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*Cover note:* Alan K. Lathrop's article, on page 409, discusses the issues surrounding the copyright of architectural drawings.

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# The Forum

## TO THE EDITOR:

It is gratifying to read, in the report of the NARA MARC and Life-Cycle Tracking project [*American Archivist*, Summer 1986] that NARA has decided "that NARA should define the data elements in emerging automated systems in a manner compatible with MARC fields and that automated systems in the future should support the creation of MARC records." Since NARS was represented on the NISTF working group which defined the data elements and since the SAA is responsible for the on-going revision of the MARC AMC format, no other conclusion is conceivable. But it is distressing to read an official NARA report which still confuses implementation of automated systems with features of the exchange format and, as a consequence, reaches unwarranted conclusions.

The NARA team reports that "the manipulation and arrangement of National Archives information in MARC records . . . presents a problem. Common information structures such as disposition schedules and inventories cannot be produced without building into the system a capability for arranging and displaying MARC records in a specified order. As currently defined, MARC fields do not allow for the display of records in a specific order. For example there is no means to ensure that the

description of a series and the description of its index are displayed sequentially as the result of a search."

This conclusion is utterly meaningless and totally misleading. MARC is a communications format for exchanging data. NARA could just as easily say that the English language was useless for producing record descriptions, for, while it has all the necessary words in its lexicon, they would have to be arranged in a particular order to have an inventory! As a matter of fact, within MARC the fields can be recorded in any order, but that is irrelevant to the question of whether a retrieval system to display MARC based data has the capability of displaying the description of a series followed by its index, which is a matter of the design of output screens and reports. Does the team think that any system can output specific reports such as inventories and disposition schedules unless those reports have been defined for it?

The NARA team concludes in addition, that "the process control functions in MARC AMC while sufficient to meet the needs of smaller repositories, are not sophisticated enough to handle easily the complex and multiple needs of NARA. The use of a generic action field to record all types of action requires extra input to name each action, thus increasing the



amount of data entry and the likelihood of errors."

Once again the team confuses the purposes of a communications format with those of an implementation. Any communications function will require that the action for which a variety of data are being exchanged (date of the action, authorization, what was effected and resulting status) be named. How else would the receiving system know what it was that was done to the stuff? If, as is likely, a local system has a special screen for input of all conservation actions and a different screen for input of accessions, and yet another for calling materials from the stacks, then the reasonable designer of an information storage system would have the "action name" stored with each of these actions automatically. Certainly it shouldn't require added input, but whether it does or not is definitely not a consequence of any MARC "function" but rather a local implementation decision based on the need

to meet a logical requirement of communication.

The format was designed for inter-institutional exchange of information, so it is true that it lacks "specifically defined quantity measurements in relation to specific actions" which would be necessary for "compiling statistics and producing administrative reports." Obviously such information should be captured and analyzed in local automated systems. However, if a need to exchange such information is perceived, NARA, in concert with the archival community at large, has the mechanism to expand the format so as to include such information. The Committee on Archival Information Exchange of SAA is charged with this responsibility and the mature professional response to identifying an exchange requirement apparently not met by the MARC AMC format is to propose to CAIE that the necessary data elements be added to the interchange structure.

DAVID BEARMAN  
*Consultant*

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