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Back Talk — Use Statistics

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Recently, a university here in Hong Kong was taken to task in the press for using public funds to buy and subsequently store lesser-used materials. This university had decided to send books that had not been checked out in six years to a remote storage facility. The newspaper's reporter implied that some of these books had been little if ever used and questioned why libraries wasted money buying such books in the first place.

Librarians, of course, don't disagree that they should meet the immediate needs of their patrons. The concepts of immediate "use" and "need" appear as key selection components in every library's collection development policy statement. Yet, virtually all libraries with sufficient funds to purchase more than just those in current demand by their readers, additionally purchase books and journals which they believe are good and will ultimately prove useful. Indeed, for scholars, libraries with the most books are seen as the best libraries because the odds of these libraries having what they want are higher than libraries with smaller holdings. While some of the time we have been right and items selected in anticipation of need have proved popular, significant numbers have not – at least not at the level that would have satisfied the newspaper reporter in Hong Kong.

But what about the digital collections we are now building? Are the concepts of use and need still meaningful? For the past 15 years, I, perhaps like many librarians, have been involved in collecting digital resources: first CD-ROM versions of print indexes and abstracts, then a cavalcade of PDF full text versions of previously printed books and journals, and now we are into the world of searchable and interlinking full text materials. During these years we gave at most lip service to the importance of use and need. How could our patrons need something they had not used? Unless we provided it, how could they use it? So we, uncomfortably a bit like drug dealers handing out introductory doses, ignored the use and need requirements and provided a plethora of digital resources in order to generate the need that we were sure to follow. To use another overworked metaphor, we believed that "if you build it, they will come."

While the volume of use experienced by some of the electronic resources we purchased has been magnificent, there are several questions which we need to answer before we proceed further: are we building the right structures/digital collections? Are our patrons coming in sufficient numbers to justify our building costs? Is the seemingly free facility across the street (the Web) of sufficient value to nullify the value of what we provide? Should we be focusing on expanding the breadth and width of our digital collections or reducing their costs?

Conceptually, in the world of commercial digital resources, the question, are we building the right digital collections, seems easy to answer. If they are used, we are building the right collections. Unlike printed books that tell no tales after we place them on the shelves – unless we separately record circulation statistics – because publishers/vendors want to charge us for digital materials, use is recorded. These use statistics are frequently not to our liking. Via groups like **ICOLC** we have established use statistic standards, which we want digital providers to follow. Yet, this doesn't overcome all of the problems presented by our new invention. Many vendors don't/can't comply. Moreover, because of the complexity of the enterprise, I'm not sure what the plethora of statistics that can be supplied truly mean.

One small example: if the statistics tell us that our patrons asked/issued 50,000 search requests within X database, but only downloaded 500 full text articles does it mean that the resource is good or bad? In the print world, experience tells me that because research is the process of looking at huge piles of evidence about some phenomena that is not understood, and upon pondering the evidence and changing even the questions being asked in the face of the evidence, having large collections of seemingly worthless material, is valuable. Unless you have chaff to sift through, you can't find that which is of value. It is this truth that the Hong Kong newspaper reporter missed. But what does knowing that 500 full text articles were downloaded tell us? Like knowing that 500 books were circulated, we still don't know if they proved valuable to their borrowers. And now that many resources link from one article to another article, how can we track the value of this capability?

The question, are our patrons coming in sufficient numbers, is related, but not exactly the same, to the question of do they use the materials we provide at sufficient levels. What does it mean when we get the statistics that show that our library's Website was accessed 500,000 times? Is that prima facie evidence that our library is great, or is it just that we provide great information about what movies are being shown in the local community?

The question, is our costly commercial digital collection of value compared to the free ones provided by **Yahoo** and **Google**, is also a difficult one to answer. Librarians, I find, in knee-jerk fashion immediately go on the attack whenever this question is broached. We point out that the Website scribbling of primary school 4th grade student Albert Monet get mixed in with those of the works of the artist; or that 1,450,501 answers to a simple question are worthless; or that a question about the value of desegregated schooling is answered by a KKK Website; or that statistics provided have been intentionally manipulated by those seeking to make their point via the wonders of the Web.

The question, should we be focusing on expanding the breadth and width of our digital collections or reducing their cost is, of course, an important one. At first thought, my impression is to say, this is very similar to the situation in the print world. Should we put our emphasis on managing approval plans that we deliver/dump as much as possible, as quickly as possible, for as little as possible to our library delivery docks? Or should we put our emphasis on faculty and student liaison where we have meaningful discussions with each user so that we can up the odds of what we buy being useful? In the digital world these same questions mean spending weeks, if not months, at beating up publishers in order to reduce what we pay them; requiring them to unbundled or re-bundle what they want to sell us; fighting with them over what American states' laws would be employed when we take them to court; etc., etc. The question of understanding patron needs, in the digital world, leads to online surveys and endless analysis of use statistics. On second thought, when I think about these questions, I am reminded of something a teacher once told our class: to a carpenter with a hammer, everything is a nail. We need to make sure that our print experiences don't color everything so much that we constantly try to reconfigure everything in the image of the rows upon rows of lovely books that probably reside beyond the walls of your office as you read this last page of ***Against the Grain***.

So, I have not answered the question of what should we do with lesser-used digital materials. That will be discussed at the next **Charleston Conference 2002**.