Key Figure: Henriette Avram

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A progressive leader of contemporary libraries, Henriette Avram, worked to develop a revolutionary program in cataloging systems, MARC. MARC is now currently the international standard for cataloging and has enabled the rapid expansion of inter-library loan services and the growth of uniform library information systems.

Henriette Avram’s professional career started in computer systems. With no direct library experience or education Avram found work at the Library of Congress in 1965. Avram discussed in a 1989 interview what prepared her for her work at the LC, “Coming from the field of computer systems, I had already learned that to solve a complex problem one had to be thoroughly knowledgeable of the subject, the environment in which the problem exists—and so, I applied myself to do just that” (Rather, 860). This open application of knowledge and experience led Avram to pioneer the MARC pilot project that became the standardized distribution service utilized by libraries today.

Upon Avram’s arrival to the library profession in 1965 she quickly recognized the need for a standard vehicle for the communication of bibliographic information. This critical need that Avram identified led to a revolutionary change in library automation. Avram was recruited to work in LC’s Office of Information Systems; she issued a proposal for the MARC pilot soon after joining the office in 1965. Avram was selected
Key Figure: Henriette Avram

to head the MARC pilot project and planning began in January of 1966. Avram was noted as a tenacious individual with a big personality with persuasive powers that led the pilot project to completion in just eight months. With a short deadline and immense amount of work to accomplish, Avram assembled a tight knit group to accomplish the project.

The development of the program procedures, file maintenance, and the preparation of distribution of MARC data for participating libraries began in early 1966. There were 16 libraries that were selected to participate in the MARC pilot project. The following libraries were selected: “Argonne National Laboratory, Georgia Institute of Technology, Harvard University, Indiana University, Montgomery County Public Schools, Nassau (County) Library System, National Agricultural Library, Redstone Scientific Information Center, Rice University, University of California Institute of Library Research, University of Chicago, University of Florida, University of Missouri, University of Toronto, Washington State Library, and Yale University” (Avram, 5). After the libraries were selected Avram’s team held a conference to prepare the participants for the project. The subject matter addressed in the conference covered, “a.) Concepts, objects, schedules, functions, requirements of the experiment b.) The operation at LC c.) The MARC format. ** d.) The materials to be sent weekly to participants, and e.) The content of the reports expected from the participants. The February meeting was considered the official opening of the pilot project” (Avram, 5). The limited time set forth for the task of establishing ‘MARC I’ required that the team compile and analyze findings by April 1966 to enable the team to finish the programming for the project.
Key Figure: Henriette Avram

The months to follow would require tireless work, collaboration, and customization on the computer programs sent to the test sites. The test sites gave the MARC pilot project team insight to the best production methods, as the participants were busy implementing their customized systems. The intent of the MARC pilot project was to develop ‘MARC I’ as a guide to design ‘MARC II’, which would become the MARC Distribution Service. “It should be noted that ‘MARC I’ was only designed to handle bibliographic records of books where ‘MARC II’ was developed and designed to handle the bibliographic records of many formats such as, “serials, maps, music, journal articles, etc.” (Avram, 7).

The mounting of the pilot program and the launch of the first finished platform occurred over the span of three years. Within this time period Avram remained unwavering in her commitment to standards and the notion that a unified classification system should be fostered to further develop the reach of libraries. Since the inception of MARC Distribution Service in 1969 through numerous decades the automation system has carried libraries through countless achievements.

In 1970 Avram was appointed the Chief of the MARC Development Office at the Library of Congress, in charge of issuing formats for films, maps, and serials. Avram’s vision of a unified classification system was becoming a reality. Avram forged close working relationships with the American Library Association (ALA) and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) to establish MARC as the national standard for
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classification in 1971. After much lobbying on the part of Avram, MARC became an

Though Avram was best known for the development of the MARC format, she also
pioneered another process that enabled the automation of format recognition. The project
was initiated in 1969 as the RECON pilot project. This project was intended to test the
practicality of establishing a centralized source for the conversion of records. This
project did not result in a lasting or implemented process, but rather is remembered as a
great missed opportunity for the progress of libraries.

For many years Avram forged strong relationships through her lobbying, committee
work, and strong visions for the progress of libraries. It was only natural after years of
leadership and innovation that Avram would be given more managerial responsibilities
within LC. Avram was appointed the first director for Processing Systems, Networks,
and Automation Planning. Avram held this position for three years, and then in 1983 she
was appointed Assistant Librarian for Processing Services. In this role Avram directed a
department of over one thousand technical service staff. The department was responsible
for the management of overseas operations, acquisitions, cataloging, and the development
of networking and automation planning. Avram was viewed as a strong contributor and a
strong leader in the library profession, when asked in an interview if being a woman has
been a factor in her career or if she was a woman in a “man’s world” at times her
response was, “As I advanced in my career in librarianship, I have been a woman in a
man’s world. However, this issue has not been an important factor in my thinking”
Key Figure: Henriette Avram

(Rather, 861). It was this unabated attitude that allowed Avram to have such great success in her career and in libraries.

A question on the minds of many technical library professionals during the years closing Avram’s career with the Library of Congress was, “With the benefit of hindsight if you were given the chance to create MARC anew, would you do it any differently?” (Rather, 861). Avram expressed three major concerns in the design of MARC, “I would not have designed a separate application for each form of material…I would have monitored the development of new formats more closely to prevent the proliferation of fields such as notes and to avoid the use of the same content designation for different elements of information…Also, I believe I would have investigated starting MARC with the authority records—they are so central to bibliographic control” (Rather, 861). It wasn’t until recent years that serious conversations started about the possibility of Resource Description and Access (RDA) phasing out MARC.

During Avram’s career she received many awards and was recognized with many honors. In 1971 Avram received the Margaret Mann Citation, it was noted that this was the first time that an individual whose primary profession was not librarianship was awarded. The awards and honors to follow this would include: the Federal Women’s Award, an Honorary Degree, Doctor of Science, from Southern Illinois University, the Melvil Dewey Award, elected an Honorary Fellow of IFLA, and the Joseph W. Lippincott Award. Avram was a well respected and regarded library professional and proved to be a key figure in the automation of libraries. When asked of her thoughts on
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life after LC Avram responded, “You can rest assured, however, that I shall take on more
than I possibly can accomplish and with the same impatience to accomplish everything
immediately” (Rather, 861). Henriette Avaram was a true pioneer of libraries.
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References


