

April 2012

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Bob Holley

Wayne State University, aa3805@wayne.edu

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Recommended Citation

Holley, Bob (2012) "Random Ramblings -- Niche Research, Silos, and Collection Development," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 24: Iss. 2, Article 38.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6157>

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Random Ramblings — Niche Research, Silos, and Collection Development

Column Editor: **Bob Holley** (Professor, Library & Information Science Program, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202; Phone: 248-547-0306; Fax: 313-577-7563) <aa3805@wayne.edu>

Librarians, especially academic librarians, are wont to say that they don't buy materials for just one user when they turn down a faculty or student request for a specialized item. I think, however, that they are bending the truth a bit since some do it all the time. I got to thinking about this subject after mentioning in another column about the wonderful collection of Sub-Saharan French literature that I built at **Wayne State University** but that is now almost unused since the key faculty member retired and the collection isn't good enough to attract specialists in the field.

While I don't believe that I've ever seen an article about the importance of silos by discipline, such findings may exist. I would also ask my readers to forgive me if I make any unwarranted generalizations from my imperfect knowledge of disciplines beyond my core expertise — an example itself of the existence of silos.

The discipline of particle physics is cited as being at one end of the spectrum. According to what I've read, the field includes a relatively small number of researchers who are all working on the same problems. They communicate regularly about the most recent results but do so outside the official literature since their published research appears too late to be of use except for the historical record. Six months is a long time in this rapidly-advancing field. An example of how these researchers communicate may be found at the **Purdue Particle Physics Website** <http://www.physics.purdue.edu/particle/lhc/blogs>. "You can follow the progress of the LHC and interact with the physicists by using twitter and YouTube and the Quantum diaries Website." "Writing in multiple languages, scientists and students from universities and laboratories in North America, Asia, and Europe have volunteered to blog about their latest research findings and challenges that face them in their labs..." In a sense, academic libraries are not very relevant for these scientists because the historical record of past research is not that important for their current projects.

For an example at the other end of the spectrum, I've chosen the area that I know best — French language and literature at **Wayne State University (WSU)**. Like most French units, the area is relatively small with only four tenured or tenure-track faculty. This sparse faculty is expected to teach the entire range of French literature, as well as French linguistics. As one of the richest Western literatures, French literature has masterpieces in all centuries from the medieval period to the present. In most French units, the general rule is to find an expert to deal with each century, the first step in creating a silo. Occasionally, a department hires a genre expert in, for example, theatre across the entire history of French literature,

another type of silo. The French unit at **WSU** doesn't have enough faculty to cover all periods and lacks a specialist in medieval literature. I suspect that few French units are large enough to have more than one expert in the same area because many graduate schools are limiting the number of doctoral students to match the extremely bad job market. **WSU** also has relatively few doctoral students, another factor that limits the possible reuse of scholarly materials since doctoral students often work in areas of interest to their advisors.

The researcher that I was thinking about as I chose the subject for this article is a full professor at **WSU** near the end of his career. A well-respected university press has just published his detailed study (1000+ pages) on a single author. He has two other books and twelve referred papers. The materials that he asks me to buy are almost always quite specialized and often very expensive because they come from publishers whose niche is printing quality research with a narrow focus that justifies only a short press run. His limited number of citations (14) from the *Publish or Perish* analysis of Google Scholar reflects the narrow scope of his research. When he retires, I don't have high expectations that others will use the materials that I bought for him. I should add that the narrow scope applies also to journals. The French publishing tradition has many journals devoted to only one author, sometimes not a major one. I know because I cancelled many of them during the last journal cut.

Of course, French faculty can have broader research interests where the materials are potentially useful to other students and faculty. Research on the greatest French writers is often not limited to literary studies. Philosophers study **Montaigne, Voltaire, and Sartre**. Some great French writers were historians (**Michelet**) or influenced the history of their epochs (**Chateaubriand and Hugo**). Theater scholars may be interested in France's greatest playwrights such as **Moliere**. It seems as if everyone studies **Foucault**. Finally, more popular works on French literary figures, those that get reviewed in the *New York Times*, are still important for my faculty, as well as for general readers at my university. French faculty perhaps even write some of these popular works.

I'll hasten to add that niche scholarship is not limited to the Humanities. Narrow topics exist in almost all disciplines, even librarianship. Often a small number of scholars who all know each other write the books and articles and read and comment upon each other's works. Sometimes they have academic quarrels that seem inconsequential to others. To

give several examples, an archaeologist interested in the Silk Road most likely won't care all that much about Inca ruins. The botanist with a specialization in Tasmanian fauna or a zoologist who focuses on African elephants are examples that science also has its narrow niches. A sports education scholar may be out there whose publication record focuses on how to play ping pong.

Other factors discourage niche scholarship. Some topics such as **Shakespeare**, United States presidential elections, and global warming have so many publications of all types and at all levels of discourse that no scholar can hope to read them all. Libraries should see heavy use of these items in their collections because they are of great interest to faculty and to graduate/undergraduate students. Most faculty with research interests in these areas will assign papers on their topics to their students, something that usually doesn't happen for faculty with niche interests.

Another possibility in the Sciences and the Social Sciences is having teams devoted to the same research such as a laboratory team on prostate cancer or a psychology department where all faculty specialize in some aspect of **B. F. Skinner's** theory of behaviorism. These units focus on hiring new members to join existing teams rather than to teach and research in uncovered areas.

In the end, this topic is more about the nature and culture of research universities. Whether the university rewards or punishes niche researchers has an effect upon what the library collects especially in an era of patron-driven acquisitions since many specialized scholars will ask the library to support their research needs. Interlibrary loan is not sufficient for these niche researchers who have a long-term need for specialized resources.

The current political climate favors practical research with economic benefits so that research libraries may encounter many fewer specialized researchers as the current generation of faculty retires. Current trends are deemphasizing the Humanities where silos are most common. This decline in niche research coupled with other recent developments such as patron-driven acquisitions should lead to having a larger percentage of the collection circulate and to a higher number of circulations per item. Much niche research won't justify commercial publication. Overall, I'm saddened by this development. Just because research doesn't have practical consequences doesn't mean that these research questions aren't worth asking. 🌱

