IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion): Is the Library Collection Too Risky?

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Is the Library Collection Too Risky?

by Rick Anderson (Associate Director for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Phone: 801-721-1687) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

Like many (maybe even most) of my colleagues, I’ve been thinking a lot lately about how to allocate a suddenly diminished materials budget. Only a year ago our biggest worry was how to deal with serials inflation in an environment that offered no escape. Now, budget cuts are a daily reality. These were apparently the good old days. Now we’re dealing with double-digit budget cuts and the promise of more to come, and this means (or had better mean) a more fundamental reassessment of our collecting strategies.

At the same time that library budgets are tightening, a seemingly unrelated development has been quietly emerging in the publishing industry: the phrase “out of print” is finally beginning to disappear from the corporate vocabulary. The Google Books project has made millions of out-of-print books available to search and, in many cases, to actually download to people’s computers and (much more significantly) phones. Amazon’s Kindle (which can print and bind a 300-page book in a few minutes) has suddenly made such a service available for exchange. The Espresso Book Machine (not all publishers make their books available in this way, of course, but the option to do so now exists where before it did not). And ebooks don’t have to be purchased in advance of demonstrated patron need at all — services like MyiLibrary and MyiLibrary will provide libraries with catalog records for some or all of their offerings, and then charge the library only for those that patrons actually use. These factors combine to constitute a radically different book-buying environment from the one that existed just two years ago.

In other words, the risk inherent in buying the wrong book has increased (because each budget dollar is now scarcer than it once was), while the risk inherent in failing to buy the right book has decreased (because it’s increasingly possible to buy only what is needed when it’s needed, and it’s much easier to quickly and cheaply correct any failure to buy the right book). Both of these developments support the same conclusion: that most research libraries should seriously reconsider their traditional strategy of meeting patrons’ needs by building large, inclusive, speculative collections that attempt to anticipate them.

Several years ago, in this column, I offered a crazy idea — that maybe it was time for libraries to start moving beyond the idea of a permanent collection at all.¹ At the time, the idea sort of made sense even to me and I saw it mainly as a stick with which to stir up some new ideas about collection strategies. Three years later, I’m becoming increasingly convinced that the near future of most research libraries really does lie less in brokering access to an artificially small subset of the huge universe of available documents, and more in showing our patrons everything that’s available and buying only what they say they need, in the very moment that they realize they need it.¹ For online content, that reality is already here. The combination of Google’s massive library of scanned print books and a service like the Espresso Book Machine (which can print and bind a 300-page book in a few minutes) has suddenly made such a service possible for printed materials as well. In light of these new developments, with materials budgets being cut everywhere, and with circulation rates falling, why would we ever again buy a book that we aren’t sure anyone wants?


Not be surprised. In 2005, CIBER found that less than ten per cent of authors knew “a lot” about institutional repositories; 58 percent acknowledged that they knew nothing about them (Rowlands I. & Nicholas D., New journal publishing models — an international survey of senior researchers. CIBER, London, 2005, www.slais.ucl.ac.uk/papers/dni-20050925.pdf). Nothing much appears to have changed in the intervening years.

There are lessons in this for all of us. Publishers have been negligent in making clear to their authors how their copyright policies operate in practice. That they increasingly will accept a license to publish with the copyright being retained by the author, and that they generally permit posting to Websites and repositories and reuse in teaching and in further research, need to be publicized and better understood.

Those who want to see the disappearance of journals and journal publishers — including many academic librarians and their professional associations — must stop wilfully mislead the community about authors’ rights. In a changing scholarly environment, arguments about the best way to serve the information requirements of scholars and scientists need to be based on evidence rather than prejudice. To do otherwise puts at risk a scholarly information structure that has, with all its imperfections, served the interests of scholars and researchers for 350 years.

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Endnotes


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