An account of the changeover from card catalogues to microfiche, written by Deborah Encel, University of NSW

Gone fichin'!

MICROFICHE CATALOGUES have completely replaced the card catalogue at the University of New South Wales libraries. On Thursday 3 March, 1983 the card catalogue was taken from the second floor of the main library building where it had stood for the last seven of its twenty five years. During those years it grew from a mere 2 cabinets to 1692 drawers containing records for about 1,000,000 books.

Forty sets of microfiche replaced the card catalogue with copies located on every floor of the library building and in all our special research libraries. On the same day the Biomedical library replaced its own card catalogue with 6 copies of the whole UNSW microfiche catalogue. The catalogue is available to all schools of the university, university organisations, and outside institutions who may wish to purchase it.

The new catalogue, COMCAT, with instructional material and microfiche reader. There are forty of these in the library, most with two microfiche readers.

The UNSW library's decision to participate in the Australian Bibliographic Network or ABN, precipitated the replacement of the card catalogue. ABN is a national online shared cataloguing system, making available to its participants, libraries all over Australia, cataloguing records input by other participants, as well as most national agency machine readable cataloguing records, ie Library of Congress records, British National Bibliography records. A side benefit of ABN is that it can supply Computer Output Microfiche catalogues to its participants, containing that participant's own holdings. These are more accessible than cards, more compact and more up-to-date.

Microfiche catalogues were accepted as an interim measure by the UNSW library, to be superseded every two months until their replacement with online catalogue. The decision to change over to microfiche catalogues therefore coincided with the plan to change over the whole cataloguing system from our local system, NUNCAT to the national system ABN.

Entering ABN was not just a matter of changing current cataloguing practices to fit the new system, but to be able to use ABN as a holdings record, we had to input records and statements of holdings for our entire existing catalogued collection.

In May 1982 the ABN/NUNCAT interface committee was formed in the UNSW library to plan the changeover. We wished to have a substantial number of records in ABN, and a microfiche catalogue available covering our entire catalogued collection before the first session of the university began in March, 1983.

The changeover was a relatively simple matter; cataloguers were re-educated to use the slightly different system and a date was set for cessation of cataloguing on the old system. From 18 October 1982, no more catalogue cards were produced, and only those already in the pipeline filed into the old card catalogue. Current cataloguing was to be done straight into ABN, and produced on microfiche from the ABN system. Library users would have to cope with a frozen card catalogue from November to March, the low usage period of the long vacation.

In order to have our whole catalogue on microfiche it was necessary to plan the production on microfiche of the items already catalogued. As the ABN microfiche catalogue would contain only those items we had catalogued on ABN, we would have to produce a second set of microfiche containing items not yet in ABN. Until we can get all our catalogue into ABN we will have a two-sequence catalogue.

In order to have the ABN sequence as large as possible, a large transfer of items from NUNCAT to ABN was planned before the production of the first publicly available set of microfiche catalogues. The Systems Department therefore had two major programming tasks to perform between May 1982 and March 1983.

● a program which would add a large number of our holdings to records in ABN, and
● a program to produce what remained of our existing catalogue on microfiche, in as close as possible a form to the ABN-produced microfiche.

The provisional name of the new catalogue was COMCAT, for Computer Output Microfiche Catalogue, and this name stuck. To advise on the catalogue from the Reader Services point of view, the COMCAT Committee was set up in May 1982.

The Committee recommended that the two parts of the catalogue be known as 1 and 2 to avoid confusion with information about ABN and NUNCAT; colour coding of the strips at the top of each fiche to distinguish author and title etc, keeping Parts 1 and 2 the same colour. The wording of the fiche headers was prescribed, and the arrangement of the fiche in their stands. The Committee also produced publicity pamphlets and instructional material for display with the catalogues.

By November 1982 our Systems department had completed a program which when run against the ABN database, would match corresponding records by LC number or ISBN and add our call numbers for those matched items to the holdings file in ABN. This input represented about one third of the items in our existing catalogue.

This program was run by the National Library in the last weekend of November, and added about 130,000 holdings statements to 112,000 records in ABN. The result was that a significant number of holdings were attached to the wrong record in ABN. This was due to discrepancies between LC numbers or ISBNs attached to the records in ABN, and our numbers which were taken from the book. (Moral: don't trust the LC numbers in your books).

The UNSW ABN catalogue contains all records that have a UNSW holdings statement attached to them in the ABN holdings file. The production of our first big microfiche catalogue from ABN therefore had to be delayed, as we did not want call numbers appearing with items to which they did not belong, or which the library did not even hold.

A program to remove these holdings was completed by our Systems department and run by the National Library against ABN early in February 1983.

The National Library then produced a magnetic tape from ABN containing our catalogue, which was sent to a microfiche bureau which managed to produce our catalogues on microfiche by 25 February.

Part 1 of the catalogue was distributed and set up in its stands before the first day of the university session. Part 2 was still in production. The program to produce it was completed and run in the third week of February. The microfiche bureau produced the microfiche in 3 days.

Part 2 of the catalogue arrived in the library as the card catalogue was removed and it was set up in most locations by the time the final cabinet was wheeled away. All that remained were a few impressions in the carpet, some long-lost scraps of paper — and the first of many bewildered library users.