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Acquisitions in a Wired World: Where Are We Going?

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This is a frightening time to be a thirty-something acquisitions librarian. Convention dictates that I follow up that statement by saying that this is also a very exciting time to be a thirty-something acquisitions librarian, but I’ll tell you what: it’s mainly just scary. I worry a lot about what’s going to become of the work I love over the next ten, twenty, thirty years—not just because I love the work and will miss it if it disappears, but also because I need the work in order to feed my family and I wonder whether the work I’m doing now is preparing me well for the work that will need to be done ten, twenty, thirty years from now.

Here’s a very frightening question, but it’s one that I think each of us in this profession needs to be asking of him or herself. If I’m concerned about the future of acquisitions work, and maybe of librarianship in general, for whom am I scared? Am I scared that libraries will disappear or become unrecognizable and that patrons will then no longer be able to get services that they need, or am I scared that libraries will disappear or become unrecognizable and then I’m going to have to look for another job? It can be hard to look clearly at our own motives and answer that question honestly, but I think we have to because the actions that we take now are going to help shape the future of libraries. If those actions are guided by concern for patrons, I think libraries have a bright future; and if libraries have a bright future, so do librarians. If our actions are guided by fear for our professional future, we risk making decisions that are designed to protect the status quo, and that may doom us to the very fate we’re most afraid of.

Actually, I think the best case scenario is pretty good, and I think it’s one that is realizable if we use our heads. Despite changes in the information marketplace that many have seen as dangerous to libraries and librarians, I’m slowly becoming more confident that libraries—and, indeed, libraries very much like the ones we know now—will continue to exist for a very long time. Furthermore, I’m also convinced that there will be acquisitions work in the future, and that in many ways it will be roughly similar to the acquisitions work we’re doing today. Given the current low-grade panic that seems to suffuse the library and publishing professions these days, those predictions may sound a bit reckless, so I’d like to try to back them up. I don’t claim that most of these thoughts are very original, but I think this is a good time and place to reiterate them.

First of all, let’s think about libraries generally. In an information world increasingly dominated by technologies that facilitate decentralization, what future could the library as a central institution possibly have? To answer that question, we have to look beyond the physical manifestation of the library (or what it traditionally is) and examine its purposes (or what it traditionally does). A library’s physical manifestation has always been a function of its purpose; that’s why, throughout the many years that information has been primarily published in paper formats, libraries have always been physical places. But in and of themselves, paper formats don’t have anything to do with a library’s purposes, so there’s no real reason to believe that the decline of paper publishing has to mean a decline in the importance of libraries as institutions. Let me back up a second and talk about what it is a library does. I’ll sum it up in this way: A library is the institutional means by which a community acquires, organizes and distributes access to information on behalf of its members. Now, bear in mind that a community may be political (like a city), or it may be academic (like a school or university), or it may even be as small as a family. In all cases, the community creates a library by pooling its resources to provide access to more information than any one member would be able to purchase for herself. I want to emphasize here that no matter what the anarchistic utopians and anti-intellectual property activists say, information is never going to stop costing money, because those who produce it will always insist on getting paid. It’s tempting to believe that the Internet is going to make it possible for everyone to have access to all the information there is at no charge. But until everyone who is currently writing for pay decides to start doing the same amount (and the same quality) of writing for free, that’s not going to happen. This means, first of all, that communities will always be expected to provide communal information access to its members; apart from Bill Gates and Ted Turner, no one is going to be able to afford his own library (at least, not a library comparable to New York City’s). And it means, second of all, that communities are going to need trained people to help them organize the information to which they have access; information doesn’t organize itself any more than it creates itself. Neither of these functions depends on the existence of a physical gathering place.

Now, let me hasten to say that I’m not arguing that libraries are going to disappear physically even as they persist virtually, though I guess that’s a possibility. What I am saying is that if libraries were to stop existing as physical facilities, that wouldn’t mean the end of librarianship.

I’d like to digress on the issue of economics for a minute, and then expand a bit on the issue of cataloging and organization. I said a minute ago that information isn’t ever going to be free, because those who create it are always going to insist on being paid. One obvious response to that is, well, what about scholars and academics, who write for free all the time? The fact is that academics do not write for free. They write for a salary. I won’t get a check for having written this article, but the State of North Carolina most certainly did pay me to write it, by giving me a salary to come to work 40 hours per week and perform tasks that include writing articles. If writing articles were not a part of my job duties, I can promise you that I wouldn’t have written this one on my own time—not instead, I’d have written something I could get paid for.

It is significant, though, that academics write and publish stuff for which they are not paid directly. But the significance of that fact has less to do with the economics of information production than it does with copyright issues—since academics don’t typically rely on selling their work directly, they consequently don’t typically care that much about controlling the distribution of their work; on the contrary, they’d usually like to see it get distributed as widely as possible. That’s one reason we see so much friction between librarians and scholarly publishers. Publishers get much of their material for free from academics, and then sell it, often back to the same institutions that paid for the articles to be produced in the first place. This drives many librarians crazy. But if you look beyond the surface goodness of that arrangement, there’s really nothing wrong with it. The publishers are providing a valuable service by vetting, printing and distributing those articles; in a very real sense, the library that purchases a journal filled with content written by its own faculty is just outsourcing the publication process. (Whether the purchase price is fair or not is, of course, an important but separate issue.) Interestingly, the price of scholarly information seems to be going up even as the price of access to non-scholarly information is going down—I can now
A Short History of Academic Library Bookselling in America: Or A Tale of the Two Richards

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This short history of bookselling to academic libraries in America can be written in three chapters. Chapter I is not so much bookselling, as book buying from the academic librarian’s perspective. Prior to the 1950’s, those of us who were around, were around to serve the needs of the public library market and some of us, like Blackwell’s of Oxford, to serve the academic needs of a university town and the export trade. This early period was about collection development and less than ideal acquisitions facilities.

Chapter II, and the origin of my subtitle: “A Tale of the Two Richards” begins in the late 1950’s and the early 1960’s, and of course the two Richards are Richard Abel and Richard Blackwell. These two men are primarily responsible for English language academic bookselling as we know it today. One, Richard Abel, is responsible for approval plans, standing orders, comprehensive firm order services and the beginning of shelf-ready processing. The other, Richard Blackwell, had the vision to expand bookselling from the narrow Oxford-based university bookstore to an internationally known bookseller serving academics worldwide through retail, library wholesaling, mail order and publishing. These two Richards shaped all of the modern, academic booksellers.

Chapter III, today, is a direct result of the work done by academic booksellers over the past forty or more years, and the economic needs of the librarians we serve. Tightening budgets, the reversal of the split between money spent for books versus that spent for journals, and the availability of affordable computer technology has led booksellers to offer the highest levels of service and efficiency libraries have ever seen.

Chapter I. Prior to the 1950’s, the most interesting collection development was being done at those institutions of higher learning with the largest budgets (whether from tax dollars or wealthy donors at private universities). These libraries could afford to pay for large, first-class staffs of individual subject bibliographers. Their collection development excellence was in the hands of trained and educated professional bibliographers. It was up to them not only to build the complete collection based on currently published books, most often ordered directly from individual publishers, but it was also in their hands to ferret out the old, rare and out-of-print titles which were missing from their collections. Often, these bibliographers had close personal relationships with bookshops and distributors around the world. Often, they would travel the globe to meet with their colleagues.