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Op Ed -- IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinioin) -- The Library Collection and Other Moribund Concepts

Rick Anderson

University of Nevada, Reno, serialsonline@unr.edu

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IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

The Library Collection and Other Moribund Concepts

by **Rick Anderson** (Director of Resource Acquisition, The University Libraries, University of Nevada, Reno, 1664 N. Virginia Street, Reno, NV 89557; Phone: 775-784-6500 x.273; Fax: 775-784-1328) <rickand@unr.edu>

My boss, **Steve Zink**, has said a few things to me that have changed the way I think about my job as a librarian. The first one, shortly after I arrived at the **University of Nevada**, was "Why do we check in journal issues?" The second one, a few months later, was "If we were really serious about providing access to journal content, we'd be cataloging the articles instead of the journal titles."

I laughed at his first comment and promptly forgot about it (or so I thought — a year later my staff and I had eliminated journal check-in). But that second comment elicited in me several rather contradictory reactions: embarrassment that I hadn't thought of something so obvious on my own; excitement at the thought of how well we could serve our patrons if we focused on the stuff they need instead of focusing on a particular method of getting it; terror at the thought of the work that would be involved.

If you think about it, our current approach to serials cataloging is not terribly useful to patrons. It gives them, in painstaking detail, information that they really don't need (how long we've subscribed to the journal, which issues we've received, how frequently the journal is published, how long it's been published, the physical dimensions of its issues, etc.) but does not tell them what they really *do* need to know (whether the library has an authoritative article that is relevant to their research needs and whether that article is available for them to look at right now). For the library catalog to be really useful to people seeking out journal content, it would have to act like a journal database does, allowing users to search for keywords and cross-reference subjects from the content of the articles themselves rather than merely documenting the existence of a particular journal in the collection. (For patrons with a citation in hand, of course, a title list with a very simple holdings note will work just fine.)

Would this involve a tremendous amount of work on the part of catalog departments? Well, yes, but only if we continue to cling stubbornly to AACRII and MARC — a cataloging system and data format that were designed to serve patrons in a completely different information universe and which are of rapidly decreasing utility in the current one... but that's a topic for another column.

The thing is, we and our patrons have been fooled into thinking that what we need are journals, and, therefore, journal subscriptions. But that's an illusion that arises from colloquial convenience: in other words, we use the journal title as a shorthand reference for what we really need, which is articles of a particular quality on particular topics. When a faculty member says "We absolutely must have a subscription to the *Journal of Applied Philately*," what he really means is "My colleagues and I must have access to at least some of the articles published in the *Journal of Applied Philately*, and therefore the library must subscribe to it so that we are assured of getting access to every issue."

In the print era, the conclusion "we need to subscribe" followed quite logically from the premise "we need access to at least some of the articles." In the digital era, however, it's a non sequitur. While it has long been possible to buy individual articles from journal publishers in lieu of subscribing to their journals, in the print era the process was too inefficient and costly to be a rational alternative to a simple print subscription. But it is now possible for libraries to buy almost any article a patron requests and to deliver it very quickly to the patron's desktop. More to the point, it's possible to let them take care of the whole transaction themselves, with money drawn from the library's materials budget.

Part of what's holding us back from this kind of service is an undue attachment to our traditional role as gatekeepers between our patrons and the information universe. Throughout the last century librarianship has been a matter of professional librarians exploring that universe, acquiring items that seemed to us like the best fit for our patrons' needs, and bringing them back for our patrons to use. The argument in favor of this approach is that librarians *are* information professionals, and we're more familiar with the workings and geography of the information universe than our patrons are. Patrons need us to tell them what is best. The argument against it is that librarians are usually generalists, not specialists. Even those with some level of specialty in a given subject area are usually less expert in those fields than the Ph.D.s who make up the faculty, and in many ways the *faculty* actually know better than the librarians do. They should be telling *us* what is best. And in any case, sometimes what they need is not just the best available source (which is what we usually look for), but the source *most relevant to their particular research needs* (which may or may not be the "best" book or article on the subject).

Does it sound as if I'm saying we should abdicate our collection development function in favor of a patron-oriented, do-it-yourself approach to collection building? Not really; my suggestion is actually more radical than that. I think maybe we need to give up the idea of building a collection. The whole idea of a selected library collection is an artifact of the print era, when giving patrons the whole world was patently impossible. We still can't *give* them the whole world, because no library can afford it. But it is becoming increasingly possible to *show* our patrons the whole world, and then offer to buy them whatever they want. Why don't we do so? I can imagine some possible responses:

- **Because our patrons don't know how to find the stuff they need.** True, but then, neither do we. We know how to find some of the stuff they need, even some stuff that they don't know about, but then, they often know how to find stuff that we don't know about. Besides, letting them make the final selection doesn't have to mean leaving them without guidance; it just means letting them make the final selection.

- **Because then we won't be professionals anymore; we'll just be the people who pay the bills.** Fair enough, but why should our patrons care about our professional status? Shouldn't we be asking how we can provide better information services, rather than asking how we can best hang onto our professional self-esteem? Isn't there a certain cruel irony in refusing to do something that works better for our patrons out of a concern for our own status as professionals?

- **Because we might run out of money before we meet all of our patrons' needs.** That's the problem we have already, and it is greatly exacerbated by the huge amount of unwanted stuff that we buy for our patrons, thinking (mistakenly) that we've bought something they need. However, see below.

- Because if we give our patrons carte blanche to order whatever they want, one patron (or a few patrons) might hog all the resources and not leave enough for the others. That's another problem we have already. However, the solution is simple: just because we show our patrons the universe of information and ask them to select for themselves does not mean that we give them carte blanche to order whatever they want. We still have limited budgets. It just means that we expand the universe of options from which they may select, using a limited budget. Our message changes from "Here are the things we've selected for you" to "Here's everything that's available. We can't afford everything, so what would you like?" Yes, some may overeat, leaving others hungry. But how is that different from the current situation, in which aggressive patrons can already submit more than their share of order requests? The solution remains the same: responsible allocation of the limited resources by library professionals.

- Because our patrons don't have time to be library selectors. They have their own jobs; they're paying us to find the good stuff. Under the model I'm suggesting, though, "library selection" would take no more time than the research we already expect our patrons to do. The difference, from their perspective, would only be that their options are much greater. When they look something up and find something that looks good, they would have the option of saying "Buy this," and having an electronic copy delivered to them; under the current model of collection building, they would have gone looking for that thing and not found it, because we hadn't anticipated that they would want it.

How serious is this suggestion? Admittedly, it's only a set of preliminary thoughts and it ignores a whole host of practical issues. For example, what does it mean to "show patrons everything that is available," and how could it be done in a coherent way? But what if we took the fundamental idea seriously and started actually working towards a reality that offers our patrons everything instead of offering them only a tiny subset of what's actually available? What if we worked from a "Yes, of course you can have it" assumption instead of a "Wait, let's see whether I thought you were going to want it" assumption?

In short, what if we allowed our users' needs and the changing reality of the information environment to shape our practices, instead of trying to shape our users' behavior to the practices we are comfortable with? 🌲

Bookseller <Deanna@ramsaybooks.com>

by **Narda Tafuri** (Acquisitions Librarian, Harry & Jeanette Weinberg Memorial Library, University of Scranton, Scranton, PA 18510-4634; Phone: 570-941-7811; Fax: 570-941-7809) <tafurin1@scranton.edu>

*Column Editors Note: **Deanna Ramsay** has been an out-of-print bookseller in Aurora, Ontario, Canada, since 1987. She started out selling used books in a retail shop called **Starlight Books** which she sold in 1992 and now sells exclusively online. **Deanna** is the Webmaster for **IOBA**, the **Independent Out-of-Print Booksellers Association**, Webmaster of **Littera Scripta**, (http://www.litterascripta.com/) a Website providing resources for readers, rare book collections and used booksellers, as well as a manager of email lists and designer of Websites for other booksellers.*

*I interviewed **Deanna** recently to help give librarians the "skinny" on the Canadian out-of-print book scene. The following are her responses.*

*(For more information on **Deanna**, visit her Website at: http://www.ramsaybooks.com or contact her by email at: <Deanna@ramsaybooks.com>). — NT*

ATG: Deanna, you've been selling used and out-of-print books now for 16 years, how did you get "into" the business? Did you have any formal training, etc.?

DR: One day I discovered that my favourite used bookstore was for sale. The owner was moving to the west coast. I impulsively decided to buy it. I had no experience in the book business, nor in retail. I borrowed money from my family and from the bank and plunged in. I wince a bit when I think of just how little I knew when I started.

ATG: You started out with an open shop and then decided to sell exclusively online. What led you to that decision? Do you see this as being a trend in the OP book business?

DR: Well, I didn't go directly from an open shop to selling online. I was a single mother with a young daughter, two dogs, a cat, and two horses at home, and a retail business. Initially I tried to do all the work myself, and didn't hire any part-time help until the third year (I was in my 20's when I did this and still thought I was immortal). To be quite honest, I got very, very tired. After five years, in 1992, I put the store up for sale with no real idea of what I would do afterwards. As luck would have it, I had three different prospective buyers interested, so I had no trouble selling it. I've since realized that selling a business is not usually that easy.

From the proceeds of the sale, I bought my first computer. I did some book scouting [*book scouting* is the process of searching and purchasing books on behalf of out-of-print booksellers; an individual involved in this activity is therefore called a *book scout*] for other booksellers, while reading as many books on the book trade as I could get my hands on. I think I learned as much during that year or so of reading as I had in the previous five years of running a retail store.

For a while, I sold books on **Interloc**, which was a closed computer network that matched wants and books for sale. In 1993, I discovered the Internet and started selling books (from my book scouting) on rec.arts.books.marketplace which is a newsgroup. Then I found the **Bibliophile** mailing list. I'd been on **Bibliophile** for a while when **Cathy Waters** of **Timeless Books** in Victoria, BC, announced that her husband **Keith** and his friend **Rick Pura** were starting an online database called the **Advanced Book Exchange**. So I was one of the first booksellers to sign up for that.

I do think that there has been a trend in the trade towards strictly online businesses. But lately I've also heard about some people going the other direction - from online to open store. I believe that the most successful booksellers online are actually those who have moved from mail order catalogue businesses to the Internet. Most still produce catalogues. Essentially it's the same business, but with online catalogues rather than paper.

ATG: How many books do you have and how do you store them? Why do you think it is that used/out-of-print booksellers never seem to have enough books?

DR: I have about 5,500 books listed online, and perhaps another 7,000-8,000 stored in boxes. I renovated my garage, which is about 450 square feet. So all of the listed books are on shelves, and are alphabetical by author. Because I don't have a walk-in trade, I don't bother to separate them into subject categories for the most part. There are just four categories, mostly dictated by size so that I can use different shelf sizes for efficiency - hardcovers, mass market paperbacks, oversize books, and a separate section for books on horses (my specialty).

Most booksellers enjoy buying books much more than they enjoy selling books. Buying is a treasure hunt, and it's fun. Selling books is work — quite hard work sometimes. I suspect that many booksellers are just collectors whose buying habits have gotten completely out of control, and need to finance their habit.

ATG: What do you see as some of the greatest changes in the used/out-of-print book business since you started? What changes in the Canadian OP book market have you seen over the last five years?

DR: I guess that I've changed my own methods over time that I don't always see changes in the marketplace so clearly. But overall, I've seen prices decline slightly. There are many more small part-time booksellers now with the databases (**ABE**, **Alibris**, **Choosebooks**, etc.) making it an easy business to get into on a part-time basis. The problem is that it's become a much more difficult business to make a living from. The biggest change that I've seen is in the availability of books. It was much easier to find quality out-of-print titles a few years ago. There are