Random Ramblings -- Why Aren't Faculty Complaining about Academic Libraries Not Buying Books?

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I don’t understand why book-oriented faculty aren’t raising more of a stink about the changing patterns in collection development. Most academic research libraries have drastically reduced their purchases of scholarly monographs as online resources of all types have taken an increasing percentage of the collection development budget. I started my career when the rule of thumb was 60% for serials and 40% for books. A quick calculation from the ARL statistics for 2007-2008 on monographs expenditures as a percentage of total library materials expenditures showed that the median percentage is 21% with a range from 6% to 43%. For my own institution, Wayne State University, the percentage is 13%, a fact that influenced my choosing this topic. I suspect that this percentage is now even less as most libraries have lost purchasing power during the recent economic difficulties.

I had expected these faculty, mostly in the Humanities and some of the Social Science disciplines, to be concerned about this decline in book purchases. The common wisdom holds that many faculty still need books for their research since a full discussion of many topics requires more extensive discourse than a journal article. Faculty should also be concerned that the decline in book sales will lead to fewer books being accepted for publication, mostly by university presses, because most publishers expect to sell a certain number of copies to justify selecting a manuscript for publication. Faculty who publish in less popular areas and niche topics will be most affected and may encounter increasing difficulty in getting promoted without the “tenure” book. A third reason, perhaps overlooked by some faculty, is that their students still need books to complete the assignments for their courses.

While I don’t have a definite answer to the question that I’m asking in this column, I have several plausible hypotheses. The first is that perhaps faculty, contrary to the common wisdom, are making less use of published books. Statistics show that book circulation is declining overall in research libraries. As will be seen later, this reduction could mean that faculty are obtaining their books from other sources; but it could also mean that they are depending more upon journal articles and perhaps on substantive book-like materials available on the Internet as well as blogs, discussion lists, personal emails, and other similar Web forms of publication. The greater use of URL’s instead of print sources in bibliographies lends some credibility to this hypothesis.

The trend toward patron-driven acquisitions of all types is another possibility. Faculty aren’t complaining about the lack of books because the library is purchasing the books that they want or are getting them quickly enough through interlibrary loan. According to the circumstances, these purchases could be through the conventional book jobbers, the out-of-print...
Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 14: Building and Computers in the Twentieth Century

by Richard Abel (Aged Independent Learner) <reabel@q.com>

Earlier an account of the Copenhagen presentation to Scandinavian librarians was related. The same presentation was offered in London several weeks later to a group of about 50 UK university and research library librarians organized by Tom Slatter, then running the London office. Tom had enlisted Maurice Line, then director of the British Library subsidiary responsible for collecting all the scholarly journals and books and reproducing them in support of the Library’s international interlibrary loan service, to chair the meeting. (The London office was supplying all the non-UK, English-language books to Maurice’s library.) But there was a surprise laying in wait — Maurice had invited Julian Blackwell to the presentation. I had no option but to lay out in considerable detail the firm’s systems, having learned of Julian’s presence only upon arriving at the room — that after all, was the point of the gathering. That a major competitor, who was having difficulty bringing up the systems to support a comparable offering, would have a detailed account of the firm’s systems and their capabilities was entirely beside the point — so, off I went on another six-hour presentation.

The session broke for lunch a little before noon. Maurice had, unknown to me, arranged that he, Julian, and I, were to go off to a different restaurant for lunch. I didn’t know, and don’t know today, if some sort of confrontation was expected or some other purpose was to be served. Whatever, in the course of lunch, I decided to make a proposal of a very different nature. I suggested to Julian that I would welcome the opportunity to sit down with him and his brother Richard to discuss the possibility of somehow merging our firms. I pointed out that each outfit had a great deal to offer the world of knowledge creation and distribution. But that in a genuine sense we were both wasting management time and resources in our worldwide competition. I advanced the notion that some sort of an equitable method could not but prove a more powerful vehicle for carrying forward this cultural responsibility. I knew that the Blackwells were as committed to the cultural role of the distribution of knowledge and the stimulus thereof to new knowledge creation (ala Karl Popper) as were our band of Argonauts. He indicated that he would carry this message back. But I heard nothing further for some years when I learned that he had not sent his memo to Richard or the Blackwell board. Too bad! What might have emerged from such a joining of forces can still not be divined.

In the several weeks between these two presentations I had had much time in quiet evenings in hotel rooms to further reflect upon the meaning of these sessions and intervening mini-repeats to other librarians and publishers in Europe. I was particularly struck by the degree and extent into which I had fallen into the information trap. I, together with the entire band of Argonauts, had entered the game as bibliophiles and scientiaphiles (the latter a neologism invented for the immediate purposes herein) but we were submerged in specific bits of information. It was true that we still dealt with books, the “violls” (to use Milton’s apt phrase) of knowledge, but their essence had been subsumed within the continuing focus on programs and systems dealing with their control as objects rather than violls of hard-won knowledge. The only knowledge to be found in this welter data and technical information was the over-arching design of the system and its components — and more importantly the understanding of what the entire construct was meant to do. I, for example, no longer studied publishers’ catalogs or subject bibliographies, and together with the office managers I no longer selected books to fulfill a variety of users’ needs. Almost all the Argonauts were now setting up networks to couple the firm’s systems to library needs. I hardly knew what was being published, so I might add to the library that I had long planned to occupy my advanced years. A massive unforeseen consequence indeed.

Whatever, I returned to Portland to take up the tasks of getting a new building up and planning its layout. To this end, meetings with the managers of each of the individual operating sections were conducted to solicit their sense of the amounts of space and other facilities each would require to not only carry on their functions effectively but to provide for future growth. When these individual plans were in hand, collective meetings of all the managers were mounted to plan the co-ordination, and resulting physical relations were held to optimize the flow of books, cataloging, processing, and related functions. It took about six months to gather and integrate this information. Thereupon a rough layout, reflecting dimensions as well as operating relationships, was created. This layout was then taken to an architect from whom final construction drawings were duly received.

In the meantime, Keith Barker had been looking for a site of sufficient acreage to accommodate this building somewhat larger than two football fields placed side-by-side, plus another future building of the same size to accommodate growth, landscaped parking segments, and well-landscaped grounds. The continued on page 63