Curating Collective Collections-Reflexive Curation: Accident, Risk and Medium in the Collectively Curted Collection

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The third area is grey literature. Great libraries provided comprehensive subject coverage through their extensive collecting of grey literature, which includes “patents, technical reports from government agencies or scientific research groups, working papers from research groups or committees, white papers, and preprints.” (Wikipedia) Bibliographers spent much effort in tracking down these resources, which often cost very little once they were found. I suspect that many of these resources exist digitally on the Web. Both good and great libraries will be able to find them once researchers or librarians know that they exist. Great libraries, however, may continue to collect them for the reason given next.

Good libraries that build collections based upon patron-driven acquisitions will be able to provide researchers with what they want. Great libraries will be able to provide researchers with useful resources that they didn’t know they needed. Perhaps the main function of great libraries will be to scan subject areas where they would have comprehensively collected in the print world at Conspectus Level 5 to acquire in print or digital format materials of research interest that do not appear in standard sources and that even the reasonably-skilled researcher might never discover. In some cases, a record with a link to the digital resource may be all that is needed if continued availability is highly probable. Faculty and students in these great libraries will be able to use the integrated library system or its successor to find useful items that would otherwise be difficult to identify. Researchers in good libraries may need to develop more sophisticated searching skills to include entries in Amazon and other search engines, or discovering specialized bibliographies. Or, if the great libraries do decide to collect the items or the links as described above, all that the good libraries’ researchers may need to do is to access the great libraries’ integrated library systems, which I assume would be available on the Internet.

To conclude, to assure the greatest access to scholarly resources, perhaps the great libraries of the world should revive the idea of cooperative collection development where the goal is discovery rather than purchase. The commercial databases will cover some areas, notably STM, because enough great and good libraries have traditionally purchased these resources to make their creation and maintenance profitable. For poorer areas with extensive grey literature or self-publication, I could see informal agreements where, for example, the Yale University libraries would collect comprehensively anything on the Incas, while the UC Berkeley libraries would do the same for the Mayans. While the Internet has destroyed any hope of systematically collecting all human knowledge, newly-focused cooperative efforts would be a step in the right direction and provide a new definition of a great library.
tute in Salem, Massachusetts. I was privileged to be able to confirm a tentative identification of a fragmentary pamphlet — its title page missing along with portions of the text — as a "lost" sermon by the famous Puritan minister Cotton Mather. A former librarian had inserted a querulous "Evans 1979?" inside the fragment, which was part of a longstanding backlog of uncataloged materials awaiting attention by the Institute's understaffed library. I followed this lead — a reference to Charles Evans' American Bibliography — through references in Mather's diary and other contemporary sources, concluding that it was the sermon Providence Asserted and Adored, preached and published in 1718 on the death of a lighthouse keeper named George Worthylake. The sermon had been known to exist, but Evans and other bibliographers had recorded it as "no copy located" — a lost imprint, now found.

Over time my career took me to an academic library. Digital files became a more important part of my professional concern. And as I reflected on this lost-and-then-found pamphlet, I was deeply struck by the fragility of print — how easily a work, albeit minor, by a major figure in American history could altogether disappear — but also by its durability. This copy had survived the loss (so far as anyone knows) of all other copies, even survived the loss of its metadata (its title page), seemingly by virtue of the ontological stubbornness of paper and ink. Could a digital object, I wondered, possibly survive under similar conditions — the lone copy of someone's master's thesis reconstructed 270 years later, extracted from a 5-1/4 inch floppy found at the bottom of the proverbial shoebox, its header information corrupted by a bad disk sector?

However many copies of that Mather sermon may have been printed, they all — save this one — seem to have befallen various accidents: burned in fires, destroyed in floods, buried in collapsing farmhouses. The difference between accident and risk — or natural risk and manufactured risk — has figured prominently in modern social theory, particularly in the work of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. Examples of natural risks are fires, floods, and epidemics — disasters that are a natural part of the physical world. The vulnerability of digital information, by contrast, seems better characterized by what Beck calls manufactured risk — "hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself. Risks, as opposed to older dangers, are consequences which relate to the threatening force of modernization." It is the very complexity of this system of digital representation, storage, and communication, on this analysis — the fragile storage media, the far-flung network, the relentless dynamism of its cycles of innovation and obsolescence — that creates the conditions of its own fragility and risk of breakdown. But are digital objects really more vulnerable to loss than print-based information objects? And is the difference between print and digital media for preservation the real lesson of this story? As to the first question, Matthew Kirschenbaum, among others, reminds us that, in fact, digital information is "surprisingly resilient in the face of fire, flood, and other disasters that would have spelled doom for their paper precursors."

"[G]iven sufficient time and resources," he continues, "data can often be recovered even if the supporting medium has been traumatized."

More important, the survival of that copy of Mather's sermon was not as accidental as the disappearance of the other copies. At some point in its history, that copy became part of the collections of a library whose operations were organized around curation and preservation. The sermon had entered a space in which the possibility of accident was greatly reduced (though not eliminated, of course: fires and other misfortunes befall libraries, too). It was not because of its medium (its physical nature as paper) that it endured. The quality of curation, not the format curated, is what matters most to preservation.

At the same time, however, that new curatorial space presented a new set of vulnerabilities, which would be characterized as risks, not accidents, by Beck and his fellow theorists: vulnerability, for example, to disruptions in the power supply for the library's climate-control system (without temperature and humidity controls, library storage in New England can be more damaging to paper than an air-cooled farmhouse) or to vicissitudes in institutional budgets or staffing: dangers created by the very systems designed to preserve the collections. Digital information is vulnerable in some similar ways and some new ones: disruptions in electrical supply can lead to more severe disruptions to access (even if not to total loss, per Kirschenbaum), and digital information is more vulnerable than print to market-driven availability of the hardware and software platforms necessary to interpret it.

So far, Beck's analysis is commonplace: the distinction between natural and manufactured risk and the notion that manufactured risk is a definition continued on page 94...
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ing characteristic of industrial and post-industrial modernity aren’t especially profound. But Beck takes this argument a step further, claiming that our increased understanding of social and natural systems — the very knowledge that librarians, archivists, and other curators are charged to preserve in its recorded forms — itself increases risk. He contrasts this position with the “classical premise according to which more modern societies are modernized, the more agents (subjects) acquire the ability to reflect on the social conditions of their existence and to change them in that way.” Our increasing understanding, for instance, of the chemistry of paper can be “fed back” into our collection management practices, helping us to that extent to reduce the risk that our cultural heritage will be attenuated or lost by acid-induced embrittlement. But Beck argues for a more complex understanding of “reflexive modernization”: “the further the modernization of modern societies proceeds, the more the foundations of industrial society are dissolved, consumed, changed, and threatened.”

Anthony Giddens makes a similar point perhaps more clearly: “To the Enlightenment thinkers, and many of their successors, it appeared that increasing information about the social and natural worlds would bring increasing control over them. For many, such control was the key to human happiness; the more, as collective human consciousness, the more we can guide history towards our ideals. We should be careful not to overestimate the benefits of science and its applications and redundancy in our collections and libraries have always worked in coordination with other libraries through shared catalogs like WorldCat, can influence our local collection decisions, leading not to careful coordination but to complaisance or false confidence as we count on others to retain materials we prefer not to.

Transitions from one media paradigm to new media — as we are seeing now in our transition from paper to digital — are especially fraught as the new media appear to supersede and eclipse the old. Media, Gitelman reminds us, “tend unthinkingly to be regarded as heralding a certain ‘coherent and directional’ way along an inevitable path, a History, toward a specific and not-so-distant end. Today, the imagination of ‘the end’ that structures our uniquely characterized by the cheerful expectation that digital media” — and we might generalize to all media — “are all converging toward some harmonious combination or global ‘synergy.’” Let us beware of glib and reductive assumptions about the redundancy of print copies after they have been digitally copied: media are embedded in complex social practices that do not fully reduce to marks on surfaces, and digital copies do not capture all the affordances of print that might turn out to be valuable parts of scholarly and cultural practice.

Beck’s and Giddens’ reflections also remind us that just as the benefits of a shared collection are widely shared — whether through an ILL system based on shared metadata like WorldCat, consortial database licensing that spreads costs more evenly, or open-access digital collections or source code — so too are the risks. Modern libraries have always worked in coordination with other libraries in other libraries, through shared catalogs like WorldCat, can influence our local collection decisions, leading not to careful coordination but to complaisance or false confidence as we count on others to retain materials we prefer not to.

As I read Beck and Giddens, the systems we use to record, communicate, and safeguard knowledge and experience — including our increasingly distributed and coordinated systems of curatorial practice — themselves increase complexity and risk, which will not be reduced, overall, by new or additional knowledge. Technological risk will not be eliminated by the application of more technology. Granted, in the face of dwindling resources and escalating needs and expectations, a theoretical appeal to risk — a vague “what if?” — may not feel compelling. Those wispy uncertainties are surely outweighed by the good that could be done if we moved more quickly to eliminate print collections, convert them to digital files, and rely on someone else — other libraries or the marketplace — to keep them available.

But media are also reflexive, as media historian Lisa Gitelman argues. They are not simply inert surfaces or containers, but rather “socially-realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice.” Caution is therefore warranted as we further rationalize and coordinate our collective-curatorial strategies. This is not an argument against technological change, much less a brief in favor of “simpler” or “more durable” analog over digital media. The challenge, as Giddens points out, is to balance as best we can the opportunities created by modern technologies with the opportunity to reduce duplication and redundancy in our collections and use our financial resources, time, and attention in new ways — against the risks that arise as we

stake preservation on fewer print copies and on digital files, including digital systems of metadata. We should be careful not to overestimate what we think we know about the functioning of these complex systems, or to extrapolate too confidently from current trends. We should, however, remember that the reflection or self-awareness that is part of modernization itself shapes the modernization process and not necessarily for the good. Consider, as a small example, how what we think we know about the holdings of other libraries through shared catalogs like WorldCat, can influence our local collection decisions, leading not to careful coordination but to complaisance or false confidence as we count on others to retain materials we prefer not to.

Our gradual development of a network of increasingly interdependent libraries and repositories promises tremendous benefits in increased access to the world of knowledge, but entails difficult choices regarding business models, standards for “trustworthiness,” numbers of page-verified print copies that ought to be preserved, etc. “Reflective curator” might be one name for describing an evolving practice that is marked by an understanding of risk, sensitivity to uncertainty and our own fallibility, and an awareness of the historically contingent nature of all curatorial practices, including this one. Let us move forward with optimism, tempered by care.

Endnotes
2. A research center and museum for New England history, since merged with the Peabody Museum as the Peabody Essex Museum.
6. “The remarkable staying power of data stored in digital form is a function of the physical property of magnetic media known as hysteresis, or its capacity to retain a charge over time.” Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, Richard Ovenden, and Gabriela Redwine, Digital Forensics and Born-Digital Content (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), p. 308.
8. Ibid., p. 176.
9. Ibid., p. 58, Italics in original.
11. Lisa Gitelman, op. cit., p. 3.