A Quiet Crisis: Bibliographic Control and Machine-Readable Records for Microforms

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In 1941 Andrew Osborn drew attention to a "crisis" in cataloging generated by a proliferation of new materials and a corresponding inability of libraries to catalog these materials at a reasonable cost due to inadequate cataloging practices and codes.[1] American libraries have apparently survived this crisis of materials, although not without making some concessions to a more simplified and pragmatic approach to cataloging advocated by Osborn and others. Today, the planned adoption of a new cataloging code and the decision of the Library of Congress to close its card catalog have generated a new crisis. Whether libraries will survive this crisis, only time will tell, but there is reason for optimism in the fact that the library community is generally apprised of the impact of these developments, and work is proceeding on both the national and local levels to deal with the issues arising from AACR 2 and the decision of LC to close its card catalog in 1981.

Beneath this well-publicized issue lurks still another crisis in cataloging—a quiet crisis. To date its dimensions and ramifications have not appeared to be fully appreciated. This is the crisis of our current lack of bibliographic control of microforms and the attendant problem of a lack of machine-readable cataloging for titles in microform.

Bibliographic Congrol of Microforms

The issue of bibliographic control of microforms has received attention from librarians and has been discussed in the library press.[2] Most articles on the subject rightfully deplore the lack of adequate bibliographic access and the carelessness of bibliographic essentials shown by some microform publishers. Yet little has been offered in the way of remedy, and little attention has been paid to the problem of providing machine-readable cataloging for titles in microform.

The dimensions of the problem are immense. The *Bowker Annual* has estimated that the number of volume-equivalents contained on microform in college and university libraries in Fall 1977 was 153,000,000.[3] Compared to a total volume count of 490,000,000 for regular print items, this means that microforms now account for approximately 25 percent of the holdings in college and university libraries in the United States. In many libraries, particularly those like the Hunter Library at Western Carolina University, which have grown rapidly during the late 60's and 70's when high quality microform publications have been available in quantity for purchase, the ratio of microforms to print is much higher. At Western Carolina, the number of volume-equivalents on microform exceeds the number of print volumes. Our situation is by no means unique.

It is clear, then, that the problem of bibliographic control of microforms is not one of bringing into the mainstream of bibliographic control a few

straggling items. It is rather a matter of providing adequate bibliographic access for a quarter to a half of our holdings.

Processing Microsets

It is not only the same size, but also the shape of the problem which is formidable. The bulk of the 153,000,000 volume-equivalents represent distinct titles in large collections, such as the pioneering *Library of American Civilization* and the recently published *American Fiction*. For many of these collections, catalog cards are available from the publisher or, in some cases, from libraries which have cataloged the collection. Even where cards are available, however, the problems of integrating purchased card sets into existing card catalogs can be almost insuperable. Apart from problems inherent in the cataloging itself, such as name conflicts due to inadequate authority control and obsolete subject headings, libraries attempting to file purchased cards are frequently overwhelmed with the clerical labor involved. This includes the need for typing call numbers or other location symbols onto the cards, typing headings for added entries, and typing complete cards for missing entries (not an uncommon occurrence with purchased card sets). Based on our experience at Western Carolina with a number of different microform collections, it can be said that as much time is required for preparing for filing a purchased set of cards requiring typing of location symbols and added entry headings as is required for editing and producing cards for a monograph found in the OCLC data base. We have estimated that the time required for preparing, filing, and revising catalog cards for our recently purchased *American Fiction* collections, consisting of a total of approximately 18,000 titles, to be a minimum of 800 person-hours. This, of course, is work which must somehow be accomplished in addition to regular cataloging duties.

Yet backlogs in preparing and filing catalog cards are a commonplace in libraries. What elevates the current situation to a crisis, I believe, is the impact it has on plans for automating catalogs. The computer and machine-readable cataloging records have been hailed as the answer to the lingering crisis of materials and the new crisis of AACR 2. The existence of large bibliographic data bases such as OCLC, BNA, and RLIN (formerly BALLOTS) make it possible for libraries to produce machine-readable cataloging for most new materials and make it economically feasible to convert previous cataloging to machine-readable form. The catch, for libraries with large microform holdings, is that for the most part records for titles in microform collections are generally not in the data bases. Even where cataloging for these collections exists, little or no effort has been made to convert these records to machine-readable form. Thus libraries planning conversions to machine-readable catalogs are faced with the prospect of separating the bibliographic records for these microform collections from the rest of the catalog and maintaining both a card catalog for microforms and a machine-readable catalog for the regular print collection.[4] This must be done, or else a library must take upon itself the massive task of converting available catalog records for microforms to machine-readable form.

Cooperative Cataloging of Microsets

For a single library to catalog or even to put into machine-readable form existing cataloging for some of these collections is, in most cases, probably out of the qurestion. In one of the few serious attemps to deal with this problem, Avram and Gochman[5] suggested in 1972 a centralized agency dedicated to using computer technology to produce machine-readable indexes to

microsets which could be sold to individual libraries in various forms of output. Seven years later, such an agency still does not exist. What we do have, however, are the bibliographic utilities such as OCLC and RLIN with the capability of converting and storing cataloging records in machine-readable form. Clearly, some sort of cooperative effort is necessary to manage this task, and the bibliographic utilities would seem to possess the technical means and the organizational structure to accomplish the task.

For this approach to be effective, however, we must forge a new and broader concept of library cooperation than currently exists. Bibliographic congrol of microforms will not be achieved by the practice of individual libraries inputting single records as the need (or occasion) arises. What is needed is a truly cooperative effort in which libraries interested in machine-readable cataloging for microsets organize to share their human and computer resources to accomplish the task. Using a system like OCLC the cataloging for a particular microset could be input jointly by a group of libraries. The individual records for titles in the set could be coded so that they are machine-readable *en bloc*. With such a system, once the input of the records is complete, a computer program could be written to strip these records from the data base and to write them on to a separate tape. Participating libraries would then receive copies of the tapes which could be machine-loaded into existing or planned institution data bases, thus saving the laborious and time consuming task of searching and retrieving individual records from the master data base. Libraries not participating in the cataloging would be able to purchase ptapes from the network, with perhaps a fee being paid to participating libraries to reward them for their effort.

The system just described is surely technically feasible. The major obstacles to its implementation are organizational in nature. To assess the need, determine the willingness to participate, and to focus available resources on providing machine-readable cataloging for microform collections is no mean organizational task. Structures for managing this task probably exist within present networks however. SOLINET, for example, appears to be searching for ways of expanding its services to member libraries. Short of this, groups such as the recently formed North Carolina SOLINET User's Group could investigate the feasibility of such an approach.

Even with the best of cooperation, a resolution of the problem is not likely to be quickly or easily achieved. In the meantime, there are a number of steps which can and should be taken.

First of all, the library community needs to be better informed of the significance and dimensions of the problem. This is the purpose of this writing. Other discussions are needed, suggesting alternative ways of dealing with the issue.

Second, a specific effort needs to be made to place the issue as a highly priority item among agencies concerned with bibliographic control at the national level. Especially the newly launched Bibliographic Services Development Program of the Council on Library Resources, which has taken as a major goal the coordination of activity among bibliographic networks, should become involved.

Third, librarians must continue to exert pressure on microform publishers to be more concerned with bibliographic access. Many microform collections are currently published without leaders bearing standard bibliographic information for the collection. The situation, interestingly, parallels that which existed for books in the 15th and 16th centuries, when many were published without title pages.

Fourth, microform publishers should be urged to make their cataloging available in machine-readable form in standard MARC formats, which could then easily be added to institution catalog data bases.

Fifth, librarians themselves need to adopt a more positive attitude toward microform collections and to demand adequate access to these collections as a basic service. Too often microform collections are regarded as rather unwanted step-children in the library, and there exists among librarians a blase attitude about access to these collections which would not be tolerated for ordinary print materials.

Finally, as suggested above, I do not believe that we will solve this or other problems of bibliographic control unless a more far-reaching and fruitful attitude toward cooperation and networking is achieved. We should move beyond a minimal concept of networking to a truly synergistic concept of networking in which the human material resources of member libraries are organized and directed to the accomplishment of specific needs. This type of cooperation is not unknown in the library community. The CONSER project for serial publications provides a good example of how such an approach might work. To adopt such an approach to solving the problem of bibliographic control and machine-readable records for microforms seems a natural and logical step.

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REFERENCES

1. Andrew Osborn, "Crisis in Cataloging," *Library Quarterly*, 11 (Oct. 1941), pp. 393-411.
2. See, e.g.: Marcia Jebb, "Bibliographic Control of Microforms," *Drexel Library Quarterly*, 11 (Oct. 1975), pp. 32-41; Robert Grey Cole, "Bibliographic Control," *Illinois Libraries*, 58 (March 1976), pp. 211-216; C. Edward Carroll, "Bibliographic Control of Microforms: Where Do We Go from Here?," *Microform Review*, 7 (Nov. 1978), pp. 321-326.
3. *Bowker Annual*, 23rd ed. (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1978), p. 247.
4. A number of libraries have already had to face this problem. Old Dominion University Library and Greenville County (S. C.) Public Library, e.g., have been unable to display bibliographic records for titles in major microform collections in their new COM catalogs because of the unavailability of machine-readable cataloging for these collections.
5. Henriette D. Avram and Harry Gochman, "A Machine-Readable Index for Microsets," in *Bibliographic Control of Microforms*, by Felix Reichmann and Josephine M. Tharpe (Westwood, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972), pp. 41-47.