CATALOGUE & INDEX

FULL MARCs for MANUSCRIPTS

by David C Sutton*

British and American archivists and manuscripts cataloguers have long held the view that both Chapter 4 of *AACR2* and the standard MARC format are so inadequate for archival purposes as to be not worth taking seriously and not even worth teaching on archives courses. This may be regretted, since MARC is undoubtedly the key to national and international data exchange, but archivists have always refused to consider reducing their standards and, specifically, curtailing their descriptions, simply in order to fit into Procrustean systems devised by librarians for librarians. (Such systems significantly place archives and manuscripts

under the highly offensive heading of "non-book materials".

This paper describes three initiatives which have to some extent broken this impasse and which, by introducing new versions of the MARC format into the world of archives and manuscripts, make data exchange and international networking possible. These are the Location Register Project, based at the University of Reading; the new cataloguing system of the British Library Department of Manuscripts; and the RLIN-AMC format, which has transformed manuscripts cataloguing in the USA over the past six or seven years.

Unfortunately, the assumption that MARC is wholly unsuitable for the cataloguing of manuscripts is still, in Britain, taken as read and taken as a starting-point. In recent years, computerised cataloguing has been widely adopted by British archivists, but it has taken the form of a

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Negotiations have reached an advanced stage for a sponsored T-shirt (100% cotton, of course - and unbleached if it can be sorted out with the printers). This will be available in the new year; perhaps an ideal late Christmas present. The T-shirt will be printed in two colours with a 4" diameter CIG logo and "SILVER" written below it (the sponsors' logos will appear on the verso). The price will be in the region of £5. Please contact Keith Trickey, 25 Sandy Lane, West Kirby, Wirral, L48 3HY ('phone 051 625 6316) specifying size required to reserve your copy.

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proliferation of individual stand-alone catalogues in a variety of formats. Some of the catalogues are very sophisticated in design, but none of them was created with data-exchange in view.

Certain archivists have moved beyond their technical objections to MARC-based systems to develop positions in favour of stand-alone systems as a matter of principle - arguing that for archivists there is no need at all for physical transfer of data from one catalogue to another or from one network to another. Such a position was strongly argued by Chris Woolgar in an article published in the *Journal of the Society of Archivists*:

> The main principle behind the development of the Machine Readable Cataloguing (MARC) format for the automated cataloguing of books was the need for libraries to exchange data, to develop shared cataloguing systems. It is much less likely that record offices will wish to share data, although they will probably wish to search the data in each other's files. The principal question of strategy, therefore, in the development of an automated system for cataloguing manuscripts is not the standardisation of the detailed structure of information interchange, but the means of access to it.[1]

Many British Archivists, and a few North Americans, still hold the view that the spreading use of systems with incompatible software is not a problem and that archivists need only to be able to access each other's data, not to share it. In other words, the aim is a series of linked nodes, without any development of host databases.

In mitigation of this individualist position, let me remind you of an obvious fundamental difference between archives and books: namely, the fact that each archive is unique. Until the age of word-processors, there has been no such thing as genuinely duplicate manuscripts. And when two manuscripts have been very very similar, they have *especially* needed individual descriptions (including references to their siblings). You cannot catalogue a manuscript by waiting until the University of Bristol has processed its copy and then using their record!

Nevertheless, what Woolgar has not taken into account is the fact that the searcher for manuscript information, as opposed to the cataloguer, can derive benefits from data-sharing networks which are comparable to the benefits derived by the searcher for book information. The searcher who is obliged to scan through the series of linked nodes, using a system such as JANET, for example, is being given a very poor searching service. Thus, someone who is looking for all papers relating to the fourteenth century poll tax, say, or to little magazines published in Paris, is soon going to tire of logging in and out, in and out, in order to search the catalogues of Canterbury Cathedral and then perhaps the Huntington Library in California and then Gloucestershire Record Office and so on.

This is not to denigrate JANET or similar networks. JANET is a very useful tool in many ways, but it is not designed for cross-collection searching. It is, moreover, becoming ever more obvious that the greater the variety of catalogues available on JANET, the more complicated JANET becomes for its users.

I suspect that the arguments now coming forward against networked archival databases are, to some extent, *ex post facto* self-justifications. Having devised a system which makes data-exchange almost impossible, one will naturally be much more likely to evolve a philosophy based on non-exchange.

We at the Location Register have adopted a different philosophy, based on the desirability of sharing data. We have been using a MARC-based system for the listing of manuscripts since 1982. We have since been followed in this by the North American archivists using the RLIN-AMC system and, more recently, by the British Library's Department of Manuscripts and we are quite clear that our choice of a MARC-based system has brought us, and will bring us, a number of important advantages - advantages which will outweigh the restrictions which the use of MARC has placed upon us.

When I took up my position as Senior Research Officer of the Location Register project in October 1982, I was starting from scratch. I had a blank desk, an empty filing-cabinet, no staff, and a computerisation-budget but no computer. The mission was to go out and locate and list all modern literary papers which were available for public consultation anywhere in the British Isles.[2]. The project's founders (my Advisory Group) had taken a decision that this new location list should be "computerised", but had not prescribed a method. The first task of the new Senior Research Officer was to be the choice of a system of computerisation. We can take it, however, that most of the librarians on the Advisory Group were assuming that UKMARC was the norm, while the archivists were generally hostile to it.

I started by dividing the possibilities into three groups:
(1)   some sort of stand-alone system based at Reading, using our own programming according to our own precise needs, probably with a fairly large mini-computer;
(2)   the use of the facilities of a university computer centre like Oxford, Manchester or, indeed, Reading, in conjunction with a standard archival or database package such as FAMULUS (in 1982 surveys showed that more archivists were using FAMULUS than any other package or format);
(3)   the use of an existing database or network to create and store our data (recognising that this would involve our becoming the first manuscripts catalogue to use the MARC format).

There followed two months of discussions, tests, proposals and counter-proposals[3] - at the end of which time a decision was taken that the Location Register should be a MARC file maintained by the British Library's BLAISE-LOCAS service. Among the factors which were taken into account in reaching this decision were the desire to see a major national project as part of the major national database; the impracticality of maintaining our own hardware; costing, and standard of output; and the allocation of a number of local MARC fields to fit the particular needs of a literary location list. I don't want to burden you with lists of sub-fields and indicators, but examples of our local fields are 719 for location (city, town or village); 659 for genre (novels, poems, libretti, account books, etc.); 956 for printed sources of information; 957 for the date information was collected; and 249 for correspondence (distinct from