Archivists, Archives, and Computers: A Starting Point

Foreword by Guest Editors CHARLES M. DOLLAR and CAROLYN L. GEDA

THE SAA COMMITTEE ON AUTOMATED RECORDS AND TECHNIQUES met in Washington, D.C., on 3 February 1978 to discuss its future role in the Society. At the end of the day-long meeting, the committee had agreed on a five-year plan to increase SAA's awareness of the impact of automation on archives. Part of this plan called for a special issue of *The American Archivist* devoted exclusively to automated records, with a subsequent issue concentrating on automated finding aids. The committee concluded that there was sufficient interest in automated finding aids to justify some attention to this topic in the first special issue. Editor C. F. W. Coker, who had endorsed the idea of a special issue, concurred in this assessment, and the approach was developed with the hearty support of Virginia Purdy, who succeeded Coker as editor.

The four articles in this issue share a common theme of beginnings. Ben L. DeWhitt's article focuses upon the control of *machine-readable* records and automated control of archival holdings in the United States and twelve provincial-territorial archives in Canada. He used a questionnaire and follow-up telephone calls to ascertain legal and institutional arrangements, programs, and attitudes related to computers and archives. His survey indicates that the most serious problems involve programs for archival control of machine-readable records. There are no viable state, provincial, territorial, or municipal programs; and archivists do not know where to turn for help in establishing them. Such control must be developed soon, before valuable records are lost. DeWhitt concludes that the beginning of such control requires creation of a mechanism whereby archivists can obtain assistance in creating machine-readable records programs.

Another beginning dimension is touched upon in Carolyn Geda's article on the development of social science data archives. While use of the term *social science data archives* may seem singularly inappropriate to archivists, the term is used widely within the academic community, and Geda performs a very useful service in tracing the historical development of such archives, especially in relation to data collection activities of the federal government and the

introduction of computers. Social science data archives essentially are reposito-
ries for machine-readable files of interest to social science researchers in an aca-
demic setting. In this context they function as data libraries or data banks, the
primary purpose of which is to disseminate data to users. Geda shows that while
this institutional context gives social science data archives their uniqueness, many
of their functions parallel those of what she calls traditional archives. She makes
very clear that traditional archives which hold machine-readable records and so-
cial science data archives have much to learn from each other and are part of a
larger information community.

The theme of beginnings is reinforced in Alan Calmes's report on some of the
practical realities of creating an automated finding aids system for holdings in the
National Archives. Since this system was designed to provide computer–assisted
administrative control over accessioned holdings, subject retrieval access was re-
jected because it was believed that identifying appropriate index terms for series
descriptions would triple the amount of time required to gain full administrative
control. Closely related to this was the decision that the primary output would be
in the traditional NARS inventory *format*. Thus, *batch processing* was viewed as the
mode of operation and from the outset interactive querying of the full data base
was not incorporated into the system. The practical realities of implementing the
A-1 System, Calmes argues, consist primarily of data entry. The large volume of
series descriptions—some 200,000—along with a relatively low data input by op-
erators, results in a cost of about $11 per series. And this does not include the cost
of archivists preparing the series descriptions. Calmes concludes that A-1 System
experience thus far suggests that automation of archival finding aids must be
carefully considered because the cost is quite high.

A much more optimistic note on how one institution designed and imple-
mented automated finding aids is seen in David Bearman's case study, the last
article in this issue. The procedures followed in assessing institutional needs and
then defining systems needs constitute a model that archivists could follow with
confidence. The fact that Bearman writes from personal experience and clearly
understands the concerns of archivists adds considerable authority to his article.
In addition, his description of the kinds of things archivists should look for in
information retrieval systems is illuminating. Bearman concludes that while au-
tomation of archival information is part of a broader context of expanding service
and linking the holdings of archives, automation will succeed only if it meets the
specific needs and goals of archives. If this is done, he believes that archivists will
be able to alter practices developed because of the constraints of manual process-
ing. Archival automation, properly executed, holds many promises for archivists
and users of archives.

Some of the material discussed in these four articles may present problems to
archivists because of the technical jargon used. In addition, some terms familiar
to archivists—such as *record*—have a different meaning. Many of these terms are
defined when they are used; others are not. Consequently, we have prepared a
glossary of terms used in this issue, and the glossary follows the last article. Terms
italicized in the text are defined in the glossary. This is by no means intended to
be a complete glossary of ADP terminology, but it should assist the reader at this
starting point.

The Committee on Automated Records and Techniques believes it important that archivists become better informed about the effect of computers on their work now and in the future. We are pleased to share with readers of this issue of *The American Archivist* both this concern and the hope that the committee's work accomplishes its objective: a Society better able to deal with computers and computer records.

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