Random Ramblings -- Bigger is Not Necessarily Better

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My favorite public library ever was the Clifton Branch in Cincinnati. It was the summer of 1967, and I had just graduated from college. After a difficult year with a full-time job and a full class load, working 40 hours per week on a summer job seemed like vacation. With time to catch up on my reading, I made frequent visits to replenish my stack of books. The Clifton Branch had only one room with a very limited selection. But this selection was perfect, since the branch served mostly the members of the nearby university community. Except in the children’s area, I could have selected my books blindfolded. I’d still fast forward to a few years later when I was a student in library school at Columbia University. The professor proposed to the class that having one unified list of all the serials in the world would eliminate the need for other lists with its universal coverage. I raised my hand to disagree and made the point that smaller libraries could easily make do with a specialized list more tailored to their interests. I argued that a small public or school library would have no interest in scholarly resources or foreign language materials. I also pointed out that the comprehensive list would be too expensive to purchase in print format and would require frequent revisions. (Such a list would make more sense today in a digital format.)

I believe that most users would like to have all needed items together in one physical or digital space with as few as possible extraneous materials to complicate finding what they want. This is why most of us have personal collections. This is also why most faculty like to have departmental libraries. I still remember the faculty member who couldn’t understand why the book on ceramics in Vermont was in the art section (LC N), while the book on ceramics in Pennsylvania was in the science library (LC T). She had looked at both books and found them quite similar even if the catalogers had determined that one was over 50% art and the other over 50% technology. She would have much preferred an art departmental library where both books would have been within easy reach rather than in far distant locations from each other in two different libraries.

Many research universities have an undergraduate library for somewhat different reasons. The first is to save undergraduate students time as they navigate the complex research library, since the simpler undergraduate library contains most materials that they need for their assignments and facilitates effective browsing. The library can also provide services including reference tailored for this student population. A second reason is that undergraduates may not yet have sufficient information-seeking skills to understand that a research library includes source materials that represent all positions, including those in scholarly disrepute. Having the undergraduate library helps protect the sophomore from citing Ku Klux Klan propaganda in a research paper on race relations in the United States.

The digital era makes vast quantities of material theoretically available but practically inaccessible. Most information professionals understand this concept in regards to search engines. It is impossible to look at result number 5,023 even if the user were willing to scroll through all the screens to get there. (In one test, Google stopped providing results after around 300 entries.) The search algorithms that put popular materials at the top may push scholarly materials to the bottom of the result stack.

I am not sure that information professionals realize that the materials that libraries offer to their users can pose the same problem of too much rather than too little. To return to the pre-digital age, major microform sets often went unused because researchers didn’t know what they contained without using print finding aids. Even worse, the researcher doing a general search might not even be aware that the library owned materials in this format. I know of one faculty member who was contemplating a trip to a distant university to consult a rare item before the reference librarian at the other institution told him that the item had been filmed and was available at his home institution in a major microform set. The pre-Internet solution to this problem was a major effort from around 1980-1993, supported in part by grant funding, to catalog major microform sets and to make the records available from OCLC for batch loading. The sheer volume of Internet resources and their mutability make this level of bibliographic control impossible.

Search rules for large library databases can complicate access and show that more is not always better. I once needed to find a known item in OCLC WorldCat with a one-word title that was a common word. Since I didn’t have any other bibliographic information, I typed the one word in the title search box. The search algorithm defaulted to a keyword search that retrieved thousands of items in no useful order. The reference librarians that I consulted didn’t know how to solve this problem. A call to the OCLC help desk didn’t provide an answer either. Only a year or so later, when
From the University Presses — What University Presses Think about Open Access

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I envy a commercial publisher like Elsevier. Its mission can be very simply defined: make enough money to keep your stockholders happy. Whether Elsevier were in the business of making widgets or publishing books and journals, that mission would remain the same. The means to achieve that end varies from press to press, depending on pressures both from the university’s administration and from the commercial marketplace. Some presses like my former employer Princeton have the advantage of being semi-autonomous: it is separately incorporated in the State of New Jersey, but the use of its name is controlled by a faculty editorial board and a board of trustees on which a number of university administrators sit. It receives no financial support from the university at all but fortunately has a handsome endowment, which derives from the astute management of the Bollingen Series taken over from Pantheon in the late 1960s by funds from Paul Mellon to see through publication of the remaining volumes, some of which (like the translation of the I Ching and books by Joseph Campbell) have been huge commercial successes. A few of the very largest presses, like Cambridge and Chicago, are obliged to turn over a portion of their earnings to their parent universities and thereby subsidize those universities in small part. At least one smaller press, Rockefeller, is also similarly obliged. Much more typical is the press at Penn State, which after more than a decade with no operating subsidy now has a subsidy at the level of the 10% average I mentioned above. Depending on how close to the margin any press operates, you may find one press feeling it necessary to raise prices on its books to satisfy the commercial imperative, while another press may feel it can afford to prioritize its goal of maximizing dissemination of its books by keeping their prices low and making them available as soon as possible in cheaper paperback editions. (Some presses, like ours, cross-subsidize between journal and book operations, the former’s surpluses used to offset the latter’s losses.) Overall, because of this disparity in missions between commercial academic publishers and university presses, independent studies of pricing of books have routinely showed university press titles to be priced lower, sometimes much lower, than those from commercial publishers. In this way, too, some university presses are consciously subsidizing academe in general, if not just their own universities.

Those who, like David Shulenburger, have been critical of the positions that university press...