June 2009

Building a Library Collections in the 21st Century -- If I Were Reborn as a Librarian Today

Arlene Sievers-Hill

Case Western Reserve University, axs23@case.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sievers-Hill, Arlene (2009) "Building a Library Collections in the 21st Century -- If I Were Reborn as a Librarian Today," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 21: Iss. 3, Article 29.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2329>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

not long ago would more likely have been the dumpster than this kind of headline status. A measure of their value, in one sense or another, is that among the parties lining up to challenge or at least question the **Google** settlement are people who range from the **American Library Association**, to **Microsoft**, to the **Internet Archive**, to the **U.S. Department of Justice**.

Just try "**Ambrose Bierce**" in **Google Book Search**. The results, as of today, add up to 2,862 works where **Bierce** was author or subject or was somewhere mentioned. (A short while ago, in this column's first draft, **Bierce's** total was 2,604.) He disappeared into Mexico in 1913 and nobody knows what became of him. But today wherever his spirit resides, we can be sure **Bierce** is commenting mordantly as **Google** and others go to work to figure out how, whether through advertising or subscriptions or eBooks or print-on-demand or re-publication or something else, they might turn a little profit on his online legacy.

Anyone coming across a reference to **Bierce's** dictionary could right away, with access to the **Google** database, be immersed in that book and maybe then in the rest of the **Bierce** corpus as represented by these 2,862 manifestations of him. For students who shared some degree of his sardonic outlook on the world, this might lead to enough interest to write a paper. Those 2,862 bits of **Bierce** and whatever else found online would certainly provide most of the material needed.

For many students, there's no doubt it would be *all* the material needed — what **Google Book** would bring alongside **Wikipedia** and whatever else the student managed to find online.

What else would there be, anyway? Well, new books.

Not that there have ever been many new books about **Bierce**; but that's another question and since he was merely an example let's discard him at this point, as he might have expected.

Users will find new books in **Google**, but in an absolute reversal of the world as we've known it, they'll be far less accessible than their out-of-print forebears. For as long as current publisher practice stands up, readers will be able to read only a part or even nothing online of a new book. They'll need to buy their way in, either by visiting a bookstore or by paying for whatever online versions were available.

Or, naturally, they could check the library.

How many students will? Online, after all, new books don't look much different from old books. In fact it's always been true that the only place a newly published book always seems newer than an older book is in a library, where the degree of wear will tell. In a bookstore, while a new book might be placed more prominently, side-by-side there's no difference. Online, often the same story.

Let's face it, today's a rough time for new books. Bookstores are struggling. Book re-

view pages are shrinking. Publishers are cutting staff. Some lists seem thin. The pressure's on to get books out in a hurry on every topic of the moment, to the point that some new books look like blogs. Some of them, of course, *were* blogs not long before. And as we hear all the time, hardly anyone reads let alone buys the new academic monographs that have become so difficult for university presses to publish.

Budgets for books in libraries, which mostly has meant budgets for new books, have been battered for nearly a generation now, first by serials, then by incursions of all sorts of electronic resources. Administrators' trust in the value of expert book selection from their selectors has been on the wane for most of that time and will not be boosted by widely noted reports from **R2 Consulting**, who helpfully note that 40% of all books on the shelves never circulate.

One of the best arguments for buying new books always has been, then you wouldn't have to try to buy them later. That made a good case when the out-of-print business was based on printed catalogs and lists. Finding the book you needed was hard. Today it's easy and the copy you find online might even be cheaper than the new copy you didn't buy. Now the rise of print-on-demand and eBooks threatens the idea of "out-of-print" anyway, since a lot of books may never get there. They'll all be books for the ages, eternal, in terms of availability at least.

A big moment in the development of "collection development" was librarians' wrestling responsibility for book selection from the academic departments. Approval plans were one way they did that. Today, with libraries through "patron selection" programs trying to give back part of that responsibility, with questions in the air about usage of print books, and with its fundamentals little changed since the **Richard Abel Company** era, the approval plan is something of a remnant from the early days of "collection development." Like the rest of the book budget, approval plans have taken their lumps from serials and electronic resources. But they're still substantial vehicles, at many libraries accounting for hundreds of thousands of dollars in annual spending on new books.

Now the day doesn't look far off when libraries will be able to buy most of these books anytime, later, when needed, perhaps at the moment a patron asks, maybe as a print book, maybe as an eBook. The approval plan is basically a bet that the portfolio will hold value, through use, and not deliver weekly cartons of toxic assets. Can the approval plan investment as it stands survive without a downgrade, or can the investment be restructured to adapt to a world that's changed?

Maybe the best thing going for new books is that all the old books looking so good right now once were new too, before they got old. 🍁

Building Library Collections in the 21st Century — If I Were Reborn as a Librarian Today

Column Editor: **Arlene Sievers-Hill** <axs23@case.edu>
<arlenesievers7@hotmail.com>

Those of us who are acquisitions and collection development librarians of a certain age have had to learn many new things in our professional careers. To begin with, everything that we now know about computers, most of it at least, was learned after and outside of library school. Some began, as I did, in nearly total precomputer librarianship. I actually learned elementary computer programming at **Indiana University** as part of the MLS curriculum. I had just completed my BA and I was fortunate to have **Alan Pratt** as an instructor in Introduction to Data Processing at **IU** as I began my MLS education. I learned important concepts that I find useful to this day. Older librarians, including some directors were in my class because they were getting their PhDs and this was the new thing and required for them to lead their libraries back home to be libraries of the future. I was actually born as an MLS degreed librarian in August 1973. I went directly from my undergraduate degree to library school. I'm not as old as you might think.

Most of us have now worked with person-

al computers or **Macs** for decades as well as all of the basic and not so basic software that they run. We have been on the front lines of helping create, beta testing, and adopting early library systems and several generations of systems after them. We welcomed the library systems that automated many functions of acquisitions and serial control. We have bought and used numerous commercial databases, and created them ourselves. There are new things, materials and concepts coming along all the time. We strive to keep up with them.

As acquisitions librarians we have had to learn a lot more business and economics than was once the case. Buying books was once a gentlemanly pursuit. I happened to get the opportunity to work for a subscription service in Europe and one in the U.S., so I can claim real world business experience which at one time just didn't happen. Working for serials businesses and learning the basic concepts of business was better education for what I do

continued on page 82

than what I learned in library school, considering that absolutely nothing about acquisitions was actually taught. Many times I thought that some actual accounting classes would have been helpful. I learned the hard way. What I did, working in a library business, was somewhat groundbreaking at the time. I worked for libraries before and after my business stint and was able to put in perspective how businesses operate and how libraries do. Licensing of non-print library materials called “products” was a concept unknown when I came out of library school but a commonplace in acquisitions now. Certainly a basic knowledge of contracts would have been helpful to have had.

My first job was in a small, quaint public/research library called **Willard Library** in Evansville, Indiana, my home town. It is haunted and has a Ghost cam (http://www.willard.lib.in.us/about_willard_library/ghost.php).

Then I worked for a large county wide public library, **Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library System**. They were vastly different libraries, but the materials and methods were not. No ghosts at **IMCPL** that I know of. There were books, magazines, scholarly journals standing orders, but mostly books at both kinds of libraries. Granted there were filmstrips in school libraries and a large film collection (on reels) at **IMCPL**. **Willard** had genealogical and historical research materials that would make a great database. Book cataloging still involved a typewriter and “see” references. The magazines and journals were checked in on **Kardexes**. We have come a long way since those days. Library systems and the databases that make accessible enormous collections of primary research materials at one’s fingertips are great improvements.

I started out as a cataloger — book in hand, **Sears** subject headings, **Dewey** classification, and **AACRII** — and that’s it. I then changed to other areas. Most catalogers however went through the **LC** cards, **OCLC**, **MARC** and numerous automated systems. Cataloging was once seen as boring but has become the really interesting area in my opinion.

I had no idea of such a thing as metadata until just a few years ago, or how dominant it would become in libraries and in Technical Services. Now it appears all the open positions are for metadata librarians. Where I am we have a wonderfully gifted and knowledgeable Head of Cataloging and Metadata, **Richard Wisneski**. He can manage the logistics of a cataloging department, as well as be in the forefront of the metadata world.

If I were reborn as a librarian today I would be a Metadata Librarian. Metadata is the growth industry in Technical Services, no doubt about it. Competent metadata librarians are revered. I have heard enough and been in committees enough to know there are standards, such as **Dublin Core**, encoding, and collections of information from which the metadata is extracted. I am not well versed on much else in the field, but my colleague

Rich is. The specific information that follows comes from him.

If you are not a metadata expert already, or if you want to learn it the way it should have been taught, if it could have been, the following suggestions are as good as they come. Here are links to some metadata standards that are fairly well-known and useful to know for those new to metadata.

1. Have a working knowledge of **XHTML**, **CSS**, **XML**, and **XSLT**.
2. **Dublin Core Metadata Initiative**: <http://dublincore.org/>. Be able to distinguish between qualified and unqualified **Dublin Core** metadata.
3. **Metadata Object Description Schema (MODS)**: <http://www.loc.gov/standards/mods/>
4. **Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard (METS)**: <http://www.loc.gov/standards/mets/>
5. **Encoded Archival Description (EAD)**: <http://www.archivists.org/saa-groups/ead/>
6. **Visual Resources Association Core (VRA)**: <http://www.vraweb.org/projects/vracore4/index.html>
7. **Texts Encoding Initiative (TEI)**: <http://www.tei-c.org/index.xml>

There are other metadata standards, but these are ones typically referenced. The main point is for one to distinguish between administrative, descriptive, preservation, and structural metadata. Also, it would help for someone to have familiarity with metadata harvesting, especially the **Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH)**, digital library principles, and digital management systems (e.g., **CONTENTdm**, **Fedora**, and **DSpace**).

News Flash — Just In

I have just returned from the 2009 conference of the **OVGTSL**, or **Ohio Valley Group of Technical Services Librarians**, for those few of you not familiar with the acronym. The theme was “Opening doors, Opening Minds: The Impact of Access and Open Source.” It was held in Indianapolis, IN from May 6-8, 2009. This is only the second time in my career I have attended this conference and both times were excellent — I spoke at the first one I attended, eight years ago — enough said. Two specific presentations provided me with that excitement I sought. I will pursue them in some shape or form when I return to my library. Both, however, involve pushing aside sacred cows for new cows.

The first keynote address was given by **Amy Begg De Groff**, Director of Information Technology at **Howard County Library**, Maryland. This presentation actually is the title of the conference itself, and rightly so. In 2005 when **Amy Begg De Groff** went to **Howard County Library** as the IT head, she was working for the library she had known since a child. (I did that too, and was chagrined to find an unfinished summer reading map of the states of mine still in the children’s reading room files. This is way off the subject!) **Amy Begg De Groff** had as her task the job of seeing

how much money she could save by using open source methods. The result was that **Howard County Library** does not use **Windows** for its main operating system (70%), but is an **Ubuntu** shop using **GNU-Linux**. All of the patrons and 60% of the staff use **Ubuntu**. Using **Firefox**, which we do at my library, is important, but using **Ubuntu** lets patrons into a huge world of open source software. The patrons are happy, the staff members are listened to and money is saved. The speaker was amusing, inspiring and truly excited about what she had done at her library. She encouraged everyone to try **Ubuntu**, and I am certain she would give information and advice to anyone who contacted her on this subject.

The second “wow” session for me was a Concurrent session called “Tag Clouds: Are User Generated Tags in Your Library’s Future?” It was given by **Barbara Albee** a Lecturer at **Indiana University School of Information and Library Science**, and **Marijke Visser**, finishing up an **MLS** at **IU** while also working for **ALA** as a Policy Analyst in the Office for Information and Technology Policy. The talk explored the subject of tagging in general and specifically “tag clouds,” which are related clusters of tags. Tags are social Website users’ self-made descriptors for books, URLs, music, photos, games, and other things. They are a lot like keywords in librariespeak.

Tag clouds can be visual depictions of these terms, larger font ones indicating much use, smaller less use for example which show frequency of use. A lot of new vocabulary was engendered from this talk, for me, for example folksonomy. One of the red flags for some catalogers coming from the onset of this phenomenon of social tagging and its possible use in a library catalog is its complete unknowing disregard for authority work. Who but a cataloger knows about authority work? Both presenters were excellent and were astonished that they had an overflow crowd in their room. I think many like me hadn’t a clue about a lot of this and were intrigued and learned a lot. I thought the tag clouds from **Library Thing**, **Authorstream** and others looked like concrete poetry which I studied as an undergraduate at **Indiana University**. There are many references in the library literature to Tag Clouds and you could contact the presenters of this talk who had an excellent **PowerPoint** presentation.

Here are a few social tagging Sites to explore.

Delicious — <http://www.delicious.com>

Flickr — <http://www.flickr.com>

Library Thing — <http://www.librarything.com>

CiteULike — <http://www.citeulike.org/>

Connotea — <http://www.connotea.org/>

Digg — <http://www.digg.com/>

ESP Game — <http://www.gwap.com/gwap/gamesPreview/espgame>

Technorati — <http://www.technorati.com/>

YouTube — <http://www.youtube.co/>

Wordle — <http://www.wordle.net/>

Frassle — <http://www.frassle.org>

<<http://www.against-the-grain.com>>