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## Back Talk-Librarian Myths-Familiar and Comforting, but True

Anthony W. Ferguson

Columbia University, [ferguson@columbia.edu](mailto:ferguson@columbia.edu)

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motivation for accepting this premise?

• Librarians will evolve from collection builders to knowledge prospectors. This sort of thinking misses the point of what is taking place. Students and faculty members have always turned to the library as a last resort after they checked their own books and those of their friends. Now there is the Web which is like an expanded network of friends with libraries. Students are the prospectors here,

not librarians. As librarians we operate the general store. We distribute the tools, and we buy (ultimately) what they find.

• There is already a widespread acceptance in the sciences of digital publishing. I would agree that progress is being made, but "widespread" acceptance? I believe the evidence would show that the majority of scientific researchers are still foraging through printed journals and assembling preprint collections.

In a future column I will share some additional thoughts on what I think needs to change in collection development.

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## Back Talk — Librarian Myths: Familiar and Comforting But True?

by **Tony Ferguson** (Associate University Librarian, Columbia University)  
<ferguson@columbia.edu>

I recently had the opportunity to orally react to a draft of an interesting paper. The paper provoked me to think about a great many collection development issues. I thought I would use this space to share some of those thoughts with all of you. Let me begin with a bullet list of the issues with which I agreed:

- The growth of digital information has been most pronounced in the sciences but is rapidly spreading to the humanities and social sciences.
- For collection development to survive, there is a critical need to evolve better ways of selecting and purchasing digital forms of information.
- Publishers are consolidating but, I note, so are libraries through consortia.
- Consortial buying, storing, collection sharing, etc., is the future.
- Scholarly publishing is still taking place in much the same way as it did 50 and 100 years ago: Writers write; editors edit; publishers publish; libraries buy, catalog, shelve, preserve; writers read and write.
- Librarians, for the most part, are still holding on to print.
- Packages of digital information, not individual titles, are being purchased.
- While digital archiving is an important issue, we continue to put more and more information on paper.
- Libraries will continue to help validate research by buying some and passing up the rest.

I would like to spend a bit more space on the issues with which I disagreed. Some of these are what I would call library myths: Familiar arguments, somewhat comforting, but are they true?

- Libraries will continue to face shrinking budgets. Librarians love to show the ARL charts that show fewer items purchased while the price of journals streak ever skyward. Yet, we have to recognize that the American economy is the strongest it has ever been in the last 50 years, the dollar is stable and much stronger than it has been in the past 20 years, the dollar seems likely to be linked in a stable way with the Eurodollar, and the stock market continues to grow through the roof, symbolizing the confidence that people with money have in the future. We have been in a painful dip, that does not mean our funding roller coaster will stop there?
- Libraries have less buying power than in the past. While technically true, I wonder if the triumph of the “collecting in response

to need” model over the older “collecting in anticipation of need” model, has not resulted in a net increase in buying power? When you add to this shared catalogs and consortial-based user-initiated document delivery systems, users in many states have much richer offerings than they did in the good old days when library buying power might have been stronger.

- Technical advances are truly revolutionizing the way scholarly information is published, organized, and maintained. Now I will admit that the “izing” suffix to revolution might suggest an ongoing process, and that this process is picking up steam, but there remain a number of elements in our academic culture which will get in the way of the revolution. Tenure, for example. How much evidence do we have that the effect of tenure will be reduced in even 5% of our universities over the next 5 or 10 years? As for organizing and maintaining digital information, libraries are groping around in the dark without much of a clue about what needs to/can be done about how to organize and preserve digital forms of information.
- Digital archives will replace journals. Physics is always trotted out as the poster child for this statement, yet for tenure purposes we still continue faithfully to buy commercial and non-commercial physics journals.
- Digital technology is more cost effective than print technology. Give us all a break! Where is there any evidence that the use of digital technology has enabled our universities to spend a single fewer dollar. Rather, it has created enormous new opportunities to spend money. For libraries, digital information is more costly to select, buy, order, process, catalog, and maintain, and we have yet to confront the costs associated with the long term (Books printed on acid free paper last a hundred years or so. How long will a CD-ROM or magnetic tape last?) problems associated with the storing of digital forms of information.
- The **California State RFP** to obtain a customized package of digital information should be seen as the model for the future. The RFP failed! Moreover, I believe it failed because it was philosophically flawed in the first place. Librarians might think they can create a private Tolken village of information, but the world of scholarship is without bounds and attempts to contain it to lists of journals agreed upon by committees of librarians is hopeless as an answer to the needs of researchers. The **RLG** long-term serials projects showed that this is a dynamic world of schol-

arship and cooperation is not for the faint of heart, or limited of vision or pocketbook. Researchers want, as **Pat Battin** once noted, “untrammelled access” to information; not a pretend package made up by librarians. E-journals that click and link to resources outside the walls of the RFP will produce rebellion among the faculty.

- The high cost of maintaining archives and new technology are making comprehensive main libraries and traditional departmental libraries a convenience of the past. Like new student unions which are sprouting up all over the country, I wouldn’t count new libraries out of the picture. What goes on in them may change, but as stately edifices or glass enclosed skyscrapers, they are symbols of legitimacy that help universities compete for students, faculty, and research dollars.
- The commercialization of scientific publishing has disrupted the free flow of knowledge. I think there are a number of problems with this favorite librarian refrain: First of all, information never flowed freely in the past. Libraries with significant resources bought more information than those with fewer resources. Information did not flow in all but the larger institutions. That is why researchers wanted to go to big libraries. Second, as the number of Ph.D’s has grown, so has the amount of research being published. How can we say that there is less information today when it is obvious there is more? Moreover, we are now buying information differently than in the past: By the drink via document delivery services, by ILL, etc. The commercialization of publishing has changed things—everything is more expensive—but we don’t have less information.

- The weakening of publisher ownership of copyright is a good thing. Other than using this as a tool to do battle with the evil empire, what evidence do we have that encouraging authors to retain copyright is a good thing? Will it make getting copyright clearance for reserves or distance education easier? Will it reduce the price of journals? Who will pay for the overhead of negotiating with hundreds of thousands of authors instead of thousands, if not hundreds of publishers. We are asked to salute and jump on this bandwagon—but is it going anywhere useful?

- The nature of teaching is changing from teacher-and-students to teacher-and-technology-and students. There is a lot here that is questionable. Where is the evidence that this is true and valued by large numbers of America’s university teachers? What is our

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