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# Acquisitions Archaeology — Islands in the Stream

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History in general and archaeology in particular illustrate two closely-related but contradictory manifestations of time: change and resistance. Though the exact nature of time remains a matter of lengthy and intense philosophical debate, I will follow **Harmon's** assertion that an inherent resistance in the "being" of the world (that is, in its ontology) prevents everything possible from happening all at once.<sup>1</sup> Hence, some possibilities unfold in a temporal sequence, which in turn prevents some possibilities from happening at all. Moment to moment, the universe around is constantly changing, but not everything changes at the same rate. Some things (e.g., properties of elements or physical laws of the universe) appear not to change under any circumstances, resulting in universals. To such universals we can add less tangible and slightly less fixed abstractions like ideas and concepts, which may be changed over time but may also be resistant to change.

History and archaeology show us that some of these abstract elements within culture indeed can be resistant to change. The resistance found in many practices and productions (be they material or ideological) is highly variable. The course of time revealed through the study of the past helps us mark the winding course of change in time while simultaneously sketching the outline of those islands of resistance or relative constancy. Sometimes the juxtaposition is so sharp between change (contingency) and consistency (resistance) over time that it shines a bright light on the human condition at a particular point in time.

So, too, in acquisitions archaeology, it seems. The year of 1991 is just over two decades ago. In the scope of history, twenty years is not an expansive period of time; it is approximately a single generation. However, if time is a river rushing past the islands of relative constancy, then two decades are enough time to experience



some profound change. The impact we can observe, if not in the immensity of years, may be measured by the profundity of its rate.

In June of 1991, **Richard Brumley** explores what it means to be an acquisitions librarian.<sup>2</sup> Though anyone who has spent any significant time in acquisitions during the last twenty years intuits that the changes in the profession have been profound, it is surprising how current **Brumley's** description feels. Breaking the idea of the acquisitions librarian into three parts, he surveys a fairly complete and entirely familiar island of acquisitions work. His overview is enough to suggest that acquisitions librarianship is fairly constant, if not universal.

Starting with the "skills" required for the job, he lists the requisite library skills, business skills, and managerial skills that an acquisitions librarian must possess. The second part of **Brumley's** article includes the "attributes" needed for success. Attributes are personal qualities that are needed in acquisitions work, such as ability to take on new tasks and responsibilities, a service orientation, and tact. Finally, there are "elements" generally needed in the academic workplace that are no less necessary for acquisitions librarians: collegiality and professional development.

In all, **Brumley's** take on acquisitions reads as quite contemporary. Within the framework of three parts, he discusses the challenge of losing staff positions, the problems encountered in managing subscriptions, and the need to be comfortable and innovative with technology. This general approach to describing the "acquisitions librarian" is reassuringly similar to what someone in the profession might say today. But rather than demonstrating stability by showing the constants in specific acquisitions work, **Brumley** has delimited the boundaries of an island in terms of general qualities — delimiting in the process an isolated constant in the river of temporal contingencies by which we mark change.

This dichotomy can be illustrated by considering a seemingly unrelated article. In the immediately preceding issue of *ATG*, perhaps the last article dealing with "Soviet serials" as a current event was published.<sup>3</sup> Prefacing the article is an editorial note announcing, "just as we were preparing this issue for publication, the following article [about Soviet serials acquisition] came in from **Collets**. Very interesting given all that's going on in Russia." The article itself addresses concerns about periodical supply, exchange programs, printing quality, and publishing delays. Of course, any and all such concerns can be a factor in acquisitions work wherever it is done, but here the elements are framed specifically in the now-historical context of Soviet politics and information production. **Lytton** concludes that "the days of cheap Soviet books are over."

This remark is remarkably, if unintentionally, prescient: the Supreme Soviet would dissolve itself before the end of the year, and the days of Soviet publishing would come abruptly to an end.

The historical period or archaeological stratum of 1991 offers an opportunity to observe the contradictory forces of time in a space that is both relatively close to the present yet absolutely distant. The definition and even the scope of acquisitions librarianship uncovered in **Brumley's** 1991 article stands out as a constant: a set of generalized competencies and connected practices that remain hardly changed at all in concept. The construct of "academic acquisitions librarian," however, exists within the information environment of the library, the academy, and the universe beyond. Therefore, the librarian that we recognize, if an island, is surrounded by the political, cultural, and technological streams that create an always moving, ever-changing context.

In the end, the constant we call "acquisitions librarian" provides a reassuring framework in which to structure strategies and develop processes, but it is not enough to hold back the force of change. Even while performing a similar function through time, the particulars of acquisitions are shaped by the information flows in which they are surrounded. The world of Soviet Communism, itself a strategic framework established to resist change, has been swept away, and the stream in which the librarian is now situated is no longer the same — even if that stream is still just as turbulent.

A universe without change would be a frozen picture unmarked by movement, immune to forces (like gravity) and processes (like entropy) by which we experience and track the movement of time. A universe of change without distributed points of resistance would, again following **Harmon**, expend all of its potential immediately. While ideas and concepts may be outside time, resistant to the currents affecting physical bodies, the universe in motion is likewise in a perpetual state of change. Even assuming some abstractions may be impervious to external forces (like entropy), such islands are created by the flows of change that swirl around it. In this way, we can measure the profound change over the past twenty years not by the way that we define ourselves as librarians but how as librarians we interact with the changed (and ever-changing) world around us. 🌸

## Vendor Library Relations from page 81

All patrons are not created equal, after all. Many will be happy enough with the café alone, not much desire for a personal bibliographic trainer or for book-picking opportunities, thank you. Many, post-graduation, will live happy, fulfilling, and all but library-free lives. A few, on the other hand, will find the library the very best thing about their student years. Who knows, maybe an embedded librarian would have helped me, and I wish there'd been a better way, those years ago, to learn more about the library. For that, as it was, I needed to go to library school. 🌸

### Endnotes

1. **Graham Harmon**, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Open Court Press: 2005.
2. **Richard Brumley**, "Acquisitions Librarians — Jacks of All Trades?" *ATG* v.3#3 (June 1991), p. 40-42, 45.
3. **Steve Lytton**, "Soviet Serials: What's Next?" *ATG* v.3#2 (Apr. 1991), p. 36.