researcher to the individual manuscript collections that seem from the index entries to be relevant?   From my own observation I think overdescription originated during the period when manuscripts were collected for the prestige derived from possessing individual documents of value and having the papers of a famous person.   The cataloger understandably wanted to lead the researcher to the choice items and the prestigious collections, something he did through substantial descriptions.   Historians reinforced the predilection of catalogers, curators, directors, and benefactors to overdescribe their holdings by developing and encouraging calendaring,[5] a practice now out of vogue but in the same vein as much, if not most, manuscript cataloging.   Calendaring could not be trusted by the researcher because it maximized the describer's subjectiveness by allowing him to highlight some things and ignore others.   Is there not a lesson to be learned from its demise?

The fact that most modern manuscript collections, particularly those documenting the 20th century, share only a few characteristics of earlier collections, should cause us to pause and think about our present modes of description.   Only a Clements Library can validly describe in detail its individual manuscripts; its collecting range is limited to certain subjects, and its holdings are smallish collections. Though the scope and size of collections documenting recent decades are wholly different in character, single repositories still seek to completely document several fields concurrently.   As researchers and most repositories want to find all relevant material, the tech-

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[5] See Morris L. Radoff, "A Guide to Practical Calendaring," in *American Archivist,* 11:123–140 (Apr. 1948); and "A Practical Guide to Calendaring," in *American Archivist,* 11:203–222 (July 1948). Also see T. R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives,* p. 60 (New York, 1965).

niques of bibliographic control should be aimed at the problems posed by the massive documentation in typical manuscript collections.   In general the card catalog as an index tries to do too much; as a comprehensive description, it covers too little.   What the catalog presently contains is, of course, a positive advantage, but it is questionable that cataloging should continue in the current manner.

It is hoped that we are entering a new phase in managing archives and manuscript collections.   Both NUCMC and SPINDEX II offer potential revolutionary changes, if only we would try to learn from them. It would be sadly ironic if the fullest theoretical and practical implications of NUCMC are not realized.   SPINDEX II has not yet been tested adequately enough for us to know its full potential, but it is similar to NUCMC, with one basic difference being that it was originally conceived as a system of cumulatively indexing finding aids. The leading proponents of NUCMC, who have yet to realize that its volumes serve the same function, have not explored the implications of its indexes and how they are used.   One threatening implication is the abandonment of the traditional card catalog as the primary descriptive device.   The catalog would either be abandoned altogether or incorporated into a totally different format. It is unfortunate that the implication is threatening, but that is probably why the Association of College and Research Libraries subcommittee hesitates to address the fundamental question of this paper, the relationships between card catalogs and finding aids. A hallowed tradition in librarianship is being threatened while archivists stand to one side often criticizing library craftsmanship but failing to do anything positive to meet the problems. Both NUCMC and SPINDEX II point in a new direction, toward a single descriptive system based on cumulative indexes to finding aids, a less costly, more efficient, more comprehensive procedure.   Why hesitate?   We are at a new beginning, are we not?