The Future of Print in Open Stacks: A Proposal

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The Future of Print in Open Stacks: A Proposal

Presented by Jim O'Donnell, Arizona State University Library

The following is a transcription of a live presentation at the 2017 Charleston Conference.

***Editor's Note:** This plenary session was followed by a Lively Lunch Discussion at the Charleston Conference with co-presenter Lorrie McAllister, Associate University Librarian for Collections and Strategy at Arizona State University, on Thursday, November 9 (<http://sched.co/CHpt>). The project will also be discussed in an article authored by Lorrie McAllister in an upcoming issue of *Against the Grain* (<https://www.against-the-grain.com>).

Jim O'Donnell: Anthony, thank you. Good morning, friends and colleagues. I shall be brief.

I want you to begin by examining that slide. I took that photograph myself about a year ago in one of America's truly great libraries famous for its collections, collections that indeed, I would say are second to none. It's a beautiful reading room. I envy this reading room. It has soaring high ceilings, skylights, natural light flooding down into the space, handsomely furnished with neoclassical details, built-in bookshelves, furniture, comfort, students hard at work, and yes, indeed, print books on the bookshelves.

But, look a little more closely at those print books. They all look alike. They have the same size and shape. They are rather tall and bulky and a dark or fatigue sort of green. Now, I have reason to suspect that there are individuals present here who are in fact professional librarians of a certain age. If there are, I suspect some of you should recognize those books. Do I hear any guesses?

NUC, that's right. We present to the brightest students of this generation for their delectation the 750 volumes of the National Union Catalog pre-1956 imprints. We need still to remember to admire that extraordinary technology-assisted tool for improving bibliographical access. It was a miracle in the days of our youth. It is now somewhere in the vicinity of obsolete. Yes, I know there are wizards in the tribe who will tell you that there are days on which you still need to go back to NUC pre-56 to track down some particular volume, and they are right. But you will notice in this photograph an absence of

undergraduates elbowing and jostling each other on the way to the shelves to grab their favorite volumes. Is this, I ask, the future of the print book in our libraries? Books as furniture, venerated but unread? At Arizona State University we think not. We think the print book has a glorious future in front of it if we just but take it, if we just strategize to make it happen.

We have a special opportunity at ASU because we are about to do a major renovation, gutting to the walls the 1966 Charles Hayden Memorial Library, our signature stack tower. We get to start over from scratch. For the moment, the books are leaving the building. Occasional panicked undergraduates come up to me with, "You're taking the books away?" The books are actually looking forward to the trip. They're moving to our high-density shelving facility. In Arizona 50°F and 35% humidity feels really good to a book. When I described the high-density facilities to our visionary president, Michael Crow, he said, "Sounds to me like your fulfillment center." I said, "Fulfillment center: that's a good way to think about it." With new digital tools for access to what's out there, with accelerated retrieval, we will be able to deliver from that high-density facility to all of our students wherever they happen to be, including the 25,000 online-only degree candidates who are scattered around the United States and around the world. We are inventing a new generation of service.

When we come back to the Hayden Tower we'll bring in about 325,000 volumes. So, the challenge for us for now is to think about which 325,000 volumes we bring back and how we keep them from becoming wallpaper or furniture, how we keep them from becoming invisible and disappearing.

So, over the last month we have written a white paper: "Which Books? Where? The Future of the Academic Library Print Collection: A Space for Engagement." I'm happy to acknowledge the support of a planning grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that made this work possible. In this document, which was circulated to Charleston attendees before the conference, and my thanks to Leah Hinds for doing that, we lay out the first steps of a strategy and a planning process for taking what we're thinking of as a zero-based budgeting approach to the books that go into the building. If you didn't have any

books, which 325,000 would you put there? Why? How would you display them? How would you make them objects of engagement for a new generation of students who enter this building in 2020 and after? We will, of course, draw upon the four and a half million volumes in our collection, but we will probably buy other volumes as well in order to stock that collection. I just had the pleasure of spending \$1,000 on a new copy of the Oxford English Dictionary, partly because I was astonished you get one for a thousand dollars. Our old copies were falling apart, but we think it's important to have those books on a shelf where students can see them, to brand the Oxford English Dictionary, to introduce to a 19-year-old what it means to use a real dictionary.

Let me tell you one other experiment we've undertaken. About six months ago we acquired a set of the Oxford University Press *Very Short Introductions*. You can read about them in a recent edition of the *New Yorker*, if you haven't seen them otherwise; 502 volumes we acquired. If you buy the complete set, here's a hint for you, you can probably negotiate with Oxford to get a free twirly rack thrown in to shelve them in your library. We put them in front of the circulation desk right where you come into the building, right next to the soft seating. They've been out there for six months. There are 502 volumes in that series and in that six months, 444 volumes have been checked out an average of two times each. We are moving that product, as the retailers would say; we're making those books engaging to the students who are at Arizona State University today.

What else can we do in that direction? We have ideas about selection, about curation, about display; we're going to bring in a retail consultant to talk to us about how we make our materials visible and usable. We're designing our building to emphasize special and distinctive collections as you walk in the door. If you're a student at ASU three years from now, you won't be able to come in to do your calculus homework without passing exhibits, without passing books you can handle, that will suggest to you something of the riches and possibilities that only a

great university provides, that only a great university library provides.

We're excited. We are moving forward at warp speed on this project, but we also know that we cannot do it simply alone. So, my purpose in talking to you today is to encourage you to read the White Paper, to think about how this could have effect in your libraries, and in particular to think if you want to join with us in the conversation, the planning, and the conspiracy to invent new ways to make the print book in the modern research library exciting and visible and engaging for our students.

To that end, we are hosting tomorrow a Lively Lunch. I will be joined by my colleague Lorrie McAllister, who is our associate university librarian for Collections and Strategy. She has been the lead investigator on the work that we have done with the Mellon grant that we have so far. We'll talk a little bit more about the project and what we've been doing and what we are doing, but we will really want to hear from the people who come to that meeting what you're already doing in your libraries, what other ideas and suggestions you might have, and there will be a sign-up sheet for staying in touch, for becoming part of what I say we are describing as this conspiracy on behalf of the printed book.

To that end, here again is a reference to the white paper: <https://lib.asu.edu/futureprint>. But if you have any trouble accessing the white paper or if you're not able to join us tomorrow but would like to stay in touch with this project, please contact me at jod@asu.edu. We will look to engage as many fellow institutions as possible. We have a program for doing a case study of where you are and can then work forward with you, looking for the kind of partners who want to make sure that the print book has a lively and energized future for our students for generations to come. I said I would be brief and I trust that I have been. Thank you for your time and attention, and thank you to Katina and Leah for giving us this moment in the spotlight. I hope to see as many of you as possible tomorrow. Thank you.