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Triumphant Over Chance: The Case for CLOCKSS

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Not so many years ago when the digital world first beckoned, when we were working hard to encourage our academic communities to accept and start using electronic resources, one of their first demands was an assurance that such resources would not disappear, that they were not being offered attractive but insubstantial riches. They trusted print — all those journal backruns sitting on library shelves gave them the reassurance they sought. They saw no such reassurance in a digital environment, happy though they were to use electronic resources on a day-to-day basis.

Today, I think, that concern is not so widespread among our users. Most university libraries, in Australia at least, have electronic-only policies in the case of journals. Most, but not all. And our academic communities have not relented. The concern about continued access, about electronic archiving, lies now with the profession, with us. And it is a responsibility that I believe we cannot shirk or attempt to offload on to others.

The rapid transition from an exclusively physical collection environment to a largely digital equivalent has changed radically the way in which information resources are managed within academic libraries. Put simply, whereas we once owned all our collections, we now merely rent most of the digital resources we make available to our users. And what is more, whereas in a physical world we exercised sole responsibility for curating the books and journals we acquired and made available, in a digital world the resources we rent do not reside within our libraries but are largely served from and curated within remote facilities controlled by the content providers.

Such a situation implies real risk. The assurance of continuing access to key scholarly information resources that we could blithely give to our communities in a physical world no longer applies in a digital environment of this kind. Given that the digital resources we make available are not under our control, and certainly not subject to our stewardship, access may be cut at any time, not simply temporarily but conceivably forever. Clearly, one way or another, we must seek a mechanism to address this challenge, to mitigate this risk, and ensure continuing access to these resources over time, just as, at present, we do with conventional physical materials.

In seeking a way forward, it may be useful to look outside our usual frame of reference, to Mencken and Derrida:

... for there is always an easy solution to every human problem — neat, plausible, and wrong.\(^1\)

There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteri-orth. No archive without outside.\(^2\)

In quoting from H.L. Mencken and Derrida, I am not trying to add a spurious authority to dubious contentions. If that was my intention, I would seek different authorities, different authors. The Mencken essay is now quite dated, viewed from an early twenty-first century vantage point. It is the aphorism, taken out of its original context that is instructive. And the Derrida book is really a discussion of the tension between the personal, the private, and their public manifestation, viewed from a psychoanalytic, mostly Freudian, perspective. But the quotation is useful, I think, in the context of the CLOCKSS (Controlled LOCKSS) archiving option, in terms of aspiration, technique and method.

Mencken suggests that in addressing human problems we should not be looking for neat easy solutions. There is merely a simple answer, let alone a solution. What we are usually left with is, rather, a variety of different approaches. And the advice is apposite in this case of electronic archiving. Offering and employing a range of options is not indicative of uncertainty or indecision. It is a perfectly acceptable risk mitigation strategy that we should welcome and applaud.

Derrida, on the other hand, reminds us that there is no archive, viewed broadly, without an act of gathering together, of iteration, and of making public. And this, of course, is the CLOCKSS (and LOCKSS) approach. The mantra, after all, is that “lots of copies keep stuff safe”.

Thomas Jefferson also provides wise counsel:

... Let us save what remains: not by vaults and locks which fence them from the public eye and use in consigning them to the waste of time, but by such a multiplication of copies, as shall place them beyond the reach of accident.\(^3\)

This quotation, from a letter written by Thomas Jefferson to Ebenezer Hazard, appears as a banner on the CLOCKSS and LOCKSS Websites. In some ways, at this distance in time, it contains a nice irony. In the letter Jefferson congratulates Hazard on his intention to publish, to commit to print, the “valuable historical and State papers” he had long been collecting. For Hazard was not only the U.S. Postmaster General in the 1780s but also, more importantly in this context, an amateur historian. In the year following the Jefferson letter, in 1782, he secured and published two volumes of his Historical Collections. For Jefferson, publication in print of historical papers and records gave assurance of continued access, of protection against the ravages of such disastrous events as the “late war”. For us, it is the movement beyond print, the migration to a digital environment that poses the challenge, the clear and present danger.

LOCKSS

LOCKSS provides the software platform for CLOCKSS and may be seen as a precursor system. It was designed to give institutions the capability to manage their digital resources in the same way as their physical collections by allowing libraries, easily and inexpensively, to collect, store, preserve and give access to their own local copy of licensed, authorised content. Although, perhaps inevitably, the emphasis has been on archiving subscribed proprietary content, the system may also be used locally to capture other Web content, such as Websites, electronic theses and dissertations, archival and image collections, and government documents. Operated and controlled at the local level, the decision to open up the archive, to make content available, is taken by the individual institution when, for whatever reason, content is deemed no longer available from the publisher.

CLOCKSS

The CLOCKSS mission is simple and unsurprising:

Ensuring access to published scholarly content over time; a community-governed partnership of publishers and libraries working to achieve a sustainable and globally distributed archive.

In focusing on the criticality of ensuring access to published scholarly content, the mission addresses the identified primary risk. What is interesting is the emphasis on the “how,” the corporate mechanism, the community-governed partnership of publishers and libraries, and the establishment of a globally distributed archive. Sustainability in a very practical sense is achieved through the choice of host libraries or archive nodes on geopolitical grounds. It is clearly in the interest of the stability and sustainability of the network to place CLOCKSS servers strategically across the world to secure computing environments with uninterrupted power and network connectivity.

CLOCKSS is a private LOCKSS network. And in one sense, CLOCKSS may be seen as a publisher, rather than a library, initiative. The standard LOCKSS application is not really a dark archive. Given that the decision on when to open up content lies with individual institutions, it is more in the nature of a bright archive. Understandably some publishers became a little nervous about the highly distributed character of the LOCKSS system and the consequent lack of control over decisions on access. In support, they were concerned about content leakage.

A closed network was seen to provide the necessary level of security and reassurance, and accordingly a new small partnership of

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Endnotes

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At ALA in Denver, I also attended the Academic Services Managers in Academic Libraries Interest Group discussion early on Saturday morning. Most of the discussions focused on budgeting, staffing and cataloging issues. Participants compared experiences with staffing cuts, reassigning staff as library priorities change or staffing is cut, the necessity for layoffs or furloughs and other budgeting and staffing issues. s e r i a l s . in f o m o t i o n s . c o m / n g c 4 l i b / archive/2009/200901/0006.html continued on page 40