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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Cycling Through

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In the morning, at nearby Greenwich, we met in one of the buildings of the old Royal Naval College, a colonnaded masterpiece on the Thames designed in part by Christopher Wren. Lord Nelson lay in state there in 1806. Now it's a World Heritage Site. The University of Greenwich uses parts of it. I needed to kill time before my meeting and accomplished that by walking along a courtyard, the river visible at the open end of two long wings of a building enclosing inner green space in a U. A workman as I walked by asked if there was a lift inside the building. Wren might not have thought of elevators, but we didn't need one for our room on the ground floor, which once you entered from the stone passageway inside the colonnade, was a plain long meeting room like any meeting room anywhere. We met with a dozen or so librarians from around the UK who had come to London for the day's session.

The librarian next to me was from Glasgow. She spoke in a brogue and was a little shy. Another librarian, at the table's far end, was from the London School of Economics and spoke like she belonged there. Earlier this librarian had circulated a YouTube video of a student flashmob that had taken place in the LSE library at the end of exam week, a spontaneous event organized via 2.0 that for a throbbing fifteen minutes packed the library with enthusiastic students. “A lovely event,” she reported.

Across the table from me was a young librarian, also from London. She had short, geometrically styled hair, and it would have been easy to see her dancing in a flashmob. She’d majored in Film Theory and Psychology, but “I don’t believe in that anymore,” she said. Today, she orders and licenses eBooks. She was talking to the librarian next to her, who was from one of the country’s ancient universities. Before becoming a librarian he’d been a scholar, a theologian, “but I found I was reading bibliographies of bibliographies and thought there must be something else to life.” He said there were a lot of “exotic species” at his university. Cooperation was difficult. The Classics faculty, for example, won’t share the University of Greenwich, is “the friendliest university!” The University of Southampton is “Contributing to the community.” Not that any of this is unknown in North America, of course, but the focus on marketing in the UK is a little sharper, even, than ours.

UK librarians find themselves dropped suddenly into a market economy. Now it’s their job to create demand for library services, services that won’t be floated by government subsidy, but instead will require paying customers. One librarian told me that her library faced potential ten percent annual cuts, each year for the next four years. Everything the staff does is scrutinized for its contribution to creating a superior “student experience” — a phrase I heard often. When needless practices are eliminated or other forms of waste uncovered, “that’s what we want to show in our reports to the vice chancellor,” she said.

Ideas, again, not unknown in North America. But the concentrated dosage of change UK universities are now undergoing offers a magnified view of the changes faced by libraries across the western world. One library has a staff position responsible for “Content Life Cycle,” created under the assumption that from the moment an item is acquired, it will have a life cycle defined by usage. When usage declines the cycle is over, and the content will go. Nothing is permanent when it comes to the collection, or anything else. Everything is cycling through.

We returned from Greenwich by water, on the River Bus, a conveyance of London Transport. It must be impossible to ride on the Thames and not feel you’re being taken on a trip to the future. St. Paul’s Cathedral, built from the ashes of the 1666 Great Fire of London, rises over the surrounding city. And so does the Gherkin, since 2004 the pickel-shaped focal point of London’s financial district. The river view of the Parliament Buildings and Westminster Abbey remains a perfect picture of London from past centuries — unless you look to the opposite bank, where in 1999 the London Eye was erected, and joined its iconic counterparts in defining this city.
The response isn’t surprising — I think we’re all aware that the transition to electronic journals is ahead of monographs and the evolutions are different — but taken in isolation it is misleading. Or rather, when you read the survey results as a whole a more nuanced and affirmative picture emerges. Library directors are predicting that they will devote more money to electronic journals. Within five years, most predict that spending on e-monographs will surpass that of print monographs. The survey results also emphasize the important relationship between the respondents acceptance of print monograph deaccessioning and preservation conditions. With preservation and access to historical collections needs met, the majority of directors reported that print deaccession would be important. What I think the report demonstrates is less about the increasing acceptance of eBooks and more about the still developing and uncertain practices and policies they necessitate.

Steve: True enough. In fact, a summary statement from the report made on print journals is telling: “the lack of standards and policies means that collections management decisions at many libraries are made on a case-by-case basis, rather than as part of a strategic process of evaluating collections and access.” This is certainly the case in my library. If a print journal is available online, or if a publisher of a print + online journal is now allowing online only for the same price, our selectors almost always cancel the print subscription. Unfortunately, many print cancelations are frequently done by selectors and Acquisitions staff scrambling to meet budget cutting deadlines. Not much evaluation goes into the process, so it is not exactly strategic. The concept about academic libraries not having a strategic process for deaccessioning the print versions of journals acquired online can apply equally to many libraries not having a clear collection strategy for eBooks, as you stated earlier.

Robin: Yes, but I think it is important to discuss some of the reasons why such a strategy for eBooks is so elusive. As the report’s authors aptly raise, there is no widely accepted access model, nor are there mature preservation solutions. Is it your sense that these issues are proving more difficult to address with eBooks than with journals?

Steve: I think so. With journals the strategies of collection, archiving, and access is easier to conceive in an online environment — basically the online versions are replacing the print versions. A lot of libraries are not even bothering to keep a print archive if online access is available; others are taking steps to archive print versions with their state or regional consortia. With eBooks it’s not so simple. In most cases the eBooks are not replacing the print versions; print and eBooks are being acquired in tandem. With so many academic libraries facing restrictive budgets, has collection management even been more challenging?

Robin: I think some of the challenges are tied to the infrastructure of producing, distributing and acquiring monographs and eBooks. This system, if you will, is very different from those supporting journals. Consequently, it is difficult to apply the lessons and practices the library community has developed for e-journals to eBooks. It strikes me that for monographs and particularly electronic monographs, there is more distance between the players: the creators, publishers, distributors, buyers, and users of the content. This is just an anecdotal observation, of course, but consider preservation through the lens of a much used acquisitions workflow. From its primary book vendor, a library buys the majority of its electronic monographs; the vendor has contracts with multiple aggregators and the library executes separate agreements with its desired eBook providers. The library-aggregator agreement addresses an approach to archival access and preservation that is, in most cases, platform specific, unrelated to individual publisher practices, separate from any relationships and agreements the library may have with individual publishers, and often incompatible with the long-term archival services the library is employing. It strikes me that successful perseverance practices will need to address the business of acquiring eBooks to avoid vendor specific and publisher exclusive solutions.

Steve: Agreed, but one lesson the libraries may have learned from dealing with e-journals is with the purchasing methods now used for eBooks. From my observations at ALA and talking with other academic librarians, it sure sounds like most libraries are buying eBooks individually, whether firm ordered or acquired through approval plans or PDA’s, and not so much as part of a pre-packaged deal that were so popular a decade ago. The Big Deal model that forces libraries to pay for an entire package of content — whether each individual journal in the package is wanted or not — does not seem to be acceptable for many libraries acquiring eBooks. You deal with a lot of academic libraries, Robin, would you say this is the case and be a distinction between e-journal and eBook acquisitions?

Robin: My perspective is skewed because I work for a company that does not sell packages of content. But, yes, there does seem to be an emphasis on title by title purchasing; however, academic libraries have always bought monographs this way. It’s not surprising the same approach and expectations would hold for eBooks. Similarly, libraries are applying trusted monographic acquisitions and collection development strategies like approval plans to eBook. A question for another column might be should they?

Steve: That’s a great question and we can delve into that another time. Talk to you soon. 📚