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Collection Management and Sustainability in the Digital Age: Chasing the Holy Grail

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How can collection management be sustainable in the turbulent digital era? The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines sustainability as “‘Capable of being upheld or defended; maintainable’ and ‘Capable of being maintained at a certain rate or level.’”¹ The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* refers to “capable of being sustained; of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged.”²

The implication is that any human activity needs to be reassessed so as to maintain its viability into the future. It’s readily apparent that the world of collection management is beset by many interrelated challenges that are bewildering in complexity and intoxicating in their potential. It’s not merely a question of maintaining or enduring our current practices but actively justifying and transforming our *raison d’être* in light of a rapidly changing environment. Sustainability by means of reinvention is perhaps a more accurate approach. This involves a thorough understanding of our strategic role in the organizations that we support, and planning for the future. As **Jankowska** and **Marcum** assert, “Library sustainability must become a strategic consideration balancing the assumptions of continued growth and expansion.”³ Ultimately this can be seen as asserting our “value footprint” in our institutions, if you’ll permit me to coin such a phrase. I think it brings together the need to frankly assess what we provide to our community and to frame this in terms of the impact we provide. This can be seen in the outcomes that are important, such as stellar research produced by faculty and a high level of educational accomplishment attained by students. But the difficult realization that we can’t be all things to all people can lead us to better define our priorities. This can also sharpen the focus on the age-old dilemma of what constitutes a core collection. Providing alternative materials (either open access or available via document delivery / ILL or pay-per-view) is an approach that will become more and more important as we confront the budgetary and scholarly communication challenges of our day.

What length of time should we consider in regards to collection management and sustainability? Five years is too short; fifty years is almost unimaginable. Twenty years is probably a realistic marker, although this involves a lot of crystal-ball gazing into trends and circumstances. If we consider the exponential pace of change of the past ten years as a baseline, it seems that twenty years is the outer limit of valid analysis. If we follow **Walter Lewis**, who adopted this timeline in his thought-provoking piece⁴ on the future of academic libraries, we’ll be in good company.

Let’s start with a few brushstrokes to sketch the landscape.

Space Wars

In order to repurpose space for learning environments, libraries have made strategic decisions to move little-used material or items with digital surrogates to off-site storage. This has ignited heated protests in many institutions from faculty who are upset over losing the ability to browse the entire collection in one campus location. Meanwhile, collection managers and other library administrators are under enormous pressure to transform their physical spaces in ways that permit greater collaboration and wider access to tools, technology, and expertise that enhances learning in a commons model.

Budget Pressures

The era of flat or declining budgets is likely to be with us for many years to come. The **ICOLC (International Coalition of Library Consortia)** Issues Statement on the Global Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Consortial Licenses has held up a mirror to the times we live in and concludes soberly that “Putting price first will help all parties, because budget pressures will drive decisions in a way never seen before.”⁵ All of us are facing this challenge, and it is the vendors who offer flexible, creative approaches to pricing, content options, and licensing that will survive and thrive in this environment. The next few years will reveal which vendors are up to these challenges. Working together to understand mutual interests and find innovative solutions has never been as important as it is today. Assessing the wide variety of user needs for scholarly resources, and examining cheaper or free alternatives, is leading to a sanguine evaluation of value for money.

Abundance of Resources

As more and more commercial vendors are developing new products and chasing a finite and shrinking budget pie, it will become clear that some resources don’t have a market. The global research output has sharply ratcheted upward in recent years. The abundance paradigm leads inevitably to the conclusion that addressing niche needs with unique research tools will become increasingly important. Moreover, the customer base for many current products will diminish as well. Some of the explosive growth in scholarly information resources is in open access material, and here we have an opportunity to develop longer-term approaches that are sustainable and consistent with our values and to lessen our dependence on commercial products. The challenge will be to develop viable solutions that address publishing costs, institutional funding mod-

els, and the scholarly communication process across research disciplines in a systemic manner. One can agree with **Dan Hazen** that the consequence of commercialization is to “threaten the free flow of information that the academy requires.”⁶ How we will balance our investments in licensed resources with open access investments is a very large and complex question.

Profusion of Interdisciplinary Programs

All of us have seen the sprouting of programs at the crossroads of traditional disciplines, such as Globalization, Bioethics, Population Health, Environmental Studies, and Aboriginal Studies, to name but a few. (Also in this issue, see **Merilyn Burke’s** “Collection Development and Sustainability at the University of South Florida” for more on this topic.) Collaborative teams within the university or across institutions are becoming the norm. This has required a rethinking of how program support is understood and collection investments are made. Scholarly resources that enhance knowledge and problem solving within such programs will become increasingly valued by the community. Creating synergies in these research areas will require a careful assessment of how we prioritize our budget allocation.

Performance Indicators

In this era of assessment and accountability for the use of public tax dollars, there is a much greater onus on the library to demonstrate value for money spent on collections. A sustainable collection will be one that can do this in a politically compelling manner. How to show return on investment in a meaningful and coherent way that respects the inherent differences in the disciplinary cultures, while recognizing the institution’s strategic goals, is no easy feat. Usage statistics are important, but equally important will be the analysis of how the collection is used in the preparation of grant proposals and the productivity of researchers in relation to their peers elsewhere.

A smorgasbord of acquisition models — e-journals, eBooks, reference works, and primary scholarly content in digital form can be acquired through many channels; it can be paid as a single purchase or subscription or through various hybrid models that combine the two. The explosion of information resources and multiple acquisition options has led to infinitely greater complexity in decision making and has had a ripple effect on selection decisions and technical service workflows, as well as budget allocation procedures. This reality permeates our policies, procedures, and day-to-day challenges in acquisitions and collection development work.

continued on page 24

Core Values

It's impossible to address sustainability without considering our core values. Intellectual freedom, equity of access, trustworthiness, and stewardship are values that we hold close to the heart. They are woven in the fabric of our professional lives and organizational cultures. All of our collection management activities — selection, budgeting, space planning, weeding, and preservation — are underpinned by these principles. Our workflows and policies in an analog, print-based world were framed by these values over many generations. Do we still accept these values as integral to how we develop a rapidly expanding digital collection, how we acquire materials, and how we make them available? I think the answer is a definite *yes*. The question of how we apply these values, however, is no simple matter. As we grapple with short-term and long-term collection challenges, we can ask ourselves whether our individual and collective choices and actions are consistent with the above values or not. If yes, then we can feel reasonably confident that we are acting in the best interests of our community and profession. It may be that we need to emphasize some values over others, in the interests of practicality and incremental progress.

Digital Collections

There are many in our profession who believe that our collections will be largely digital in the not-too-distant future. As commercial and noncommercial digitization rapidly progresses, it is fairly certain that most document types — journals, newspapers, microforms, government publications, films/slides, maps, rare books, and theses — will be available primarily in digital form. This will be the default medium, and patrons will need to use other mechanisms, such as print-on-demand, to obtain a hard copy for their personal use. And what about books? This is where the complexity of platforms, business models, and patron preferences will lead to a mosaic of possibilities. In the humanities and social sciences in particular, the print book is still the medium of choice and enjoys great prestige and psychological attachment, regardless of the growing usage and acceptance of eBooks in these subject areas. Faculty promotion and tenure processes have been very reluctant to accept eBooks, and digital scholarship in general, as legitimate forms of scholarly output. And as long as there is sufficient demand, the publishers will continue to make print available alongside the eBook. In other research areas such as science, engineering, medicine, and management, however, the physical book as artifact and container of knowledge will be largely superseded by the digital format.

More than a decade after the Internet turned our assumptions of collection management upside down, the access/ownership dichotomy is still a challenge for us. Purchase is important from the perspective of enabling preservation options, whether locally or via third-party

providers. We have accepted that access arrangements are integral to delivering scholarly information resources that are not available for purchase. These resources, however, are typically based on a lease or subscription payment. As the scale and scope of these resources grow — many of them highly interdisciplinary — how will we make decisions on what we can afford and why? User surveys, focus groups, product evaluation including usage, budget allocation formulas, and targeted funding are common methods used to prioritize resources. The right mix of methods will depend on what is perceived to be most effective for a given research discipline in the institutional context.

The inherent instability, mutability, and rebundling qualities of digital content are in the DNA of these scholarly objects. This is a fundamental break from the sense of stability and predictability that their physical analogs exhibited. Our collection, however defined, contains large swaths of material that can never be controlled and contained in the way that print items were. Born digital objects create another dimension of challenge, since comparison with predecessors for quality and impact isn't an option.

Kallinikos, Aaltonen, and Marten have articulated a general theory of digital objects that reflects upon our volatile environment:

Digital objects are editable, interactive, open or reprogrammable and distributed. Rather than being simply the contingent outcome of design, these attributes derive from the constitutional texture of digital technologies, most notably the modular and granular make-up of digital objects and their numerical nature. Taken together the attributes of digital objects and the operations by which they are sustained mingle with social practices redefining the scope, the object of work and the modes of conduct underlying them.⁷

The modes of use, forms of collaboration, and remix of information are almost infinite in range today. Digital collection resources present possibilities for collaboration, recombination, analysis, and portability that were unthinkable not too long ago. What's most intriguing is the social interaction and personal behavior that underlie this shift. Our students and faculty expect more from a library's collection than ever before and will go elsewhere if the resources are wanting or not easily accessible. Seamless 24/7 digital availability, integration with a range of desktop applications and now mobile technologies, collaborative sharing of online research materials, and metasearch capabilities are the new normal. This in turn has a domino effect on search behavior and discovery expectations, information gathering, and workflow patterns as they relate to collection use. The library collection, on which huge sums are invested over time, competes with many external alternatives for patron attention.

The Ithaka Faculty Survey 2009 makes this uncomfortably clear: "As scholars have grown better able to reach needed materials directly online, the library has been increasingly dis-

intermediated from research processes, as the previous section on shifting discovery practices illustrated. The library must evolve to meet these changing needs."⁸ How our collection investment strategies evolve will depend, at least in part, on how we address this question. If we are to have more than a buying and delivery function, how do we meet those changing needs, and what unique value in the research process do we represent? If we want to avoid disintermediation, a more active partnership in the research and teaching process (such as embedding librarians in the faculty) is important. Developing workflow tools that support easier integration of scholarly resources into course materials is also a necessity.

What has also become clear in recent years is the gargantuan challenge of long-term digital preservation in a landscape of shifting formats, platforms, access methods, and business models. There are many well-developed initiatives that have taken root — such as **LOCKSS**, **Portico**, and **Hathi Trust** in the United States, and **Scholars Portal** in Canada — and one hopes that they will be sustainable beyond what we can imagine in our current set of assumptions. The scale of the problem is far better understood than a few years ago. As cultural memory institutions, we are struggling to develop cohesive, long-term options that are affordable, durable, and trustworthy. The challenges are described in the Trustworthy Repositories Audit and Certification: Criteria and Checklist developed by **ARL (Association of Research Libraries)** and **OCLC (Online Computer Library Center)**:

In determining trustworthiness, one must look at the entire system in which the digital information is managed, including the organization running the repository: its governance; organizational structure and staffing; policies and procedures; financial fitness and sustainability; the contracts, licenses, and liabilities under which it must operate; and trusted inheritors of data, as applicable. Additionally, the digital object management practices, technological infrastructure, and data security in place must be reasonable and adequate to fulfill the mission and commitments of the repository.⁹

This is no small task, especially in an era of fiscal restraint. Recent audits of **Portico** and **Hathi Trust** by **CRL (The Center for Research Libraries)** have revealed the challenges of meeting the breadth of requirements needed to be certified as a trusted and sustainable digital repository. This focus on digital preservation, important as it is, also raises questions about the complementary value and existence of print originals. **Gary Frost** asks the question, "Should we advocate for certification of print masters alongside certification of their screen simulations?"¹⁰ This is an important question that raises a host of related issues: What process would such a certification involve, how would this complement existing structures for digital preservation, and what collaborations would be required? What happens when the digital item is supplemented with rich media (e.g., video,

continued on page 26

audio, data sets) that changes the content and requires new applications and access considerations? And what is the best format for our patrons and for durable access? How will we decide upon standards?

I'm not one of those who believe that print is about to wither away; it is too deeply rooted in our society and intellectual culture to quickly vanish, and there are many people who will still find the print book to be more convenient and usable than the digital counterpart, in spite of what the eBook reader industry wants us to believe. This is quite different from the journal world, where the transition to digital has been faster and more thoroughgoing than anyone would have expected a decade ago. But as more and more of the collection moves into the cloud, we find ourselves in a new era where partnerships, flexibility, and innovation become the hallmarks of success. We don't control the far-flung servers that house and deliver the streams of digital works that our patrons are using every hour of every day. We rely upon the many agreements we have crafted with vendors, publishers, and other libraries and cultural memory organizations for the reliable pipeline of access to these books, journals, databases, and reference works.

In the myriad of formal and informal publications, what do we collect for posterity and what do we support in a more temporary and short-term manner? More precisely, can we afford to maintain the traditional ownership model as the basis for collection management, or do we need to focus on access-based, user-targeted approaches that can accomplish our goals in a complementary manner? Patron-driven acquisition services and print-on-demand delivery have shown themselves to be more effective than many in the library community had expected. Large bureaucratic institutions like universities and colleges are typically risk averse and lack the nimbleness to respond quickly and creatively to new opportunities that arise in the digital information era. We need to cultivate a greater nimbleness and the luxury of being allowed to experiment and fail, and start again, if we want to hit upon the right opportunities that increase the usefulness and value of our collection strategies.

Here are a few more ideas that can hopefully lead us to a more sustainable approach to collection management.

Rumors from page 6

Long time ago, **Celia** and I were talking about writing books and I gave her anecdotes from my husband's and my experiences. Can't wait to see this book! Will keep y'all posted. **Celia** wrote me on **LinkedIn**. I have to tell y'all that I am retro! I prefer email to social networking sites. So if you want to make sure that I answer (probably) please use one of my emails - <kstrauch@comcast.net> (preferred unless it's broken), <katina.strauch@gmail.com> or <strauchk@cofc.edu>. THANKS!

Paying Only Once

We need to look carefully at where we are paying twice for the same work, whether it is a book, a journal, a report, or a dissertation. Can we become format agnostic and cut expenses where we find overlaps and duplication, particularly between aggregated collections and publisher-direct purchases? Can we make a commitment to a single format for books or journals, for example, in a given field?

Walking the Tightrope Between Competition and Collaboration

Libraries work together in consortial resource-sharing arrangements — for licensing digital resources, union catalogue records, and ILL arrangements, for example — but our parent institutions compete intensely with each other to attract and retain faculty, research grants, students, and public-private partnerships. Consortial collaboration has been very effective in enabling acquisition and cost-effective access for various scholarly information resources, but this doesn't mean that we have a level playing field across institutions or a complete consensus on how cost-share arrangements are handled. The great diversity of funding levels, curriculums, and research profiles across institutions in the same region is symptomatic of the tensions with which we live. Can we strike a healthy and honest balance between competition and collaboration?

Partnerships with Publishers and Vendors

In the evolving scholarly communications ecosystem, our relationships with partners outside of the library are becoming more and more critical to our success. They need us as much as we need them. In moving away from the polarizing rhetoric of "us" versus "them," we need to focus on where our interests overlap and where we can develop innovative and forward-looking models of collaboration that can enhance our delivery of scholarly resources to our community. Like us, the publishers and vendors are struggling to reinvent themselves in the crowded information landscape and the new technologies and business models that constantly buzz around us. Those who don't want to listen to our interests and concerns are less likely to receive our business. Adopting a principled stand on questions such as unfair pricing models is important for our credibility and for prudent fiscal management.

The collection as a whole is always political. The dynamics of political decision

Speaking of which, I was interested in the **Charleston Observatory Survey** of the use of social networking by researchers which the gracious times two **Ian Rowlands** and **Dave Nicholas** reported in Charleston. (quote: "Researchers use generic sources; they don't focus on the bells and whistles.") Watch for the final survey results that are currently under review and will be published shortly. As well, I found **John Sack's** talk in Charleston equally enlightening. **John** reported on another survey of researchers at **Stanford**, quote: "For the end user or researcher, reading is an opportunity to get away from the computer." http://www.katina.info/conference/video_2010_observatory.php
http://www.katina.info/conference/video_2010_sack.php

continued on page 38

making leave their mark on every library collection budget; it is the delicate art of the possible amid many competing interests in the institution, all of which require financial commitment. How we navigate these challenges, and how we address the various environmental challenges I've sketched in this article, will determine how effectively we position ourselves to develop a sustainable approach to collection management. Sustainability is the holy Grail shimmering in the distance — if we ask ourselves the key questions we will at least be on the right road. This means an ongoing process of rethinking our practices and strategies. The perceived value footprint we bring to the evolving academic enterprise, in terms of being essential to teaching, research, and learning, will determine how successful we are. 🐼

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