Random Ramblings: Mourning the Passing of the Print Edition of College and Research Libraries

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I sometimes learn about changes that concern me in unexpected ways. In a recent article on “Arguments Over Open Access” by Carl Strausheim from Inside Higher Ed (January 6, 2014), Mary Ellen K. Davis, Executive Director of the Association of College and Research Libraries, reported that College & Research Libraries will no longer appear in print. “The ACRL made its scholarly journal, College & Research Libraries (C&RL), open access in 2011, and the publication will this month go online only after members ‘begged’ the organization to end its print edition,” Davis said.” I certainly am not one of the “beggars” and will give two personal reasons plus an organizational worry to explain why I’m mourning the disappearance of the print edition. I will add that I’ve been a member of ACRL for over forty years.

My first reason springs from the advantages that print still maintains for me as a reading format. Please don’t accuse me of being anti-digital. I teach online, answer email online, and do most of my research online. I stopped printing out documents years ago because I put them in folders and never read them. Then why do I feel differently about C&RL? To begin, I consider it to be a treat to read this publication in the evening in my easy chair, most often with a glass of wine, after I’m completely sick of looking at digital screens. I have wireless access for my easy chair; but I don’t want to look at yet another digital device whether it be a netbook, tablet, or smart phone. (I don’t have any special love for the feel or smell of paper.) In addition, I want to look at the whole issue as expeditiously as possible. I scan print for content much more easily than I can scan digital even if digital includes abstracts, summaries, and tables of content all hyperlinked to the correct spot in the journal issue. I started my career as a subject cataloguer and have retained the skill of flipping through non-fiction works to become able to summarize content in less than ten minutes. I dare anyone to do this with a substantive e-document. When the latest issue of C&RL arrives, I scan the articles quickly, often reading the abstract, first paragraph, and conclusion to see if I’m interested in reading the complete article later. I also pay particular attention to the book reviews for reasons that I’ll explain later.

Finally, as I’ve written elsewhere, I believe that the basic unit of scholarly communication is becoming the article rather than the journal. I still, however, consider C&RL to be a coherent entity because of its focus on an area of great interest to me. I would not say the same about American Libraries, which, while appealing to a much more diverse audience with a great variety of library news, includes some content of less interest to each individual member of its audience. I would also contrast reading C&RL with much of my digital reading where each short item is self-contained and usually not related to other parts of any digital document in which it is contained. I consider these documents comparable to newspaper articles and quite different from substantive documents. For longer texts, including books, I still prefer print. My other option is to read lengthy digital documents at my peak energy levels, usually in the morning fortified with several cups of coffee, when I have greater patience for sustained digital text.

The second reason I’m mourning the print edition of C&RL is the serendipity factor. Most of my professional reading and research focuses on precise topics where I use resources like Library Literature Online. I’m searching for a known item, most often discovered elsewhere, or for a specific subject. While complete issues of many library science periodicals are available, I seldom if ever take the time to look at an entire issue. I often feel guilty about no longer scanning important journals such as the Journal of Academic Librarianship but not guilty enough to make doing so part of my regular routine. With the physical copy of C&RL, I sometimes find myself reading articles that I would have otherwise paid no attention to but find interesting enough from the abstract to read in their entirety. I pay particular attention to the book reviews — first, because they are relatively short, and, second, because they keep me up-to-date on scholarship in library and information science. I’d also suggest that scanning C&RL is the journal equivalent of browsing the stacks for related physical books of potential interest — another loss from the increasing focus on e-resources.

The third reason for mourning the physical edition of C&RL is that I believe that dropping the print edition of C&RL may pose some organizational risks for ACRL. I can certainly understand the decision to do so from a fiscal perspective. Providing a print copy and mailing it to 11,944 members (2013) must be a substantial cost for the division. On the other hand, the print version is one of the few tangible benefits of paying $58 annual dues as a full member. I have long thought that the policies of the American Library Association offer continued on page 60

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few inducements to join divisions and round tables. Programs sponsored by ALA units are open to all members, as are any committee or interest/discussion group meetings, though some special events charge a lower fee for members. Being appointed to a committee requires membership in the unit, but a subject for another column could be why ALA members are becoming increasingly disinterested in such appointments. The arrival in the mail of C&RL reminds me that I’m an ACRL member and am receiving a visible benefit from this membership. Over the years, I’ve dropped membership in two other divisions when they ceased distributing print publications. I have enough commitment to ACRL that I’ll most likely continue to renew each year. Perhaps this factor doesn’t concern other members who are more involved with ACRL through Facebook, Google Groups, Twitter, ALA Connect, and other social media.

The cost savings in eliminating the print version of C&RL will most likely far exceed the loss of revenue from any decreased membership dues. Nonetheless, I worry about this slippery slope that I see occurring in many parts of my life. My local daily newspaper went digital and reduced content to save money. In the beginning, I read the digital version daily, though not as thoroughly because scanning the entire issue was more difficult as I’ve already discussed above. I stopped reading it completely when I lost the email that contained the password and didn’t consider it important enough to go looking for it. The same will most likely be true for the digital edition of C&RL. I’ll get the digital email about the new issue, perhaps even with a table of contents; make a mental note that I should really, really read it; file the email away in my “read later” folder; and eventually delete the email without reading the issue. To be fair, I have a stack of publications in my office that will also be discarded at some point without systematic reading; but I have at least scanned the most important ones when they arrived and noted the organization that sent them. In the end, I’ll have less of a connection with ACRL and ALA. I don’t know if other organizations have faced this same issue. A quick Google search indicates that many professional societies stress the benefits of receiving print publications as a perk for joining and at least a few have less expensive online memberships that don’t include print journals.

I’m beginning to worry that I look like a Luddite in too many of my columns, but I’ll remind readers that the Luddites were right — technology would change their lives in ways that they didn’t like. Where they were wrong was that they could do anything to stop these changes. I know better than to make that mistake but hope that I can at least mourn the losses attached to adopting new technologies, including not receiving a print edition of C&RL.

From the University Presses — Whither Library-University Press Partnerships?

Column Editor: Alex Holzman (Director, Temple University Press; Phone: 215-926-2145) <aholzman@temple.edu> http://www.temple.edu/temptpress

This is the last column I’ll write before I retire as director at Temple University Press, and it seems an auspicious time to think out loud about how the library-university press relationship has evolved in recent years and where we might thrive by working together in the future.

The January 2014 publication of the Association of American University Presses (AAUP) Press and Library Collaboration Survey (http://www.aaupnet.org/images/stories/data/LibraryPressCollaboration_report.pdf) provides a good place to start. The good news — ninety-five percent of the respondents, which included both library and university press personnel — “see the need for presses and libraries to engage with each other about issues facing scholarly publishing beyond the usual topics of open access, fair use, and copyright.” A variety of responses to questions throughout the survey show an unmistakable trend toward increasing degrees of library-press interaction, though the benefits of those interactions seem much less clear.

The survey spends a lot of time on the scope and success of library publishing programs, how they differ from press publishing programs, and where (whether) they should cooperate on specific programs. It also notes that the press reports directly to the library at just over seventeen percent of the respondent institutions. That would seem to imply working together much more closely, or at least a better understanding of each other’s needs and priorities, but unfortunately, the study doesn’t treat that group with any further specificity.

Here’s a striking difference between presses and libraries. Slightly over 40% of reporting presses are charged with recovering the costs of print publishing and 40% of their publishing program, including staff salaries and overhead costs, while another 25% are charged with achieving an “acceptable loss,” which I expect means achieving a budgeted loss (subvention) negotiated with the administration at the start of a budget year.

Libraries face a very different situation. Only 8.5% of respondents are charged with recovering the full costs of their publishing program. More astounding — and I don’t know what to make of this — thirty-five percent of reporting libraries say they don’t know what their home institution’s financial expectations are of their publishing program compared to sixteen percent of presses. So one in six presses and more than one in three libraries don’t know what their institution’s financial expectations of their publishing program is. This from a survey sent to library directors, deans, and university librarians (titles vary), and to press directors.

Perhaps — the report doesn’t say — library-side folks are included in the number of respondents saying they don’t know what financial results define acceptability to presses and vice-versa. That would be a bit of a relief, but only a bit. Because in 2012, when the survey was taken, and surely in 2014, I’d hope every library and press coexisting (or in one in six cases engaged in a direct report situation) on a campus would talk to each other enough to have at least this minimum mutual understanding of what their university’s administration expects of them.

Here’s another mystery. The survey asks, logically enough, what types of materials the library and press partner to publish. Yet only thirty-five of eighty-three respondents even bothered to answer the question. I’m not sure if this is because there are so few press-library publishing partnerships that result in an identifiable product (partnership can be defined in terms of subsidies, archiving, and other activities that don’t produce an actual product).

I’ll end what I’m sure can quickly become a boring recitation with two hopeful stats. Twenty percent of library-press collaborations are more than ten years old, and another twenty-five percent are between five and ten years old. These things appear to last; I would guess the fifty percent under five years old result from an accelerating number of such programs, not a high failure rate.

Equally hopeful, absolutely none of the respondents have any plans to suspend existing partnerships between presses and libraries, and 70% plan to develop new ones. Cooperation is in the air.

To which I can only say, thank heavens. The absence of real understanding between these key university players in the scholarly communications ecosystem has puzzled me throughout my almost thirty years in university press publishing. Presses, except for some of their journals departments, didn’t understand libraries even as customers for the longest time. Libraries didn’t understand the financial pressures the university puts on presses and, even worse, tended to lump university presses with commercial presses, especially on those occasions — and there are some — when presses took the same positions as their commercial

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