Standards work at its easiest is never very easy. In the fields of automation and bibliographic control of special collections it is perhaps more difficult than in other areas. To be properly consultative and authoritative, this kind of standards work must take place under the aegis of national organizations like the American Library Association. This in itself is enough to exclude the direct participation of most candidates for work in this area because, as the last few years have shown, most special collections librarians either shun ALA altogether or limit their attendance to annual Rare Book and Manuscript Section (RBMS) preconference institutes and summer rare book schools. While these seminars and workshops arguably contribute to the subject expertise and professional development of the participants—sometimes even in areas relating to automated bibliographic control—they do not necessarily contribute to the development of standards hospitable to rare book and special collections.

Perhaps it is because special collections librarians are often academic tenure-track defectors of one kind or another that they sometimes tend to value pursuit of esoteric subdisciplines more than the less exciting task of improving the accessibility of their collections to other scholars. As a result, it is generally only a dedicated few who end up doing standards work in this field. To make matters worse, those few who do commit themselves to the long and usually thankless process of standards work are frequently faced with apathetic or even unsympathetic administrators at their home institutions, with workloads that

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allow little or no time for standards activities, and with extremely long intervals between meetings—intervals long enough almost to forget what the point of it all is.

The pool of talent, energy, leadership, and institutional support for this kind of standards work seems depressingly small. The same peoples' names come up over and over, and those capable of making real contributions always seem to be involved in a myriad of other activities, most of them much more entertaining. When people are finally corralled into participating in this work, it is not infrequently the case that, when they finally meet after six months or a year, they haven't had a moment to do what they promised they would at the last meeting, and they have usually had to pay their own way to the conference.

Why it should be so difficult to carry out standards work in the area of automated control of special collections is perhaps not really so mysterious. To many people's minds rare book cataloging and library automation are both tainted with being clerical, unacademic, and perhaps even vaguely disreputable (and when you consider that librarianship itself is generally considered disreputable, those involved in computer-assisted rare book cataloging must be disreputable indeed). After all, isn't rare book cataloging where you put people who were personnel problems elsewhere in the library? And isn't automation really inimical to the true spirit of old books, even if it does help you get grant money these days?

Yet a further problem in standards work in this area is the lack of an effective institutional vehicle for it. The Library of Congress (LC) has provided some leadership in the past, most notably in the preparation of *Bibliographic Description of Rare Books* (1981), the manual that made it possible even to consider applying the second edition of the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules* (AACR2) to the cataloging of rare books. For most purposes, however, LC has chosen not to be a center of activity for rare book standards work.

Since 1980, the Standards Committee of the Rare Book and Manuscript Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries of ALA has attempted to coordinate standards development in the area of bibliographic control of rare books. The RBMS Standards Committee was in many ways the outgrowth of an ad hoc committee of the Independent Research Libraries Association (IRLA) which in 1979 was charged with investigating the problems of rare book cataloging and automation. This IRLA committee, chaired by Marcus A. McCorrison, librarian and director of the American Antiquarian Society, issued a final report that had several major recommendations—it supported LC's proposal to publish a cataloging manual compatible with
AACR2, and urged that LC consult widely with the rare book community during its preparation (which it did); it proposed a number of changes to the LC MARC (Machine Readable Cataloging) format to accommodate rare book information; and it recommended that a number of thesauri be developed for specialized access points in rare book records ("special file access").

Members of the IRLA committee and those in RBMS who were following its progress soon realized the need for some more permanent vehicle to carry out these recommendations and to continue to promote bibliographic standards, as well as education and information exchange in this area. To this end the RBMS Standards Committee was established in 1979 and met for the first time in January 1980.

Since 1980, the Standards Committee has succeeded to some extent in coordinating further work on bibliographical standards for rare book and special collections. The committee has so far sponsored, produced, or worked on the following standards:

- Standard Citation Forms for Published Bibliographies and Catalogs Used in Rare Book Cataloging by Peter VanWingen and Stephen Davis. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1982.
- Genre Terms: A Thesaurus for Use in Rare Book and Special Collections Cataloguing. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, ALA, 1983. (Editor's Note: This thesaurus is currently under revision. Two more thesauri have been completed: Printing and Publishing Evidence. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, ALA, 1986; and Binding Terms. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, ALA, 1987.)

In addition to these published standards, the standards committee completed and shepherded through ALA the IRLA MARC format proposals, all except one of which were ultimately accepted; it has sponsored programs and information exchanges, it has begun to open channels of communication with the major bibliographic utilities (OCLC and RLIN) about the needs of rare book and special collections; it has developed proposals for handling rare serials in MARC and under AACR2, which, in revised form, were adopted by the Library of Congress and published as LC rule interpretations in Cataloging Service Bulletin, No. 26, Fall 1984, pp. 21-25.

On the surface, these publications and activities might seem reasonable accomplishments for a committee that was established seven
years ago. In actuality, however, progress has been painfully slow and hampered by many of the problems mentioned earlier in this paper. Even more significantly, however, the Standards Committee has not managed to move beyond those original IRLA proposals. Much has happened in librarianship, automation, and special collections over the past seven years, and many opportunities have been missed in education, dissemination of information, standards coordination and development, and for constructive engagement in issues before RBMS and other parts of ALA. Broader discussion of directions for technical services in special collections has been notably absent from committee deliberations.

A further dilution of the effectiveness of the committee resulted from a 1984 decision by the RBMS Executive Committee to broaden the Standards Committee’s scope to include review of all kinds of nonbibliographic standards, regardless of the interest or expertise of committee members. Despite the generality of the Standards Committee’s name (which stemmed solely from intra-ALA political considerations, ca. 1979), its charge—not yet fulfilled—related solely to bibliographic standards. The Executive Committee’s unfortunate decision at one stroke added another layer of bureaucracy to RBMS, impeded progress on technical processing standards, and established an inadequate and inappropriate mechanism for review of nonbibliographic standards within the section.

This decision, however, can be seen to reflect the general under-valuation of cataloging, automation, and bibliographic control by many administrators in the field, who typically have little awareness of the importance of developing and coordinating standards in this area. Now that a few of the initial problems of doing rare book cataloging through the OCLC and RLIN seem to have been solved, some rare book librarians may be losing their interest in the remaining substantial issues. Many in the field have never understood the need to follow external standards of any kind, feeling that their institutional practice (dating in some cases from the nineteenth century) was probably the best that could possibly be developed. Now that they have modified their practice to the extent that they are allowed to participate in the national networks, they resent being asked to standardize their practice any further, even in the name of future benefits to themselves, other institutions, and scholars.

These attitudes seem to reflect a kind of institutional parochialism and lack of vision with regard to the role of special collections as a national research tool and not just a local resource or private treasure. This parochialism combines in some cases with a competitiveness with
other special collections, a general unwillingness to engage in cooperative projects, and a highly developed chauvinism about the importance of their own collections. This is, of course, not true of all or even most rare book and special collections librarians, but it is prevalent enough to hinder the effectiveness of certain kinds of cooperative efforts in the field.

One might hope that the introduction of automation in rare book and special collections will gradually break down some of this parochialism as has been the case generally with many of the large research libraries. With those libraries, particularly ones that have joined the Research Libraries Group, automation has opened the door to a broader approach to cooperation that involves not only technical processing, but such areas as cooperative collection development, cooperative preservation plans, and a general attempt to consider the nation’s research libraries as a single, multifaceted resource, rather than as a multitude of warring fiefdoms.

Special collections may have an even more fundamental problem than parochialism, however. Many special collections seem to have only the most tenuous sense of their own goals and objectives. They frequently have no one-year plan, much less a five- or ten-year strategy, and no effective planning mechanism. Further, they often have no overall service philosophy and no very precise idea of what their role in research and scholarship is likely to be in the future.

Only a few years ago, this author consulted for a highly regarded rare book library with no automated processing. The assistant director of the library articulated his request approximately as follows: “We have some extra money, so we thought we’d get a terminal. What kind should we get?” The gentleman really had no idea what a terminal was or what it could do. He did not really want a study of what automation could accomplish for the institution—he just wanted a terminal. This was clearly an unwise approach to planning for anything much less something as complex as automation.

Another institution for which the author consulted asked whether they should retrospectively convert into machine-readable form their entire manual card catalog dating from the nineteenth century—not an unreasonable question on the face of it. However, when asked what institutional programs or services they wanted their cataloging to support more effectively or what more they wanted their catalog to do than it was doing already, they seemed bewildered by the questions as if no one had ever suggested to them that their cataloging operation had anything to do with the rest of their services and programs.
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Yet another rare book library for which this author consulted seemed chiefly interested in having a report written that would prevent them from having their cataloging automated by the main university library to which they were attached. In many ways, that seemed the most reasonable request since they at least appeared to know what they did not want to happen to their programs and services.

Cataloging and automation are only tools; they are not ends in themselves. Those who administer special collections must know in some detail what their goals and objectives are in order to plan for what these tools can do. The best approach to planning for automation (or anything else) for most special collections would be to undertake a careful self-study of their users, collections, services, publications program, and institutional objectives, in conjunction with a thoughtful investigation of where research, scholarship, and automation are headed in the next ten years. Staff at all levels of the organization should be involved in an intensive goals-setting exercise and an institutional consensus developed about the directions to be taken. Administrators will also need to educate themselves and their staffs on a continuing basis about new technology and new work in bibliographic and other standards for special collections.

A general investigation of where research, scholarship, publishing, and library automation are headed, with particular emphasis on the role special collections should play in this, might in fact best be carried out at the national level so that the larger context would be apparent and so that other institutions could benefit from the exercise. This might well be something that grant money would be available for and perhaps sponsorship by one or more professional or scholarly organizations. Such a study could be seen as a natural extension of the 1986 Carnegie Commission report on higher education. Some of the questions to be addressed might include: Should special collections collect and catalog all the things that are currently being collected and cataloged? How are special collections actually being used? Who is using them? Who should use them? Who will use them in the future? Will different media be collected in the future? How can special collections be effectively exploited as research collections in a national and international context? Are foundation and grant monies being appropriately spent? Are special collections wasting money duplicating materials? How do the goals of special collections fit in with the goals of the larger institutions to which they are sometimes associated? Is enough money being spent on cataloging? Is too much money being spent on cataloging? Do all materials require full cataloging? Is some kind of minimal-level cataloging sufficient for most items, particularly those described fully in a
standard bibliography or national database? Is adequate information about these items being shared with other institutions? Do we need more computerized bibliographic tools like the Eighteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue (ESTC), or are such projects luxuries and expensive toys? Are computers in special collections really just fancy new baubles, or do they serve a real purpose? Will users of special collections really benefit from the efficiencies and new approaches computers will bring, or are they being served just as well by old-fashioned card catalogs?

At the very least such a study might raise the consciousness and level of discourse of administrators and library directors about these issues. It might also result in some surprising answers.

Goals for the Future

In the absence of a general investigation of the collections and services of rare book and special collections, one can only attempt an educated guess at the directions technical services in rare book libraries should take in the future. The following list of possible goals and activities presupposes that many special collections are indeed important for research, that automation can improve services and programs in such libraries, and that the cost of carrying out these proposals would be justified by benefits to users. However, these presuppositions are untested. A study of the kind proposed earlier might show that special collections are relatively unimportant; that automation will not measurably improve services in special collections; and that the costs of automation, standardization, and cooperation in this field far outweigh the advantages. Since there is so far no objective way to decide these issues, the reader must choose which set of prejudices to accept.

In-Process Standards

The standards that are now in process in the RBMS Standards Committee need to be finished as soon as possible. At present, these consist chiefly of the thesauri of access terms for physical description of rare materials. The first draft of these was produced in 1979 by the IRLA Ad Hoc Committee, and it is considerably past time for this task to be finished. This set of standards will finally allow special collections to have access in a standard and systematic way to much of the information formerly kept in special card files, often haphazardly. It will give increased visibility—and perhaps respectability—to many of the features that were important reasons for the materials having been collected in the first place and which special collections librarians have always intuitively known were important bibliographic access points.
Additional Standards Needed

Several additional standards are probably needed in the area of technical processing for rare materials. There would be many advantages, for instance, in developing standards for completeness of rare book catalog records. Increasingly, the database for special collections records is becoming national and international, and unless there is a reasonable degree of consistency in the composition of the records, the effectiveness of this database will be impeded. Some committee, institution, or individual is needed to study National-Level Bibliographic Records–Books, as well as the input standards of the three major bibliographic utilities, to determine whether they are appropriate for rare materials cataloging. Then, additional standards need to be developed addressing the routine inclusion of the newly standardized rare materials access points, such as genre, printer, publisher, binding, and place of publication. It may be that for optimal national access, a certain level of special added entries should be routinely provided in a rare book catalog record.

The applicability of minimal-level cataloging to rare books should be studied. It may be that certain categories of material are reasonable (even desirable) candidates for minimal-level cataloging. Furthermore, like it or not, some special collections will inevitably need to process a great many new items in a short period of time or want to bring their arrearages under control quickly, or they simply will not be able to afford a full-level catalog record. For these reasons, a suitable standard for which data elements to include in a minimal-level rare book catalog record should be defined.

Along similar lines, a set of guidelines for the retrospective conversion of rare materials’ catalogs might well need to be developed. A good deal of retrospective conversion is either going on now or being planned among institutions of all kinds, and questions frequently arise about how it should best be carried out, for example, which data elements will be included, which enhancements should be made to the records, which level of bibliographic consistency should be imposed on older records. These decisions, though frequently made locally, have more than local implications, and this should be recognized by the development of some kind of standard or set of guidelines for the retrospective conversion of special collections records. In the absence of such national standards, special collections records may end up being treated in exactly the same way that nonspecial collection records are and may also be subject to whatever the local vendor or computer center wants to provide.

Additional work needs to be done in the area of standards for copy-specific information, such as provenance, special physical fea-
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tures, etc. At one time, it appeared that this difficult problem had been solved; now, however, it is clear that the bibliographical utilities continue to diverge in the way they handle this information such that certain kinds of collaboration among libraries belonging to different networks may be difficult or impossible. This issue needs to be opened up again, particularly in light of the pending implementation of the new USMARC Format for Holdings and Locations.

The area of preservation is increasingly important for libraries of all kinds. Leaving aside questions of preservation approaches and techniques, the representation of preservation and conservation information in the MARC catalog record is sorely in need of standardization. Work has begun now at the Library of Congress to address this problem; rare book and special collections librarians need to participate in the development of this standard and to make sure of its implementation at the network level and that it locally serves their needs.

Collaboration with Other Types of Special Collections

In a different direction, another important area for additional work is that of coordinating existing and future rare book standards and projects with those being developed or planned by those working with other, specialized nonbook research collections. In many cases, rare book standards may be able to be used as a point of departure, or at least a point of reference, for other standards groups. One of the lessons of the past few years has been that special collections in different areas, such as rare books, graphic materials, manuscripts, maps, music, archival motion pictures, even machine-readable data files, have a great deal in common in terms of specialized access requirements. Another lesson is that special collections are much more effective in getting what they want from networks, vendors, and foundations when they collaborate with each other. Yet another lesson is that, unless technical standards in these diverse areas are coordinated, the result will be incompatible system requirements, duplication of work, and loss in effectiveness in providing consistent access techniques for these materials. In short, more efforts need to be made to increase communication among these groups, with the goal of increasing coordination and effectiveness, and maximizing the lobbying power of special collections as a whole. The RBMS Standards Committee has made a start at this, but much more needs to be done.

Relations With Bibliographic Utilities

A continuing effort also needs to be made to discuss the objectives of special collections cataloging with the bibliographic utilities. The fact
that special collections are split between OCLC and RLIN means that most especially close coordination is needed to make sure that both utilities are responsive to the proposals of the special collections community. Further, libraries belonging to the different utilities (or having stand-alone local systems) need to make sure that their cataloging—including specialized access points and copy-specific information—remains compatible to the greatest degree possible so as not to exclude cooperative enterprises that involve records from both major utilities.

In addition, it seems that planning for automated support for special collections is proceeding increasingly under the aegis of network and consortium planning groups rather than at the national level. This makes coordination between the utilities and national standards and planning groups even more essential so that those in one bibliographic utility do not overlook the eventual impact that their planning may have on their colleagues in the other bibliographic utility. At the very least, information needs to be widely disseminated about these network-specific planning activities.

The networking environment that has developed over the past few years, in which decisions about bibliographic control are made relative to the bibliographic utility to which an institution belongs, is a new one that is fraught with implications for those interested in national planning for special collections.

Relations with the Library of Congress

The Library of Congress remains an important resource for U.S. libraries in the area of standards and other kinds of planning and coordination. The RBMS Standards Committee and other similar groups should attempt to maintain and increase their contacts with LC. One way to do this might be to seek formal representation from LC at its meetings or perhaps seek an informal arrangement whereby someone from LC attended when it seemed particularly useful.

Information About Vendors of Computer Services

Private vendors of computer services have a great deal to offer special collections with files of MARC records. They can provide printed bibliographies, finding lists, special database searches, in-house online catalogs, and other research tools. A committee or institution should act as a clearinghouse about such vendors and their services particularly those appropriate to special collections. Information about vendor performance might also be made available. This service would be of enormous value to institutions attempting to find a vendor for the first time.
Microcomputers

Many institutions now have, or are planning to acquire, microcomputers. Although these are being used now primarily for office automation tasks, they will increasingly be used to perform certain bibliographic functions. A committee or institution should undertake to produce a list of microcomputer software packages suitable for special collections. This will make it unnecessary for institutions always to go it alone with the expense and possibilities for disaster that acquiring microcomputers entails.

One caveat here: while microcomputers may in the future hold out many benefits to special collections, they also seem to have the potential of returning us to the dark ages of purely local practice in terms of cataloging and automation standards. Use of the bibliographic utilities has gradually imposed a basic consistency and standardization upon catalog records—something they never had before in special collections. Given their history, it would not be surprising if some institutions leapt at the chance of doing cataloging directly on microcomputers in order to get some of the advantages of automation but still continue to catalog the way they did a hundred years ago. (There has in fact been some evidence of this kind of activity in the published literature.) As a trend this would be disastrous for the future of collaborative efforts among special collections to create research tools that span more than one institution. As difficult as it may be for some to accept, cataloging and format standards are absolutely essential, both for the future use of the institutional database being created and for the future of national and international bibliographic control. Microcomputers should generally not be used for cataloging in place of a local or national system unless a mechanism is in place to communicate those holdings subsequently to a national database.

If cataloging is done on a microcomputer, it should in all cases be done according to the MARC format and according to AACR2/Bibliographic Description of Rare Books, even if only minimal records are created. Unfortunately, few if any bona fide MARC-based microcomputer software packages exist (except as an intermediate step in retrospective conversion to a larger system). The rare book and special collections community might do well to promote or even sponsor the development of such a program by a software vendor. (Note that such a program would need only to support MARC for input and output to other systems; use of MARC for public display or retrieval would not be necessary or even desirable.)
Name Authorities for Rare Materials

Another project that might be worth considering, results from the need for standard, AACR2 name authorities for older and specialized headings. Some institution or group of institutions might well tackle the problem of the lack of such authority headings for printers, publishers, and other older and specialized headings since the Library of Congress has not and will not establish most of them. A plan could be developed to have them done systematically so that all institutions cataloging these materials could benefit. To some extent, this is exactly what is now being done for a restricted group of older headings by the ESTC/ North America office at the University of California at Riverside and by the American Antiquarian Society which have both been adding records to the national authorities database for several years. The body of names these institutions will cover, however, is just a small portion of those that will be needed by special collections. The benefit of developing a programmatic approach to this is that, if the authorities are standardized—e.g., by being routed through the Library of Congress Name Authority Cooperative Program (NACO)—they then become the authorized heading and available to all other U.S. institutions. At present, each special collection is largely on its own in establishing AACR2 name and title headings and, besides incurring the great expense involved in doing authority work, they may well end up duplicating work already done by other institutions.

Copyright of Bibliographic Records

In a different direction, the issue of the copyrightability and ownership of machine-readable bibliographic data is one that should begin to be studied by those in special collections. This issue is, of course, of more general interest in the library world as a result of events such as OCLC's attempt to copyright its database a few years ago. Special collections in particular should be studying this problem, however, because they are among the users of MARC records with the greatest potential for exploiting them for printing, publishing, and creating specialized databases.

The Eighteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue database has been virtually unusable for shared cataloging because of decisions of the ESTC owners to try to control access to the database in order to achieve maximum financial compensation—this, by the way, in the context of a project that has been funded by hundreds of thousands of dollars of NEH, foundation, and other governmental monies. Increasingly, institutions are spending money (usually grant money) to create databases and then deciding to try to sell access to their files. The implications of
this approach to the creation and marketing of research tools needs to
begin to be scrutinized. The long-term effect of this would appear to be
divisive, contrary to the tradition of information-sharing among librar-
ies, and probably not cost effective. Excessive attempts to control and
profit from library-generated information through copyright and con-
tractual restrictions can only cripple widespread cooperation among
special collections.

Image-Transfer Technology

Rare book and special collections librarians need to begin investi-
gating the development of yet another new technology with important
implications for them. Faster than we may have expected or wanted,
digital technology will soon be used to reproduce library materials
themselves in hard copy and on terminal screens and television moni-
tors. The Library of Congress, for example, has already transferred tens
of thousands of images from several important photographic and gra-
phic collections to videodisc on an experimental basis. An optical disk
player in the LC Prints and Photographs Division displays these in an
easy and effective manner. The images are clear, bright, and eminently
usable. This technology is incalculably more effective and user friendly
than microforms. For some purposes, the originals of items preserved
on optical disk will always need to be consulted; but for many others,
this kind of reproduction will be sufficient and highly attractive, partic-
ularly for delicate and deteriorating items.

The rare materials community should perhaps consider commis-
sioning a study on this newly emerging technology to try to begin to
determine its implication for special collections. In the not too distant
future the library community will see bibliographic retrieval systems
“married” to optical retrieval systems such that MARC records may be
used to gain direct and immediate access to images of the original. This
technology will increase the ability of specialized collections to make
rare materials available for reference on-site or long distance since
digitized image information is easily replicable and can be transmitted
over ordinary phone lines.

National Research Tools

Finally, efforts should be made to begin to study the feasibility of
developing truly nationwide research tools for special research mate-
rials. This is especially important because of the division of the nation’s
research libraries among the two large bibliographic utilities. Despite
the fact that the RLIN system is greatly superior—so far as the represen-
tation and retrieval of rare materials catalog records is concerned—not
all libraries can or should belong to RLIN. Further, it seems unlikely that OCLC will substantially change its "master record" approach to database design such that libraries can see their own and other libraries' copy-specific information online. This bibliographic cleavage among libraries may in the future devolve into an even more fragmented environment with numerous automated local library systems, none of which has ready access to other institution's copy-specific records.

One sign of progress here is the Linked Systems Project (LSP)—through which LC, OCLC, and RLIN, and ultimately other systems—will engage in computer-to-computer communication such that, for certain applications, a user in one system, using his own terminal and command language, will be able to search and retrieve records from the files of the other systems. Initially LSP will involve only the transfer of authority records; the bibliographic component—i.e., the retrieval and transfer of full catalog records—is currently two to four years away. LSP holds out immense potential for increasing the level of cooperation and communication among all libraries. It will also, it is hoped, have the effect of reducing the number of bibliographic and format practices that diverge from system to system. LSP will also make easier the sort of collaborative name authority project for older headings proposed earlier in this article. For many kinds of applications, LSP should benefit rare book and special collections libraries and general libraries alike.

However, for several reasons, the usefulness of this kind of record exchange for specialized collections may be limited. One problem is OCLC's master record approach to database building which will continue to make it difficult or impossible for libraries to exchange copy-specific information with one another. Another is the lack of standardization in the way RLIN libraries have implemented copy-specific access points. The increasingly fragmented bibliographic environment of the future may also present difficulties. Even if local library systems all implement LSP, a library might be faced with communicating directly with dozens of local systems to find out about other copies of a rare item. It may well be that bibliographic utilities and automated local library systems will never be able to support a coherent national database for rare book and special collections that would allow for all the types of information, access points, and output products that they should have.

A different possibility, one which would circumvent some of the problems presented by the mix of bibliographic utilities and local library systems, might involve the creation of a kind of substitute national database for rare materials and special collections. It would call for all participating institutions currently doing standard, MARC
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cataloging, regardless of the bibliographic utility or system, to begin to pool their transaction or archive tapes on a regular basis to form what would amount to a “National Union Database of Rare Books.” This would be a permanent work-in-progress, of course, since most special collections are not yet doing retrospective conversion of their collections. Even so, it could immediately solve many of the problems associated with using the bibliographic networks. For instance, such a union catalog could have specialized indexes by printers and publishers, by place and year of publication, and by genre. It would probably have to be published in microform in the short term, but the day is not far away when the entire database could be made available in individual libraries either on magnetic or optical disk—e.g., on CD-ROM—for access through a microcomputer. This research tool could prove invaluable for scholars and researchers, reflecting as it would the full range of rare materials resources of the United States. It could allow the copy-specific information for each copy rather than just the “master record” to be displayed online. This would finally allow all participating special collections’ catalog records to be seen in their rich bibliographic and associational context. Institutions could also use this database to provide access to their own collections as well as those of others.

To be successful, this project would not necessarily require complete participation by every U.S. library. In a sense it amounts to forming a functional consortium around the bibliographic utilities and local systems, bridging the schisms between them and enhancing the possibilities for access to rare and research materials nationwide. It would not necessarily require seeking additional funds for retrospective conversion since each institution would simply contribute its existing MARC archive tapes and future tapes on a current basis.

A National Union Database of Rare Books would be a large project to coordinate, but it would not be breaking any new ground in its technology. This proposal seems worthy of serious consideration by the field and one for which major foundation support might be had. An important side benefit of a project like this would be to increase people’s awareness that special collections are a national resource, not just institutional or local. In addition, in practical terms, it might make possible the production of certain kinds of related, spin-off research tools at a lower cost than would otherwise be possible, e.g., a bibliography of 19th century children’s books in U.S. libraries, catalogs or printed bibliographies for individual institutions.
Conclusion

The field of computer-assisted bibliography is in great need of imaginative leaders and energetic participants. The development of nationally accepted bibliographic and computer format standards coupled with judicious use of new technologies is opening exciting possibilities for creating and exploiting a truly nationwide database for rare books and special collections. The realization of these possibilities, however, requires full commitment to standards and cooperation at both the national and local levels based on a careful assessment of the goals and objectives of rare book and special collections and their potential value to research and scholarship in the future.

Editor's Note: This article is a revised version of a talk delivered at the Columbia University School of Library Service Summer Rare Book School, 30 July 1984.