[ORAL REPORT]

CATALOGUING COMMISSION REPORT

MO I RANA, MAY 1993

Dear Friends and Colleagues: This is the year to stress coordination, cooperation, and access. Last year we focused on automation. We talked about the increasing affordability of automation for film archives, owing to a narrowing of the power/cost ratio of computer hardware/software configurations. This trend has indeed been confirmed by the evidence of our activities as recorded in our annual reports. During 1992, nearly 80% of the archives who reported on cataloging activities mentioned specifically the use of computers. Of these, 11 indicated that they had instituted computer usage for the first time, while 5 indicated a change from older to newer more powerful and/or more flexible systems. Most new systems reported using microcomputers or groups of them interconnected through LANS, although a few utilize minicomputers, while others are connected on-line into the mainframes of their parent institutions. Gone are the days of batch processing and the use of computer bureaus. Acronyms—AIMS, COMAT, Aleph, EXTRACT, DATAFile, RegFilm, STAR, ORACLE, NOTIS, RCIP—are proliferating. Most commonly mentioned of the software used is still ISIS (in its MicroISIS and MinISIS iterations). Cuadra’s STAR (excuse the pun) is also rising. Standards most commonly mentioned are MARC and, not surprisingly, the FIAF Cataloguing Rules.

Along with this ever increasing use of automation, stand reports of cooperative activities based on building local, national, and regional international networks. And although worldwide networks, such as TIMS which promised the appearance of single entity access to a configuration of distributed databases linked through high-speed networks, are not yet realities, there is a part of the technology which is already here. Those of us who have access to Internet know what I mean, for Internet is already proving its usefulness to archives.

What is Internet and how does it work? Internet is a large system of interconnected and not necessarily compatible networks which “are built upon a variety of physical technologies (including Ethernet, Token Ring, and point-to-point links using satellites and ground-based lines) unified by a common set of protocols, and in particular by a common addressing scheme. These separate networks which compose Internet form a wide-area network that today extends to many countries throughout the world.
Typical uses of Internet include remote log-in, electronic mail and associated bulletin boards or listservs, and file transfer. For example, once I have an Internet address, I can write a message to any colleague anywhere in the world who also has an address and have that message appear directly in that person’s local EMail listing. If I subscribe to a bulletin board or listserv of a particular interest group, messages posted to that listserv will also appear in my EMail account.

The key, of course, is access. In the United States, most major organizations and institutions belong. For individual users associated with these organizations, the cost of using Internet is the cost of a local telephone call. For those without, access can be difficult and expensive. For Americans, this disparity has already led to a national discussion concerning the merits of free access to information in a democratic society. Meanwhile, many major libraries have already placed their automated catalogs on the Internet. The Library of Congress, which just last year was talking of creating a system of licensing for use of its cataloging data, has now (as of May 1), joined them in making access to its major catalogs and automated files free for the price of a famous local telephone call. Included in the records posted to Internet are all those posted to the Library’s main bibliographic files by the film archive, our FIAF member, the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division. The UCLA Film and Television Archive is hoping to have its records on Internet shortly.

So, the days of shared cataloging are really here. Now a cataloger at one institution can sit at his/her workstation and find out, on an up-to-date basis, whether or not a colleague at another archive has already created a record for the film he/she is about to catalog. Data painstakingly collected, researched, formatted and input at one institution no longer has to be worked out all over again by a cataloger at another far-distant institution.

Does this possibility yet replace older efforts like our nitrate union catalog in Brussels? The answer is no—not yet—and for several reasons. First, most of us do not have access to Internet, and our catalogs do not appear there. But even if they did (and more inevitably will) until some special link between catalogs, such as that envisioned by TIMS, enable us to search several catalogs as one, and until we have more commonly agreed upon ways of organizing and formatting our data, information will remain elusive and difficult to understand and share. The degree to which data is useful depends upon the extent to which institutions utilize the same or similar standards and also, inevitably, the degree of reliability the records from any given institution may be said to possess.

But tomorrow is here. Last year, eleven archives mentioned inter-institutional cooperative cataloging efforts. This is approximately the number of archives who, about twenty years ago, reported using computer systems when we first started asking. What will another twenty years bring? In all their activities, FIAF and its members are at work building
infrastructures which should serve us well in future, enabling us to take full advantage of future possibilities for cooperation and sharing -- in collection building, in preservation, in cataloging, and yes, dare I say it, also in programming.

The written report I have given you emphasizes two new efforts to improve cooperation and communication: the establishment of a system of corresponding membership and the creation of a new communication mechanism--the Cataloguing Commission Occasional Papers:

Last autumn, the Commission requested FIAF archives to nominate members of their staffs to affiliate with the Commission as corresponding members, and response has been quite positive. Now we have as corresponding members 31 colleagues from archives in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North and South America. When we sent out the letters inviting nominees to accept corresponding membership, we included a list of several projects, approved for our work by FIAF's Executive Committee. Corresponding members have volunteered to work on all these projects, some even volunteering to participate in several. We invite all of you who have not yet taken advantage of this opportunity, to nominate a staff member to participate. In addition to our increased possibilities for accomplishing work, some have also noticed the side benefits of increased morale through the exchange of ideas and a loss of the sense of working in isolation.

The new series, the Cataloguing Commission Occasional Papers, goes first to our corresponding members and then to all FIAF archives. So far, we have issued three papers, and we have two more on the drawing boards. The idea behind these papers is to promote the exchange of ideas and to stimulate excitement in cataloging work. Papers offered for inclusion in the series need not be august and dusty tomes designed to impress others with the author's erudition, although we would welcome those, too. Rather, we want to encourage people to share thoughts, questions and experiences through these papers. So please encourage your people to contribute. The more we share, the more we all gain.