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Back Talk: Silence is Golden if You are in the Market for a Dead Library

Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson
University of Hong Kong, ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk

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I Hear the Train A Comin’
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Download counts and other metrics tell us there is an audience for informal works and for impermanent works. Is there an audience for informal and impermanent works, and, if so, how are these materials best captured, categorized, organized, and preserved? Or are some forms of scholarly communication simply too off-the-cuff and evanescent to be of widespread and/or long-term value?

This is but one of the questions we will encounter looking forward. Institutional repositories face many interesting challenges and opportunities as they approach adolescence. Common deposit mechanisms such as those envisioned by NISO, SWORD, and other initiatives may expose scholarly objects to their creator’s choice of multiple deposit domains, such as journals, content management systems, subject matter repositories, learning object repositories and, of course, IRs. The current reality that a scholar creates something and then must follow several submission paths to give it life in all the places where it could have life certainly impedes the success of the IR. The consolidation of effort, in which the institutional repository deposit is no harder than checking another box, seems like a promising way to clear this hurdle.

Web 2.0 considerations will also continue to impact institutional repositories. The emerging generation of scholars spends its time on the Internet sharing things — pictures, videos, theories, gripes, thoughts, and so forth. Looking ahead, it seems likely that scholars, especially students and younger professionals, will want access to more real-time information and more unfettered communication. And they will want it with lower barriers — quicker, at less expense, delivered in a format and medium of their choosing. IR infrastructures and services will need to grow more flexible and nimble to meet these expectations.

Another potential game-changer for the IR is the proliferation of funding mandates. We have seen with Harvard that institutions may decide to use the institutional repository as a tool to execute broader policies and strategies. As yet the list of schools that has followed suit in mandating faculty deposits of their research has been small. Stanford’s School of Education and Macquarie University are two of the notable mandators. Should other institutions begin requiring their faculty to archive copies of their funded research, the IR would no doubt increase in prominence.

Institutional repositories have had an interesting trajectory. They have not been the next course management system, a ubiquitous utility permanently enmeshed in the communication protocols of nearly every college and university. Nor have they been a white elephant along the lines of multimedia CD-ROMs, a product category heralded with great fanfare but ultimately adding little to the long-term fabric of scholarly communication. The jury is still out on the long-term impact of institutional repositories. I look forward to revisiting this fascinating issue in the years to come.

Endnotes
2. Sexton, David. (April 7, 2009). The sound of silence is all we want in our libraries. Evening Standard (standard.co.uk). Retrieved April 7, 2009 from http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/article/article-23560632-detail/The+sound+of+silence+is+all+we+want+in+our+libraries/article.do.
S
ilence is golden, or so it is said. How-
ever, living in a city of 7+ million
people provides few opportunities for silence
or the gold it is to produce. We live on Hong
Kong Island in an area known as the midlev-
el — that is, an area in the middle between
the harbor and the mountains. Hong Kong is
mostly mountains with few if any people liv-
ing in what might be seen as jungle. But in the
20 or so percent of the territory where people
do live, we live cheek-to-jowl in apartment
houses. Trucks seem to be banned from our
street between midnight and 6 AM so there
is a bit less noise during these hours but you
can always hear cars and people down on
the street, or at times the crying of children
through the concrete walls above and below
our flat. Last summer I did have a total silence
experience. I took a trip to Mongolia which
included two nights at a Ger camp, that is, a
camp where tourists live in felt yurts in order
to pretend they are sheep herders. Out on the
rolling hills of Mongolia it is so quiet you can
seemingly hear the beating of your own heart
— excited by the occasional howl of wolves
in search of wandering sheep.

Well, enough of this tourist nostalgia about
silence in Hong Kong and Mongolia. My
plan for this column was to deal with the
topic of silence in libraries, specifically,
to look at the value of having silent ar-

eas in the library. I thought that if I surfed the Web/library
literature to find the pros and cons for silence
in the library, I would get enough to finish this
essay (and silence Katina’s nagging me to
finish). What I found, however, was a hornet’s
nest of anger and words about the topic.

For example, I found an enormously
entertaining essay by Art Plotnick
entitled “The Liberation of Sweet
Library Lips.” Plotnick noted that in
1967 he was responsible for a pull out
centerfold sign in the Wilson Library
Bulletin “printed on heavy yellow
stock and framed in an antique border
[with] . . . the hot pink words,
NO SILENCE” inscribed. He
goes on to say “I’ve got nothing against
silence. Some of my best friends are silent. I’ve got
nothing against it except what
it’s done to the image of libraries and librarians:
it has WASTED us!” By this he means
that by requiring librarians to go around
“shushing” people we have marginalized
ourselves and made librarians archaic
symbols of musty archives worthy
only of ridicule.

Traditionally we have had of course a
number of fans who have encouraged us/
demanded that we
stick to shushing people. Plotnick
provides two excellent quotes from those who
truly believed in the value of quiet libraries:

- **John Ciardi** called for libraries to be “a
  place for the soft rustle of pages and the
  quiet stir of thoughts over the reading
tables.”

- **Jesse Shera** said that the library “is al-
  most the last outpost of silence ... There
  is nothing wrong with the library as a
  ‘quiet storage place’; indeed, it has been
  exactly that from its beginnings, for it
  was as a storage place that the library
  was brought into being.”

But libraries have changed and
most of us have listened to
Plotnick’s call for an end to
silence in at least parts of our
libraries. At the **University of Hong Kong**
we now have green (food, drink and con-
verson); yellow (water but
no food or conversation), and
red (nothing to eat or drink
and no conversation) zones. Since we have an
aversion to police state tactics we don’t heavily
enforce these restrictions but most people seem
to follow the rules. But where those demanding
silence wander into the green zones or when
noisy eat and drink patrons insist on taking
up residence in a yellow or red zone, we do
have trouble.

Apparently my library isn’t the only place
with this problem. A non librarian columnist
in the UK recently noted,

Libraries have long provided silence to
those without enough of it elsewhere in
their lives. That’s an essential provision,
not any sort of discrimination. Now our
librarians want to put a stop to it, making
libraries too participate in the noise of
urban life, the “fun.” They should hold
their silence. Or cease to honour the
name of librarian.?

So what are we to do? For our library I
think we will stick with our zoning system
but work to make it clearer where noise is and
is not appropriate. A few years ago during a
tour of Australian academic libraries I noticed
some libraries with glass walled off “deep
silence” areas. Etched in the glass were quota-
tions about the value of silence, e.g., Silence
is golden, let us be silent that we may hear the
whispers of the gods. I found this to be a nice
touch though a bit smaltzy. I have an idea if I
were a student at these schools I would want to
paste post-it-notes with contrary views:

- **Francis Bacon**: Silence is the virtue of
  fools.

- **Abraham Lincoln**: To sin by silence
  when they should protest makes cowards
  of men.

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