Encounter, Engagement, and Exchange

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Library Encounters, Engagements, and Exchanges
Although this panel is well off the conference theme, I have thought for some time that SALALM needs to address the rapidly changing contours of research library collections and their implications for the kinds of information resources these changes require. A request by one of the libreros at the end of the New Mexico meeting convinced me to organize this paper. What my colleagues and I have to say is ominous. I am asking readers to consider the real possibility that in another five years neither librarians nor booksellers will be doing the work as it is now done. I want to stress from the outset that at least my portion is speculative and that the opinions expressed here have not been vetted by SALALM, its officers, or my paymaster. If I could make a wish, it would be to begin a discussion on how to ensure that the scholarship that treats Latin America will have smooth passage through the choppy weather that likely lies ahead.

Research libraries are all making the transition from analog to digital information, a theme awkwardly compressed into the title of this paper. In answer to the first of my questions, “Where are we?,” I would argue that libraries are all in different places, but that all of them are somewhere on a continuum that leads from paper to electronic resources. Moreover, I would argue that all are moving in the same direction along the continuum, though at different speeds.

In the language used by librarians, this transition falls under the rubric of “access vs. ownership” or information acquired “just in time.” As a way of responding to new models of information presentation, some have suggested that libraries re-conceptualize collection development altogether and have offered “knowledge management” as an appropriate substitute.1 That is, the job of librarians is to provide the reader with “information objects”—sounds, images as well as texts—to interact with. There is always a lag between the formulation of an idea and its implementation. “Access vs. ownership” appeared in professional literature in the 1980s and was first discussed at SALALM in 1994,2 but its implications are only now having a noticeable impact on research libraries. For several years, libraries have shed staff. Those who have survived have been redeployed and given additional duties, and as positions become available, they are assigned to the new growth sectors of computer applications.
and public relations. Many libraries, mine included, are no longer in a position to invest in paper collections as heavily as they have in the past, and very soon there will not be staff resources sufficient to process the quantities of paper that we currently acquire. Materials budgets have thus far lagged staff changes, but this will not last. The reasons are electronic (digital technologies enable us to do things differently) and economic (we do not have enough money not to).

This paper will lay out how I think these two forces, electronics and economics, are driving change and why I think there is no altering its trajectory. But first, a few words on the rationale behind library collections.

**Background**

Higher education in the United States is very competitive. In a way reminiscent of the Cold War arms race, universities have built larger and larger faculties, labs and football teams to insure their survival. Libraries are a part of the competitive behavior; they are often called upon to demonstrate their importance in attracting the “best faculty and students” to their institutions. Traditionally, libraries measured their strength through collection size and growth, the major statistics driving the Association of Research Library’s canonical index. The movement of library resources from paper to digital has not changed the competitive behavior of the institutions, but it has shifted the indicators. Libraries now stress their importance as a place and as the provider of services wherever its readers may be and whenever they want to read.

I entered the profession just as the Research Libraries Group Conspectus wound down. This instrument, may it rest in peace, measured collections in excruciating detail on a scale of 1 to 5 and marked the high tide of assembling paper-based resources on individual campuses. Although undertaken in the name of building a “national” collection, the Conspectus put libraries’ competitive behavior into stark relief. Rather than demonstrating complementarity, the Conspectus stressed local strength; a level 4 collection was better than a level 3, even if one was simply a larger version of the other. In addition, use of the materials was implied rather than specified. Now, one can no longer assume that collections justify themselves. To evoke, again, the phraseology of the Cold War, we must use it or lose it.

Use has always been and will always be the reason for collection development. For forty years, prevailing opinion held that bibliographers in close consultation with faculty would be in the best position to predict use, based on research and teaching at each institution. But bibliometrics has not supported this contention. The use of research library materials was first systematically documented in the late 1970s by Allen Kent, et. al, who found that 40% of the books in Hillman Library had never circulated and that the modal case for circulation in the collection was less than three. Books written in languages other than English showed particularly low use rates; Spanish-language items comprised only 2.52% of circulations recorded at
Hillman in 1979.\(^4\) Despite the uproar that the “Pittsburgh Study” produced in the profession, its conclusions have stood for nearly thirty years without significant revision. With circulation as the most demonstrable test of value, and as automated systems compile these statistics as a matter of course, foreign language materials are demonstrably disadvantaged. As an indication of just how disadvantaged, one library administrator recently adopted the language that financiers employ to describe something that they want to dispose of, referring to foreign language books as “underperforming assets.”

**Electronics**

A collection of electronic information offers many advantages over its paper counterpart, especially to those who do not read. It potentially allows simultaneous consultation by several users, the ability to search a text for the occurrence of key words or phrases, and access anytime and anyplace. Equally important to library managers, an electronic collection reduces processing costs and space needs. I will leave discussion of processing costs to my fellow panelists and briefly discuss space as a managerial consideration.

I have already pointed out that paper materials no longer receive top billing at research universities. Libraries throughout the United States are reconfiguring their insides, removing shelves and inserting a mélange of computers, meeting rooms, quiet spaces and decidedly unquiet coffee bars. Displaced books, like the lost boys of J.M. Barrie’s play, have fled to bibliographic never-never lands off central campuses. Purchasing born-digital materials or converting existing texts to bit streams would disappear physical materials altogether and provide even greater spaces for reclamation.

If only the scholars would come onboard. Thus far digital journals, alone, have made their mark on scholarly communication. In Latin American studies, professors and their students now heavily consult JSTOR. And as a recent survey points out, the addition of OpenURL technology to traditional indexing tools has increased their use as well.\(^5\) On the other hand, “electronic book” has proved something an oxymoron, as readers have not accepted them and publishers are reluctant to produce them. Latin American *editoriales* are beyond reluctant, unable as they are to invest in digital production equipment and lacking a mass readership capable of consuming the product. Nevertheless, for all the reasons cited above, the appeal of electronic books to libraries is irresistible, and, as Google, Microsoft and other enterprising technologists have shown, what is not digital already, can be readily made so.

**Economics**

One thing in this discussion is certain. Libraries will not be able to maintain their current hybrid existence. Simultaneous development of digital and paper-based collections and services will soon become unsustainable. Most libraries lack the resources to support what are essentially parallel programs,
and the current status quo undermines both staff morale and users’ confidence in emerging information policy. As libraries apportion their resources, digital collections are gaining larger and larger shares. The most recent statistical report from my institution shows that it now spends 39% of its materials budget on networked electronic resources, up from 16% five years before.\textsuperscript{6} To date, the growth of electronic expenditures at Cornell has not come by reducing allocations assigned to library selectors, but it has reduced the total amount available for allocation and thus for the purchase of anything other than digital materials.

Economic constraints have increased administrators’ characteristic impatience with redundancy, and they are now labeling multiple copies of paper materials as redundant. Many multi-library campuses currently operate under a “one copy” rule for books and subscriptions. The next step, already contemplated (though not widely instituted), is to extend the one copy rule to the acquisition of low-use materials by groups of libraries in the same region. Regional, electronically-linked collaborations are already taking shape, with the University of California system leading the way. For the past three years, Cornell has participated in a program of this sort, christened “Borrow Direct.” It groups us with six other libraries in the Northeast and allows anyone with borrowing privileges at one institution to search a combined catalog and initiate unmediated borrowing requests for materials not available locally. Systems like these can provide remarkably quick service; Borrow Direct’s turnaround averages 2.5 days.

Borrow Direct is currently only a discovery and delivery tool, but it enables participants to view the holdings of a seven-institution library that is almost as accessible to them as the ones on their own campuses. And if books seldom circulate on any of the campuses, one copy per region will satisfy readers’ needs, or so the rationale goes. Libraries are gearing up for more extensive collaborations by employing computer programs to compare their holdings online. OCLC’s WorldCat Collection Analysis tool allows groups of libraries to overlay their collections and determine where they duplicate, where they are unique, and where gaps exist.

While I am not aware of plans to deaccession books already on library shelves—that would be too expensive and violate state-supported libraries’ covenants regarding curatorship of public property—there is growing interest in curtailing the duplication of current materials. The extent to which current acquisitions of Latin Americana duplicate is very difficult to measure. In fact, libreros are more qualified to quantify duplication than the library community. But one way to observe the issue is through the lens of the WorldCat Selection tool.
What this single page demonstrates is that for several recently-published titles there are numerous copies housed in North American libraries. Should something like the one copy per region rule be instituted, the number of book sales to the U.S. market will drop. I cannot say by how much, nor can I say what it will mean to any of us—librarians or booksellers. But I must reluctantly predict that the days of librarians at multiple libraries selecting copies of the same items and of booksellers selling the same item to multiple clients are numbered.

Responses

My last question, “What can we do there?,” asks us to consider how we can begin to plan for the fast-approaching, digital-dominated future. I will offer the following as a starter set:

1. It will be up to each library or group of libraries to redefine collecting profiles for paper materials. Some will see no need to change current practices. For others, the transition will mean maintaining traditional strengths and relying on regional partners for all but the most critical books and periodicals published in some countries or subjects.

2. Assuming that Latin American budgets escape rapine, libraries will expand coverage in their areas of strength. This is the intention of the Distributed Resources component in the Latin American
Research Resources Project and one that receives enthusiastic support from library administrators. Scarce out-of-print materials, genres such as posters and music scores, regional newspapers, and grey literature are unevenly acquired by research libraries, and they are consistently mentioned by Latin Americanists as highly desirable for research.

3. As they expand their digital resources in Latin America, libraries will be in need of rights management—that is, the negotiation of the right to receive or digitize materials currently in copyright and to distribute them over a network. This is an area where I can only ask questions: are there periodicals and newspapers producing full-text editions in electronic format that could be licensed for use by students and faculty; would publishers in the region grant institutions the rights to convert their print backlist to digital formats? These are examples of areas that would allow libreros to market services in the way that they sell books and journals today.

I hope that this session will catalyze a conversation and perhaps spawn a working group to examine the issues raised at this panel. We really should not wait.

NOTES


7. For a description of the Distributed Resources agreement, see http://www.crl.edu/grnlarrp/index.asp.