Intellectual Control
of Historical Records

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The cumbersome size of twentieth-century manuscript collections is dramatic evidence of the problem of intellectual control of historical records. The problem is compounded by the demands of researchers for better and more sophisticated finding aids. This session focused on a variety of methods of intellectual control, including union catalogs and computer-assisted finding aids. The conference participants debated the components of a good finding aid program.

MAYNARD BRICHFORD:

We are all aware of the twentieth-century proliferation of records. The phenomenal growth of recorded information has had two important effects. The creators and keepers of records have developed elaborate systems for the control and use of their records, and archivists have had to abandon detailed item controls and descriptive techniques that were developed when they were responsible for a few documents that had survived from the distant past. The threat of the paperwork monster fueled by computer printouts and photocopies is a familiar argument of the records manager. Archivists have developed techniques for the collective appraisal, arrangement, and description of their holdings. While custodians of static collections, and computer enthusiasts, still attempt to maintain item level controls, most archivists have a realistic view of the selection, description, and retrieval of contemporary documentation. They deal with billions of documents rather than a paltry 25,000,000 books and 150,000 serials.

The selective extension of levels of control to record groups, subgroups, and series is a basic operating principle in archival administration. The availability of staff and the needs of users determine which records will receive priority. Priorities also reflect program emphases, grantor interests, and agency resources. The level of control depends on institutional objectives and user needs. An archives needs an effective system of primary and secondary finding aids. The primary finding aid should provide records series or collection level control over all holdings. Intellectual control should be established immediately upon receipt of the material. The initial control may be in the form of an accessions register, an inventory worksheet from the sources of the records, an archives preliminary inventory, or a basic record series description that can be refined and extended after the record series or collection is processed. "Effective intellectual control should be established by national listings of collections; regional guides; subject guides; institutional guides; special lists of holdings; inventories of record groups or major divisions of a repository's holdings; finding aids for record series or collections; and box, folder, and item level descriptive finding aids."

The archivist should establish a program for the continuing evaluation, care, and use of his holdings to insure the proper levels of control. He does not buy $20,000 worth of books, but commits $20,000 worth of shelf space. His investment is not in "krausening" the records until, like hops and water, they are ready for consumption. He has a constant obligation to bring all of his holdings to the notice of users. The size of the task plus the severe problems of low budgets and inflation equals funding problems. The shortage of funds and the need to find new ways to extend program resources stimulate grant proposals to foundations.

Funding priorities present several alternatives. Grants may be based on need *or* ability. Funding may be confined to basic archival needs and activities *or* it may reflect the interests of researchers and the needs of administrators. Support may be given to technological applications *or* to the improvement of appraisal and description techniques. Primary emphasis may be placed on inventories and research tools *or* on educational programs and publications as the most efficient means of increasing the quality of archival practice.

The kinds of intellectual control proposals that should be funded are those projects with archival direction. Historians, librarians, museum curators, and book restorers should not be funded for archival projects on the promise that they will hire an archivist to do the work. Likewise, archivists should not be funded for writing histories, surveying libraries, describing artifacts, and developing binding techniques.

Proposals should also provide for the publication and dissemination of a report on the results of the project. Systematic reporting that permits a post-audit of accomplishments is a major need in the administration of grants or special funding for projects to secure bibliographical control over historical records and archives. The excessive paperwork and careful review of proposals ensures a thorough pre-audit, but the results of the work are often unreported and forgotten. No project should be supported which does not provide, as a part of the terms of the grant, for the publication of the results in a manner that is readily available to the profession as a whole as well as to the grantor, the grantee, and prospective researchers. This is professional accountability. The report should include analyses of processing and description costs, and list the costs per page of finding aids.

Foundations should require that the project undertaken, or a definite phase, be completed within the grant period. Long-term projects should not subsist on grant money. It is inadvisable to split funding for a series of years between grantors and the grantee agency. Such funding for projects providing intellectual control of records tends to encourage massive incompletions—but the quarterback is never "sacked."

HARRIET OSTROFF:

"The dream of scholars, librarians, archivists, and curators of manuscripts for more than a half century is being realized." So the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* was introduced by Lester K. Born, its first editor, in a short publicity article he wrote in December 1960. The realization of this dream was made possible by a grant of $200,000, on November 28, 1958, by the Council on Library Resources to the Library of Congress for the purpose of establishing an inventory of important manuscript collections located throughout the country. The grant money was to be used for gathering and editing information from repositories, preparing catalog cards for these entries and supplying each participating

repository with copies of these cards for each collection reported, and establishing in the Library of Congress a dictionary catalog of these collections. Copies of the printed cards were available for sale so that any other institution could also maintain a similar union catalog for its readers.

NUCMC was greeted with joy at its birth, but now that it is an established fact it is taken for granted and there are those who say it is not enough. Scholars and archivists are now dreaming new dreams which have yet to be realized. The new vision is of a nationwide computerized data base including all archival material. NUCMC could form the foundation of such a system, but many steps would have to be taken before this huge structure could be created.

The NUCMC staff today consists of one section head (also known as the editor), three manuscript catalogers, and two clerk-typists, who do all the work involved in producing the catalog except for the mounting of cards on boards prior to photographing them for publication. Each year approximately 2,000 collections are reported and approximately 2,000 collections are cataloged, indexed, typed, edited, and revised as many times as necessary. If the staff could be increased, solicitation intensified, and the restrictions for including functional archives removed, much more manuscript material could be described and their contents made known to the scholarly world.

Eventually a practical way must be found to automate this process. So far nothing has been accomplished along these lines. Limited but repeated investigations have been made with no tangible results. *Manuscripts: A MARC Format; Specifications for Magnetic Tapes Containing Catalog Records for Single Manuscripts or Manuscript Collections* was prepared by the MARC Development Office of the Library of Congress in 1973, but in October 1974, after a series of conferences, the MARC Development Office again concluded that input of the full NUCMC record would be impractical using the MARC Input System as it existed at that time. One possibility for the future is the preparation of the index by means of PRECIS (Preserved Context Index System), a system of indexing for books and other documents which combines human indexing with computer-aided construction of index entries. PRECIS was designed and developed by the British National Bibliography and has been used by them as part of the BNB MARC tapes since 1971. The basic concepts of PRECIS appear to be compatible with the basic concepts used in the present indexing for NUCMC. Further study of this and other systems would be desirable.

If this new dream is to come true, greater cooperation between the various institutions and individuals interested must take place. Perhaps if we all make a concerted effort we can do it in less than half a century.

JOHN P. BUTLER:

The issue of intellectual control of historical records occupies an important place in the large category of problems facing archivists in the 1970s. As historical records became more voluminous, as research became more sophisticated, and as financial support became increasingly more uncertain, archivists wondered if the traditional methods of control were satisfactory; and if not, what could be done about it. A few archivists turned to the computer to assist them in controlling historical records. By the mid-1960s much of the literature about automated technology implied that the computer would help solve many of the problems traditionally associated with intellectual control. The forthcoming revolution,

unfortunately, has been one of unfulfilled expectations. The results of automated applications, so far, have had relatively little effect on the archival community. This does not mean, however, that automated technology has had no impact on intellectual controls or that its future impact will be minimal. The impact of automated technology, so far, has been very selective and confined to a few large institutions. Given the limitations inherent in the archival community, mainly lack of financial resources, it is not surprising that computer applications have been so limited.

The major drawback to using automated technology is the cost of system development. It is very expensive, usually far too expensive, for most archival institutions to develop a set of programs to meet specific project needs and to implement those programs. Instead, it is far more economical to use a system which is already available, such as SPINDEX II, even if this means a slight compromise in program objectives.

Automated controls are most effective when they are used to produce and index finding aids. The products generated by an automated control system reflect the written descriptions of the historical records. If the written descriptions are concise and accurate, then chances are that the automated controls will be equally concise and accurate. Computer generated lists and indexes of poorly described historical records will, in turn, reflect the inadequacies of the written descriptions. From a cost effective point of view, the production of finding aids and indexes to those finding aids is the most useful application of computer technology to historical records.

Funding priorities should be given to those institutions that have carefully analyzed their manual control system, have closely examined the automated systems already in operation, and have indicated that their commitment to automated controls is a long range priority within their own program plans. Funds for the automated production and indexing of finding aids should receive a higher priority than funds for document indexing. Too often funds have been allocated to projects simply because new technology is going to be employed; instead, funds should be allocated because of the intrinsic importance of the project.

The cumulative experience of the last ten to fifteen years indicates that the application of computer technology to historical records is feasible, that larger institutions need automated controls more than smaller institutions, and that financial support for institutions beginning automated projects will prove beneficial not only to the institutions directly involved and to the archival community, but also to the general world of scholarship and learning.

RICHARD LYTLE:

What do archivists mean by the phrase "intellectual control of historical records and manuscripts"? For the most part, they define it as the ability of an archivist or a researcher to extract relevant information from documents. Indeed, archivists are always searching for new ways to maximize the researcher's access to archives and manuscripts. Yet archivists must take care that their efforts to achieve intellectual control of archives can fit into regional and national information storage and retrieval systems. I certainly do not have a plan for achieving this objective, but I hope to ask some of the proper questions.

The clientele and costs of a national information storage and retrieval system must be specified. Who are the users and the potential users, and what would they ask if existing systems restraints were removed? For example, to what extent do

sociologists come to archives with subject questions and how specific are these subject requests? One would have to dig for the answers since most researchers are influenced by their knowledge of the extreme limitations of finding aids in archives. Supposing that ideal but reasonable system requirements could be derived, the cost of such a system must be in proportion to funding available for all aspects of archival programs. Archivists should concentrate on the determination of user needs and the construction of a minimum—mostly manual but computerizable— system to meet those needs at a cost which makes foundation support likely.

There are a number of points for archivists to think about in developing a national information storage and retrieval system for archives. First, archivists must develop an overall systems approach incorporating user needs, integrating the varied types of intellectual control, and establishing some level of control over *all* materials covered by the system. Second, archivists must avoid overcommitment to present systems. The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections should be reevaluated, especially regarding the appropriateness of library descriptive cataloging (data element control, of which descriptive cataloging is a special case, is required) and the 3 x 5 card and book catalog. Now would appear to be a good time to do this, when there will be a call for republication of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections and when the National Historical Publications and Records Commission is preparing a new repository-level guide. Third, archivists must develop standardization where required. Usually, standardization is the first topic of discussion when cooperative information retrieval systems are considered. It should follow development of goals and an outline for a national information system for archives. Fourth, archivists must critically evaluate costly publications. Use computer output microfilms where possible. For example, republish the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections as a microfiche edition *of the data sheets*, with extended prose description of collections encouraged in the future. Index by computer output microfilms (the subject index would be a problem). Fifth, archivists must maximize use of existing resources. For example, prepare a microfilm publication of all guides which can be gathered and a computer output microfilm index (and proper name index if possible), to make links between this and the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections data sheet.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

The discussion began with exploration of the feasibility of computer assisted finding aids. Are they worth the effort and the cost? Those present had a variety of views most of which could be referred to as *cautious optimism.* John Daly speculated that a great many archival repositories are part of large institutions which have their own data processing systems. Couldn't these computers be better utilized by archivists? Daly had found that to be the case in Illinois. Edward Papenfuse took exception to this notion; he has found data processing in Maryland to be exceedingly expensive. Many of those present agreed that the computer is an expensive tool and that archivists should proceed with caution.

Frank Burke observed that archival administration has not yet "settled down", that there are many unanswered questions about methods and techniques. Thus the application of automated data processing to such an unsettled science would be premature. Burke added that archivists must first establish a set of standards for archival work, then automated techniques can be applied easily. So long as there is little agreement on standards there will be little interchange of information

through a computerized system because the product of one institution will not be compatible with the product of another institution. The interchange of archival information breaks down not because of the computer, but because archivists have not mastered their trade.

Other participants were concerned about the ongoing relationship between the archivist and the computer analyst. J. D. Porter raised the point that most computer programmers do not really understand archival work and this makes the production of finding aids difficult. Analysts do not understand the function of the catalog card or the information to be communicated. Yet, he argued, the cost of data processing is decreasing rapidly and approaching the level at which it will be affordable by all. Porter urged archivists to learn the language of the systems analyst, and to educate them in return.

At the heart of the troubled relationship between archivists and programmers is the problem of standardizing descriptions of archival materials. Richmond Williams noted that the English language does not really lend itself to subject cataloging. Because scholars describe their topics using many different terms, it is very difficult to standardize subject entries in an automated system. Trudy Peterson added that historians are increasingly asking for more and more context in their work with historical records. She cautioned against the abandonment of present hierarchical descriptions of historical records for subject cataloging. Such action would sacrifice valuable information about the context in which records were created. She concluded by saying that most repositories need money to establish basic inventories; subject cataloging is more of a dream than a reality for these institutions.

The discussion turned to other types of intellectual control of records. Edward Papenfuse argued for less complex systems of control. He also took exception to Richard Lytle's formal remarks about the obsolescence of item inventories and impracticality of hard copy publication of finding aids. Papenfuse noted that he was very much in favor of the movement to computer output microfilm as a means of disseminating information about records. But he also stressed that hard-copy publication is an absolute necessity if archivists are to develop larger bodies of constituents. Richard Lytle responded by indicating that the profession needs better overview of the publication of finding aids. Lytle raised no objection to a practical and useful hard-copy publication, but he restated his belief that hard-copy publications must be looked at critically.

Charles Lee expressed concern about the negative attitudes of many of those present. He argued that all of the problems relating to the intellectual control of archives and manuscripts can be solved. He indicated that some were difficult, but none were unsolvable. He urged the conferees to take a positive view of automatic data processing for archives. Maynard Brichford responded that computers should be used primarily as indexes to major subjects and as guides to other kinds of finding aids. The computer, Brichford added, provides the first level of control over archives and manuscripts, but it is not the only type of finding aid. Lee countered with a defense of the computer as the most inexpensive way to control archival materials.

Other participants were quick to indicate archival projects which have effectively utilized automated data processing. Elizabeth Hamer Kegan pointed out that the MARC format for manuscripts is one system which provides some hope for standardizing techniques in the near future. Hugh Taylor offered an explanation of the work being done at the Public Archives of Canada on a national archival

information system. He noted the work that PAC has done with the MARC format, and the cooperation of Canadian institutions in establishing national standards of bibliographical description. Taylor emphasized that the objective of the Canadian system is the "first line of retrieval"—a uniform level of information control. In response to a question about the adaptability of the system to other institutions, he remarked that the PAC is moving tentatively in that direction.

Charles Lee observed that the discussion was good evidence of the need for a "central think tank" to work on difficult archival problems such as determining the best type of finding aid. Lee noted that he took exception to the belief that published inventories would pay for themselves, and that this was a problem to be taken up by the "central think tank." Elizabeth H. Kegan concluded the session with the reflection that although a great deal was discussed, there were many questions left unanswered. She argued for more sessions on intellectual control, and for the publication of reports on work in progress.