

READERS' FORUM

The Midwestern Archivist welcomes and encourages dialogue between its contributors and readers. Communications from readers regarding professional issues and concerns that have been addressed in articles and book reviews will be published without substantial alteration at the discretion of the Editorial Board. As a general policy, the Board will not itself respond to letters published.

We wish to express disagreement with two points in Richard M. Kesner's generally fair review of the *SPINDEX Users Conference: Proceedings* which appeared in Vol. V, No. 1 (1980) of *The Midwestern Archivist*.

The first difference of opinion is with the use of "expensive" to describe SPINDEX applications. The Kentucky State Archives has spent around \$1,500 to date on software purchase, loader programs, and processing costs. This includes the non-recurring cost of \$1,000 for the initial purchase of SPINDEX. With these funds the Archives has produced series level descriptions for approximately one third of its 70,000 cubic feet of records and 20,000 rolls of microfilm. Labor costs were the same or lower than for manually producing the data.

Except for the cost of hardware, SPINDEX costs less to use than manually describing the materials, and is *much* less expensive when the cost of updating these descriptions is considered. One can periodically update finding aids for the cost of processing the new data. The computer does all the re-editing.

The cost of hardware is impossible to gauge since it depends on the facilities that are available to the SPINDEX user. Organizations affiliated with universities, government, or industry can probably get by with purchasing or leasing an input device, and have no other hardware investment.

The second point we wish to comment on is Mr. Kesner's statements on SPINDEX's lack of interactive capability. We agree that such a capability does not now exist. SPINDEX was, after all, designed as a text editing, indexing, and photocomposition system. It is technically possible, however, to use SPINDEX output in tandem with interactive searching systems. At this time the obstacle

to interactive archival systems is not SPINDEX, but a lack of standardization in the archival profession, a lack of focused demand among archivists and librarians, and the lack of a cooperative institutional thrust to bring an interactive on-line network into existence. The SPINDEX User's Network is helping to bridge these gaps.

Dr. Lewis J. Bellardo
Kentucky State Archivist & Records Administrator

J. Thomas Converse
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January 14, 1981

Having just read the review of *SPINDEX Users Conference: Proceedings* published in *The Midwestern Archivist*, Vol. V., No. 1 (1980), I felt that there were several points which were somewhat misleading. Dr. Kesner seems to make the assumption that an on-line information network, apparently something similar to SOLINET for the libraries, is the ultimate goal. Perhaps it is for some. But others of us are interested in a national data base which can be published through COM, distributed inexpensively, and therefore updated periodically. This is much more feasible than requiring the expensive equipment needed for membership in an on-line system. Record groups and collections are processed, and available holdings increase slowly. There are few archives or manuscript repositories which have large enough staffs to justify on-line programs. The microfilm readers required for a COM publication cost \$150, within reach of even the smallest research center, library, or repository.

SPINDEX is not an expensive system to implement. To the contrary, it is astonishingly inexpensive. The program itself costs between \$1000 and \$2000, depending on your ultimate use and your situation. The input equipment costs less than five months of computer shop charges for on-line membership in SOLINET. It is a non-recurring item. SPINDEX probably is the only system which the vast majority of repositories can afford.

Finally, not everyone is looking for "a fully automated retrieval system." The variety of indices which can be generated on COM

from a well-processed and properly tagged national data base should guide any researcher to pertinent and available materials.

(Mrs.) Cleo A. Hughes, Director
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 Tennessee State Library and Archives
 January 14, 1981

I would like to take this opportunity to expand upon statements that I made in my review in light of the comments by Hughes, Bellardo, and Converse.

First, I must share with readers a fact that I learned only after my review went to press. For various reasons that are not particularly clear to me, insufficient funds were provided for the preparation of *SPINDEX Users Conference*. As a result, the book that did emerge does not compare in quality with Hickerson's other works in the area of archival automation (i.e. *SPINDEX at Cornell*; *SAA Basic Manual: Automation*), publications that have served and will continue to serve the profession as we address the role of computers in archives. Given the editor's deserved reputation, I expected a series of proceedings as substantive as those that emerged from the University of Michigan symposium on automated records and archives. Edited proceedings are difficult at best to do well, and as I attempted to suggest in my review, the publication in this case was found lacking.

The actual cost of implementing SPINDEX remains a clouded issue. Neither Hickerson in print nor other SPINDEX users at professional conferences have provided us with data pertaining to start-up costs. In the cases of the Tennessee and Kentucky State Archives, these costs appear to be moderate. However, in a report entitled: "Staff Report NHPRC Data Base" (October 1, 1980), prepared by Nancy Sahli and Larry Hackman, the NHPRC indicates that SPINDEX was built for and operates on only certain specific hardware configurations. If the computers at Tennessee and Kentucky are compatible with SPINDEX, their start-up costs should be quite reasonable (and apparently are so). This experience was not shared by Northern Illinois University whose on-campus computer system necessitated a costly reworking of the original SPINDEX package.

I do not mean to suggest that Northern Illinois is dissatisfied with SPINDEX. But if we are to discuss the worthiness of SPINDEX, we need an objective, and more systematic and thorough, appraisal of the experiences of SPINDEX users. The cost of obtaining the package is one factor; the acquisition of necessary hardware and the customizing of the original package are matters of even greater concern. Without this information, non-SPINDEX users cannot make a reasonable determination of the costs and benefits of implementing SPINDEX in their own shops.

The matter of a national information system for archives, raised in both letters, is a subject of much greater complexity. I agree wholeheartedly with Bellardo and Converse that the single most serious hindrance to the establishment of an archives data base is the lack of standardization in the area of collection description. While the National Information Systems Task Force deals with this sticky problem, it is our responsibility to study the latest advances in information management and technology. When the elements of a national archival data base have been agreed upon, we must then determine the most efficient and economical means of developing and disseminating those data. COM catalogs, unless they are regularly replaced by updated versions, do not strike me as a preferable alternative to a more sophisticated on-line interactive system.

Hughes is correct to point out that the cost of a system along these lines, given today's library technology, would be quite prohibitive. However, neither in my review nor in my other writings on archival automation have I suggested a model along the lines of SOLINET. We can expect innovations within the information processing field in the years ahead that will suggest new and reasonable alternatives to SPINDEX in its present form. Perhaps we will turn to a SPINDEX IV or V for our data base management system. In the more immediate future, I look forward to learning more about the real costs and benefits of the SPINDEX program as it is employed today, and I await the maturation of developments in other information management fields that will directly benefit our own.

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February 9, 1981