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Exploring Concepts of “Collection” in the Digital World

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Abstract

This paper describes an ongoing doctoral research project, supported by the British Library and titled “Conceptualising the library collection for the digital world: a case study of social enterprise.” Relatively little has been written about the conceptual ideas associated with collection in a library context. Based on interview and survey data collected from library and information practitioners, people working in social enterprises, faculty members, and policymakers, three interpretations of “collection” are suggested: “collection as thing”, “collection as access,” and “collection as process.” The paper proposes a revised collection development hierarchy which incorporates these three concepts, outlining the potential impact of these ideas on collection development strategies, tactics, and operations in the digital world.

Introduction

This paper uses data collected as part of an ongoing doctoral research project to explore concepts of “collection” in a world increasingly characterized by the use of digital technology. The research project is described, and the term “social enterprise” is defined. Findings from interviews and surveys are discussed with a particular focus on definitions of collection and the impact of digital technology on library collections, as well as examining people’s perceptions of the relative importance of library collections and collection activities. These data are used as the basis for a revised collection development hierarchy, and practical examples of how this hierarchy might be used are outlined.

This paper builds on material presented in a Lively Lunch session at the 31st Charleston Conference 2011, which explored the impact of new types of community, the increasing significance of interdisciplinary subjects, and the emergence of new formats on library collections in the digital world (Roberts, 2012).

Overview of the Research Project

The doctoral research project on which this paper is based began in October 2010 and is due to be completed in September 2013. The aim of the project is to use a case study of the library collection for social enterprise to develop a conceptual approach to the library collection in the digital world, exploring stakeholder

perceptions of collections, terminology and collection development, and management processes. The main research question for the project asks: what constitutes the concept of the library collection in the digital world? Two subsidiary research questions are of particular relevance to this paper:

- What are stakeholders’ perceptions of library and information collections and terminology?
- What does this study suggest about the wider issues relating to library and information collections in the digital world?

The research has involved a case study of the British Library’s collections for social enterprise, searches of other UK library catalogs, and a series of interviews (aimed at generating theories about concepts of the collection) followed by surveys (to test the potential transferability of these theories to a larger group of people). This paper focuses on initial findings from these interviews and surveys.

Why Does Conceptualizing The Library Collection Matter?

Although the idea of “collection” has long been central to the practice of librarianship, sometimes being seen as synonymous with “library” (Corrall, 2012) only relatively recently, during the latter part of the 20th century, have fields such as collection building, collection development, and collection management emerged as key areas of professional specialization. Earlier practice in this

field tended to focus on narrower topics such as “book selection” (McColvin, 1925) or wider issues such as “library administration” (Ranganathan, 1959). There appear to have been relatively few formal research studies aimed at theory building around the idea of library collections. Gorman (2000; 2003) suggests new conceptual approaches to collection development in the digital world, describing four levels of resources, based on their degree of organization and the ease with which they can be accessed (Gorman, 2003). Lee (2000; 2003a; 2003b; 2005; 2008; 1993) provides some interesting examples of how work in this field can be conducted, based on research projects which move from focusing on collection management and control issues presented by pressures on library space (Lee, 1993), to exploring concepts of collection (Lee, 2000; 2005), and on to

model of “collection.” Social enterprise is a relatively new term for a much older concept. The Social Enterprise Alliance (2012) describes social enterprises as “businesses whose primary purpose is the common good.” The Social Enterprise Alliance (2012) also characterizes social enterprise as “the missing middle,” as shown in Figure 1—occupying a space between private, public and non-profit sectors and having the potential to do more to address social problems than any one of these sectors could do on their own. Other authors also suggest social enterprise represents a point of convergence between these three sectors (Nyssens, 2007; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2011, pp.30-31); social enterprise can use market approaches, together with decentralized voluntary or non-profit sector activism and altruism, to meet public policy needs.

Figure 1. Locating Social Enterprise (Based On Social Enterprise Alliance (2012); Nyssens (2007); Ridley-Duff And Bull (2011, pp. 30–31))

investigating aspects of users’ information behavior (Lee, 2008). It is my contention that, in the context of rapid technological changes, combined with the further specialization and potential fragmentation of collection processes and terminology, developing an overarching framework for thinking about “collection” may provide useful insights into potential future roles for libraries in information resource provision.

Defining Social Enterprise

This research uses a case study of information for social enterprise to begin to develop a conceptual

Social Enterprise and Library Collections

Social enterprise is a particularly interesting subject to study in relation to collections for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is an interdisciplinary subject. Research increasingly revolves around interdisciplinary subjects. This is partly because interdisciplinary approaches reflect the reality of how subjects interconnect. However, this is also because interdisciplinary subjects facilitate problem centered approaches to research—drawing on knowledge and experience from different disciplines to address complex real-world

problems. This process may involve individuals and organizations from beyond the academy in a more active way than would be found in traditional research fields (Witt, 2010, pp.14-15). Interdisciplinary research is also encouraged by research funders and facilitated by cross-disciplinary access to information (Hérubel, 2010, p.36).

Social enterprise provides an example of new types of community and may be seen as a community of practice. It is a highly networked field with significant virtual communities, with large amounts of relevant information generated through social media, on websites, or in blogs. This is difficult material for libraries to deal with, but it reflects important trends relating to the dramatic increase in informal online publication. There is a very diverse range of stakeholders who may be interested in social enterprise, including social enterprise practitioners, policy makers, researchers, and faculty members. Finally, there may be relevant materials in a wide range of different types of library, including academic, public, and national libraries as well as more specialized libraries, such as health libraries, and libraries in professional associations or government departments. This means that focusing on social enterprise could provide a snapshot of issues affecting library collections across a wide range of organizations.

Initial Findings: Interviews

Eighteen people were interviewed for this project between June 2011 and June 2012, including people involved with social enterprise, library and information practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and publishers.

Defining Collection

Every interviewee was asked to define the term collection. Some saw “collection” as an example of library jargon. However, all interviewees also offered quite complex and nuanced definitions of collection. Their responses appeared to be clustered around three main ideas:

- “Collection as thing”:
  - A group of materials on a subject or a theme;
  - A group of sub-groups;
  - Collection and quantity;
- “Collection as process”:
  - Collection and selection;
  - Collection and search;
  - Collection and service;
- “Collection as access.”

Ideas of “collection as thing” included defining collection as a group of materials on a subject or a theme. Ideas of collection as containing sub-groups of material, suggesting some sort of hierarchical organization, were suggested by an academic who asked, “How many sub-groups of collection are there within a collection?” The collection was also defined as “More than one and relating to a theme” raising the issue of quantity in relation to the minimum size of a collection. These ideas of collection as groupings of material on a subject and containing “subcollections” closely echoed some of Lee’s (2005, pp. 73, 76) findings.

The idea of “collection as process” was also discussed in a number of interviews. One social enterprise practitioner suggested “collection... feels like a journey, doesn’t it?” whilst an academic defined collection as “a body of work that has been brought together using a particular set of criteria,” using the example of results generated by searching. A librarian also discussed the idea of collection as materials used to respond to enquiries. These definitions echo ideas from the literature such as Horava’s (2010, p.150) advice to “consider what a collection does rather than what a collection is” and the definition of collection provided by Lagoze and Fielding (1998): “A collection is logically defined as a set of criteria for selecting resources from the broader information space.”

Seventeen interviewees discussed the idea of “collection as access,” including all six library and information practitioners. An academic librarian

said, “the term collection can mean anything that we provide access to for both teaching and research to do with the university.” This supports the suggestion from Feather and Sturges (2003, pp.80–81) that collection “can also be taken to include all the information resources to which a library has access, including those available through physical and virtual networks.” However, this also represents the greatest difference between the findings from this project and those described by Lee (2005), who found a contrast between customer priorities of access and availability, and librarian priorities of control and management.

Collection and the Impact of Digital Technology

The interviewees discussed a number of dimensions to the impact of digital technology on library collections including:

- Digital has a global reach;
- Digital can be personal and personalized;
- Digital adds complexity;
- Digital overcomes certain types of physical constraint (the size of a printed page, the length of a shelf);
- Digital creates an opportunity for libraries to shift from outside—in to inside—out information provision (Dempsey, 2012, p.8), moving from collecting materials from the external information environment to make them available to a local audience, to pushing out local content to the wider information universe;
- Digital may alter the order of some traditional collection processes; and
- Digital and perceptions of “free” information—in which librarians play an increasingly significant role as cost mediators, as well as information mediators.

Initial Findings: Surveys

Two surveys—one for library and information practitioners and one for people interested in social enterprise—were conducted between June and October 2012. One hundred and forty-nine responses were received (103 from library and

information practitioners and 46 from people interested in social enterprise).

Each survey included around 30 questions; this paper describes three key areas of similarity and difference between library and information practitioner and social enterprise responses. Firstly, there appeared to be very similar patterns of ranking for eight definitions of collection derived from definitions provided in the interviews. Overwhelmingly, most respondents from both groups selected “Group of materials on a subject or a theme” as their first, second, or third highest ranked definition, followed by “provision of access to resources” and “a set of results created through searching.”

Secondly, library and information practitioners more frequently described libraries as very important or essential sources of information about social enterprise than Google. In contrast, among social enterprise respondents, Google was one of the top two resources most frequently described as very important or essential; only a minority of these respondents rated libraries as a very important or essential source of information about social enterprise.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, social enterprise respondents seemed to place greater emphasis on the preservation role of libraries. Generally, preservation was rated as a very important or essential role for libraries by a smaller proportion of library and information practitioner respondents. However, there were considerable sectoral differences: A much higher proportion of national library respondents than public or academic library respondents gave higher levels of priority to preservation activities.

Proposed Revised Collection Development Hierarchy

Using a combination of findings from the interviews and from the surveys, a tentative revised collection development hierarchy has been suggested (Corrall & Roberts, 2012). This is based on the collection development hierarchy described by Corrall (2012), which synthesizes earlier discussions of the different management levels of collection development (Table 1).

Collection process	Relevant question	Management level
Collection development	Why?	Strategy
Selection	What?	Tactics
Acquisition	How?	Operations

Table 1. Collection Development Hierarchy Described by Corral (2012, p.5).

The proposed revised collection development hierarchy is shown in Table 2 and links the idea of “collection as thing” to strategic level decision-making, “collection as access” to tactical approaches to the collection and “collection as process” to operational collection activities.

Management level	Collection definition	Example
Strategy	<i>“Collection as thing”</i>	Policies for: identifying and prioritizing subjects; scoping collections (local and system-wide); collaborative collection development; preservation.
Tactics	<i>“Collection as access”</i>	Links to web-based materials and collections; interoperable systems; embedding libraries and librarians within non-library networks.
Operations	<i>“Collection as process”</i>	Support for community-created content; patron-driven collection; dynamic collection creation; linked data.

Table 2. Proposed Revised Collection Development Hierarchy Described by Corral and Roberts (2012)

Three examples, suggested by the interview data, illustrate how this hierarchy might be applied in practice.

In relation to Patron-Driven Acquisitions (PDA), considering “collection as thing” may assist in developing policies which define where the boundaries of the PDA collection should be, as well as setting out policies for how this material is acquired. The idea of “collection as access” also informs preferences for leasing or renting e-books on a short-term basis or purchasing them for the longer term. Finally, “collection as process” describes the automation of acquisitions activities, as well as the role of automated metadata in describing new additions to the collection.

In the example of an institutional repository, considering “collection as thing” may drive both wide policies for including material within the repository, and could also describe potential post-inclusion strategies for more focused collection building within the repository and between different repositories. The idea of “collection as access” should encourage multiple access points to the repository, whilst “collection as process” encourages customer self-archiving, as well as the automation of metadata and of preservation activities.

Finally, in the example of deselection, *“collection as thing”* encourages strategic decision-making based on where the boundaries of the collection currently are and where they should be in the future. It may also assist in clarifying the boundaries of sub-sets of the collection which may no longer be needed. Considering “collection as access” means identifying alternative ways to provide access to content from deselected materials, including in alternative formats or from repositories such as the UK Research Reserve of printed journals (Boyle & Brown, 2010) or shared print repositories (Malpas, 2011). “Collection as process” may also involve some level of automated identification of materials for review.

Conclusion

This paper has described an ongoing doctoral research project which aims to conceptualize the library collection for the digital world, using a case

study of social enterprise. Findings from interviews with 18 people, focusing on their definitions of collection, have been discussed, and a small number of findings from surveys of larger groups of stakeholders have also been reported. A revised collection development hierarchy has been proposed, and three practical examples of how this might be applied have been briefly outlined.

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