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Building Library Collections in the 21st Century -- It's the Economy, People

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In the 60s and 70s there were the serial price wars that waged — American librarians against European STM publishing behemoths. Price differences based on location, and taking into account currency fluctuations, which were difficult to track reliably. Journal prices went up so dramatically that budgets began to really pinched and book purchasing was reduced due to the serial price increases. Simply not enough money for everything.

Fast forward through the development of the Internet, journal and databases. There was a naiveté that existed for a while in the library world that awaited a rapid change to journal information on line, which would be free. STM publishers, however created this new field in the image that would allow them to make as much money as before, even more, as ejournals were sold in packages. Subscription agencies jumped in by grabbing a huge role in the creation of databases which held and indexed these journals. Now, I want to say, as one who worked as both a librarian and in the library subscription industry, I see nothing wrong with these businesses. They operate as businesses to earn money for themselves and their shareholders. Libraries, even ones at expensive universities, are altruistic in principle, and librarians sometimes have a hard time seeing the differences.

Now to the real subject — the kamikaze like death spiral of the world economy and its effect on us all, including our little world of library collection building and acquisitions. The plunging of securities in the stock markets, the wobbling and failure of national and international banks, and the massive layoffs are all having a current and probably more subsequent and longer lasting impact which may undermine severely what we are seeing.

The number one effect is the bugaboo we have always faced. This is the decline in real dollars to build collections, which in this case may be a caused by a real decline in university budgets, requiring not only priority changes, but cuts everywhere. Already, even before budgets are set for the new financial year in June/July, libraries are cutting back on book approval plans — going from automatic shipments to form only plans.

The impact on the ever-increasing implementation of

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tation of eBook plans, in all libraries, may be speeded up by a quicker switchover, particularly in states where consortia use is possible. Or, eBook growth may dry up on the vine because of a cutback on book purchases in any form.

Impacts on books come first because they are bought in a quicker time frame. The impact on serials, ejournals, and databases of ejournal information may be slower but even greater even though emphasis on these materials may be given more precedence than before — if that is possible. Many of these are bought through statewide consortia, which are in turn funded by the states. State money for public services, including education is declining and will decline even more due to loss of jobs of so many citizens, more business failures resulting in lower tax revenue. Also the fact that they will be very less able to borrow money will restrict what they can buy for anyone. The impact here may be slower but may eventually be devastating to student, faculty and researcher access.

Universities and colleges that rely greatly on endowments, such as the Ivy League and older private institutions are and will be hard hit for a long time to come. That money has been invested, some in what were thought to be safe investments such as bonds — no longer that safe — and mutual funds some of which were also considered quite safe because they were amalgams of stocks, bonds, money markets and other sorts of securities. These too have plummeted, as have traditional stock mutual funds.

The Bernard Madoff situation in which Mr. Madoff is alleged to have taken money for investment and not really done so to the advantage of the investors, but to him, has had a detrimental effect on several colleges and universities. We have all read this in the newspaper. Brandeis University and Yeshiva College have been especially hard hit. Brandeis was looking to sell off valuable works of art from its museum collection. It seems that has been met with alarm from their constituents.

Strategies that money managers have used to help institutions maintain and make money have always included investments overseas, which often are the last to go. If the US economy is tanking. No safety here, since the housing and mortgage crisis the money of which underwrote credit for everyone including banks, American, European, international — all of them. The investment firms and solid old banks are crumbling and are being bought up and restructured daily. My bank in the US has been bought up by another bank, and my old bank in Holland was bought up by another financial firm, and then returned to being self — very confusing. I believe this will affect our institutions and us by drying up money for student loans first of all. Fewer students means less money for universities and colleges, etc.

Having worked in the supplier world it has occurred to me that the easy functioning of book and serial supply companies may be impacted, particularly by the drying up of banks as credit sources. In my experience, with subscriptions particularly, agencies have been run on the concept of publishers being paid in advance of real money coming from subscribers to the agencies. The suppliers often rely on short-term loans from banks to pay publishers before they get their subscription money. Sufficient cash reserves would offset this of course, which many firms may have. However, I would imagine there are some less well funded that may fall by the wayside by the lack of credit needed to keep such businesses running smoothly.

People — How does all this affect real people, such as students and faculty? Fewer student loans available affects the number of full professors, and faculty needed to teach them. Students also rely on part-time jobs to pay for college. If you are the parent of a college age teenager you are probably already aware that these low level jobs are being filled by older employees who have lost other jobs, or need money to supplement their shrinking retirement money. That will be less money all the way around to attend college.

Serial and acquisitions librarians such as myself have watched our retirement accounts rise over the years pretty steadily. Much of this money comes from mutual funds if you’ve looked at your recent retirement account. Lately it is shocking to see how much it has gone down so quickly, unless you were smarter than everyone else and moved it all to cash immediately. Having been in business I believe in hedging my bets by taking some losses going to investments as safe and plodding as I can find. Some mutual funds I have I am hoping will rise again when I retire or am still alive. My smartest investment was buying a signed first edition, of all this.

For librarians and library staff competing for fewer jobs available now and probably fewer jobs in the future are of a different type than those I encountered in the past. All have college degrees, even those going for low-paying staff positions. Often they have an MLS and want a staff job. I have had resumes not just from PhDs but also from those with law degrees who had been practicing attorneys. The lure of these low paying jobs is that they are benefited and appear more secure than other jobs.

I didn’t live through the Great Depression of the thirties, but my parents and grandparents did. It affected their attitudes towards money and saving the rest of their lives. As librarians and plain old people our better attempts to spend money as carefully as possible, and save safely, whatever that is, may be the good that comes out of all this.

Random Ramblings — Barriers in Higher Education to Open Access and Institutional Repositories

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“We have met the enemy and he is us.”

When was the last time that the vendor held a gun to a librarian’s head to force the selector to subscribe to an expensive online serial package or to the author’s head to sign the copyright release form? In the legitimate push to change the mechanisms for distributing faculty research, I believe that librarians have most often underestimated the complicity of higher education in the current scholarly communication system, however dysfunctional it might be. To me, the scholarly communication system is comparable to book publishers who agree that fundamental change is needed, but none seem to be able to bring it about because the players don’t want to give up any advantages that the current dysfunctional system grants them. Perhaps both journal and book publishing need a few disasters before a new model can emerge. The current economic crisis, whose effects have not yet hit higher education and libraries very hard, may turn out to be the catalyst.

I will discuss some of the barriers, both hidden and obvious, in higher education to implementing an open access model including persuading or requiring faculty to deposit their research in institutional repositories. Among the many factors, I’ve selected the tenure and promotion system, institutional prestige, and copyright.

The Tenure and Promotion System

In my opinion, the most obvious and powerful barrier to open access is the entrenched tenure and promotion system at most research universities that judges faculty on the number of publications and the prestige of where they get them published. This factor is more important for untenured faculty who must prove to their tenured colleagues and to their university administration that they are worthy enough to keep their jobs. The rules for tenure vary across disciplines from the humanities where the tenure book remains important and single authorship is the norm to the sciences that rely upon large research teams and multiple authors. In fact, I see the science model as the barrier to the very reasonable proposition of changing tenure to a submission of only a few select best works. I have a friend who is a biostatistician who may have her name listed as an author on dozens of articles each year for the important but restricted function of her statistical analysis. The difficulty in getting tenure may also

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