

1969: Retrospective Conversion (RECON)

In 1969, CLR awarded the Library of Congress \$25,000 for a pilot project to convert retrospective cataloging records to machine-readable form. Over the previous years, CLR had helped support development of Project MARC (Machine Readable Cataloging), which distributed standard cataloging information in machine-readable form. But the MARC program focused on current cataloging only, and there was an urgent need to convert earlier cataloging records to machine-readable form.

The description on the following pages is taken from the 13th annual report of the Council on Library Resources, Inc., for the period ending June 30, 1969, pp. 12-17.

II. AUTOMATION

Readers of these reports are aware that the Council has from its establishment entertained high hopes for the ultimately beneficial effects of automation on library work, but that it has nevertheless been studious to avoid the costly mistakes which have too often attended attempts to automate library procedures. The Council believes that, as a result, it has been able to contribute significantly to steady, planned, progress in this field at relatively low expense. However, because of the amount and complexity of activity in this area, a preliminary word may be useful as to the relationship and significance of the several projects which the Council is currently supporting.

The Council early concluded that successful automation of libraries was completely dependent upon the availability of bibliographic information in a standardized machine-readable form, preferably from a central source. *Project MARC* is the operating expression of that conclusion; it is actually providing libraries with a machine-readable version of the Library of Congress' current output of printed catalog cards of English language titles. However, the current record by itself is insufficient for library needs; the retrospective record is required to complement it, and to supply this is the objective of *Project RECON*. But the Library

⁴ X: 59.

⁵ Maynard J. Brichford. *Scientific and Technological Documentation, Archival Evaluation and Processing of University Records Relating to Science and Technology*. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1969. 35 p. Processed. 28 cms.

of Congress is not the only Federal agency supplying bibliographic information to libraries, and it is important that in these matters all *Three National Libraries* employ the same standards so as to contribute maximally to national compatibility of practice. At the same time, while concerned with the supply, the Council has not neglected potential consumers of this information. In the *NELINET project* it is assisting six university libraries to develop procedures for utilizing the MARC information; in *Project LISTS* it is similarly assisting pilot application to various library operations of on-line computer services from a central facility; and in the abortive *International Business Machine Corporation project* it had hoped to collaborate with one of the major suppliers in this field in a demonstration of the application of its latest achievements to library work. In the *Archive of Folk Song* and the *Classification Scheme for Slides projects* it had, by contrast, supported projects in which computers play comparatively simple but eminently practical roles. Lastly, in *Project INTREX* it is assisting extremely sophisticated experimentation toward the development of the university library of the future.

MARC: Project to System The preceding section has taken note of the Council's early recognition that the general application of computer technology to library work would be possible only if machine-readable bibliographic data could be distributed in adequate form. This realization developed over a period of years into a sequence of grants and contracts leading to Project MARC (MACHINE Readable Cataloging),⁶ two reports concerning which have appeared during the Council's fiscal year.⁷ Using a refinement of the earlier format, Project MARC has become the MARC Distribution Service.

In March of 1969 the Card Division of the Library of Congress, drawing on a revolving fund provided by a grant from the Council, began the regular sale of magnetic tapes containing cataloging information in a standard format. Now more than 50 subscribers to the MARC Distribution Service are receiving weekly tapes of about 1,000 catalog records each. These include all English language monographs currently being acquired by the Library.

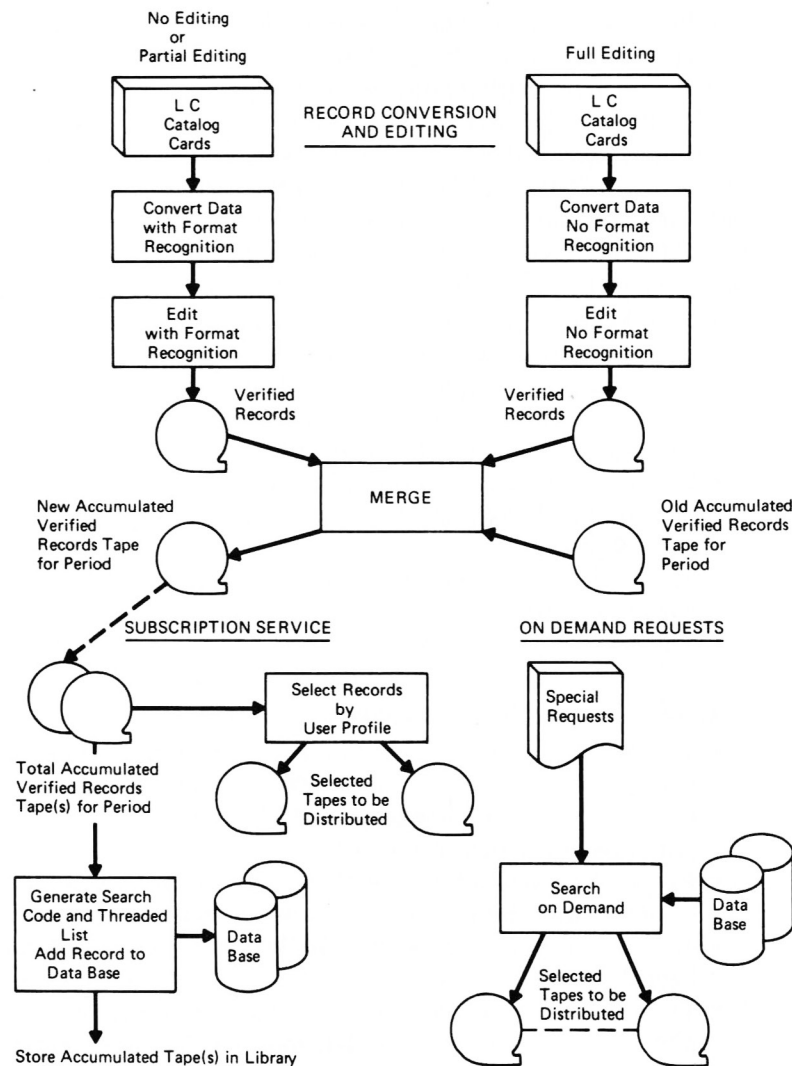
⁶ X: 29-30, 41-42; XI: 11-12; XII: 13-14.

⁷ *The MARC Pilot Experience, An Informal Summary*. Washington, Library of Congress, Information Systems Office. June 1968. 15 l. 26½ cms. *The MARC Pilot Project. Final Report on a Project Sponsored by the Council on Library Resources, Inc.* Prepared by Henriette D. Avram. Washington, Library of Congress, 1968 [1969]. [iii,] 183 p. 20 cms.

The final report of the MARC Pilot Project may have understated the case in observing, "The single most significant result of MARC has been the impetus to set standards. There is no doubt that eventually standards would have been designed for machine-readable bibliographic records, character sets, and codes for such elements as place and language. MARC accelerated standardization and still more important, the standards are being set and agreed to by a large segment of the library community." The National Task Force on Automation and Other Cooperative Services — representing the Library of Congress, the National Library of Medicine, and the National Agricultural Library — is one of several groups to adopt the new MARC format. Overseas it is the basis of the United Kingdom MARC Pilot Project sponsored by the British National Bibliography.

A most important activity arising from the development of MARC is the series of MARC Seminars sponsored by the Library of Congress and the Information Science and Automation Division of the American Library Association. LC Information Systems Office staff members as well as systems specialists from other libraries have presented the Seminars at which approximately 1,000 librarians have received detailed two-day explanations of the meaning of the MARC program and the structure of the standardized bibliographic format on which it is based.

REtrospective CONversion The MARC program has been concerned with current cataloging only; it has not attempted to cover what has been done in the past. There is, however, widespread interest in and indeed an urgent need for converting the earlier cataloging records to machine-readable form in order to provide a comprehensive store of bibliographic information. Individual libraries with computer facilities have begun converting their own records, but with uncoordinated conversion there is the likelihood that the resulting product will not be standard, nationally or internationally. Because of the heavy and increasing amount of overlap among the collections of American research libraries, unilateral conversions would also involve duplication of effort costing millions and requiring an enormous amount of manpower. Since the Library of Congress, with its nationally important collection, has been trying to come to grips with the problem of converting its retrospective catalog, the Council made a grant to that institution for a study of the



FLOW CHART showing steps involved in preparing and disseminating retrospective bibliographic records in machine-readable form at the Library of Congress for a projected national service to libraries. (From Conversion of Retrospective Catalog Records to Machine Readable-Form, Library of Congress, 1969.)

feasibility of a major assault on this problem. The study⁸ was carried out by a working task force of librarians and computer systems analysts representing various types of libraries, under the guidance of an advisory committee.

The principal outcome of the investigation was the general conclusion that large-scale centralized conversion should indeed be attempted under the direction of the Library of Congress, with its Official Catalog as the data base. Other conclusions stated in the report issued by the task force included:

- The MARC Distribution Service should be expanded to cover all languages and all forms of material as rapidly as resources and technology allow. There should be no conversion of any category of retrospective records until that category is being currently converted.
- Conversion of some portion of retrospective records to machine-readable form should be an early goal of library automation efforts.
- Standards for conversion should be the same as those for current records.
- The highest priority should be given to records most likely to be useful to the largest number of libraries.

Among the specific recommendations were:

- The initial conversion should be limited to English language monograph records issued from 1960 to date. Second priority should be given to Romance and German language monograph records issued from 1960.
- Every effort should be made to convert priority one and two records within four years. Conversion should start with the most recent year and proceed backward in reverse chronological order.
- There should be a study of the problems of creating a complete national bibliographic data store, including determination of the best means of obtaining standardized records for bibliographic items not in the Library of Congress record set.

In pursuit of the goals detailed in these conclusions and recommendations, the Council has made a grant to supplement funds appropriated by the Library of Congress for a pilot project. This seeks to establish definitive methods for conversion and to determine costs. In addition, it will convert to MARC format the

⁸ *Conversion of Retrospective Catalog Records to Machine-Readable Form, A Study of the Feasibility of a National Bibliographic Service*. Prepared by the RECON Working Task Force: Henriette D. Avram, Chairman, . . . Washington, Library of Congress, 1969. x, 230 p. 26 cms. Processed.

Library's catalog records for 1968 English language monographs as well as those 1969 English language monographs not previously covered by the current MARC program.

The progress of scholarship, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, is seriously hampered by the inability of libraries to produce their materials in the forms needed by scholars for their studies. RECON's potential value to scholarship is enormous — far exceeding its cost, great though that will probably be.

The Three National Libraries The creation of a joint Task Force on Automation and Other Cooperative Services by the National Library of Medicine, National Agricultural Library, and the Library of Congress in the spring of 1967 was a major step in the development of library service. The goals of this cooperative effort are the development of a national data bank of machine-readable cataloging information, of a similar bank of information on the location of the thousands of serial titles in American research libraries, and the achievement of the maximum possible degree of compatibility in the practices of the three libraries. As mentioned in the Council's preceding annual report, when the National Library of Medicine found that as a result of a limitation on personnel it was unable to participate adequately in the activities of the Task Force, the Council employed an experienced systems specialist and assigned him to Task Force duties at the Library of Medicine. This year the Council has employed a second specialist to reinforce the work.

Task Force groups are involved in a number of investigations relating to compatibility and problems of design. The program is intricate, but progress is good. As the Deputy Librarian of Congress, John G. Lorenz, said in an address at a recent international meeting,⁹ the Task Force's accomplishments "in a relatively brief period of time have been rather remarkable, particularly when it is recognized that many involve problem areas in which sceptics expressed doubt that any compatibility could be achieved — at least in our lifetime."

New England Board of Higher Education The Council has continued its interest in the development of the New England Library Information Network (NELINET), making this year its fifth grant to the New England Board of Higher Education for the purpose.¹⁰ NELINET, regional

⁹ First Japan - U.S. Conference on Libraries and Information Science in Higher Education: Tokyo, May 15-19, 1969.

¹⁰ XI: 12-14; XII: 12.