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Disappearing Stacks: What is Appropriate is Still the Issue

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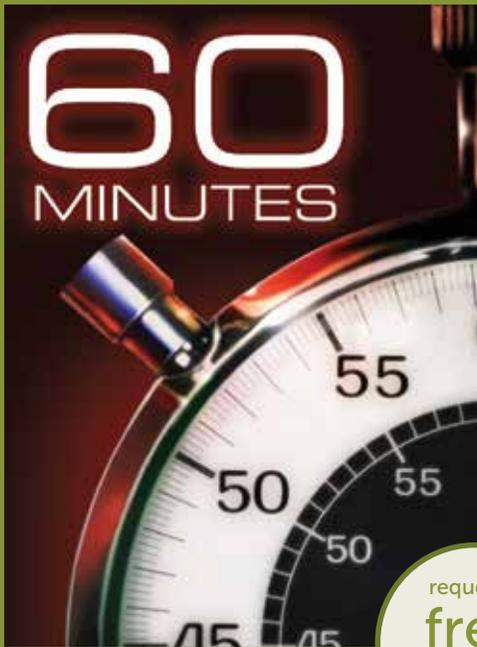


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Disappearing Stacks? What is Appropriate is Still the Issue

by **Jack Montgomery** (Professor, Coordinator, Collection Services, Western Kentucky University Libraries) <jack.montgomery@wku.edu>

It was January 1991 in Cincinnati, Ohio. As we gathered for a faculty meeting, our director, who had recently returned from a new technological innovations meeting, announced: "Every one of you needs to update your resume and consider what you will do next with our life. Libraries as you know it with books and journals will be gone within two years and a library will simply be a computer on a table." This statement had the desired effect of putting many of us into a panic and we were stressed about it for quite some time till we realized the level of hyperbole in her statement. As of the time of this article this library, as well as many others, has changed in terms of organization and focus, and yet continues to serve its patrons and community in a dynamic and meaningful manner some twenty-three years later with both paper and electronic resources.

This story is appropriate to illustrate a point concerning the managerial issues surrounding the presence, organizational focus, and the ever-expanding future of print and electronic resources within the library organization. Often when I attend professional meetings and Webinars, I hear echoes of that director's hyperbole that are designed to motivate, promote, and propel library organizations into a particular stance with regard to certain products and innovative practices. We hear stories about libraries that have no paper books, no stacks, and so forth. These newly established institutions are heralded as the way of the future. The immediate effect on the gullible is one of panic and upset and an overwhelming sense of dread. As one colleague said to me last week, "I think we (the library) are doomed. I am just trying to survive until

I can retire and collect my pension." My attempts to reassure her fell on deaf ears, and I was left to wonder just how effective a librarian this individual is going to be with this sense of impending doom constantly in the back of her mind.

Let me also state that I am not a Luddite in any sense of the word with regard to the growing role of technology in the library and, as an example, have fully embraced the eBook as a library resource whose time has arrived. When considering the role of paper resources and digital innovations it is critical not to look at the issue in terms of print versus electronic, but as print and electronic resources for the foreseeable future. eBooks, as an example, began as a movement in the 1971 with Project Gutenberg, the first producer of free eBooks, which over time has developed into the valuable resource it is today with over 46,000 eBooks available. While an impressive effort, their public domain holdings do not begin to answer the needs of an academic university community and must continue to be considered a supplementary resource. My point is quite simple: We, as institutions, have not reached the stage of development where any electronic resources on the market today can begin to meet the informational



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needs of our patron population, even if money was not a consideration and we could afford them. This may not be the case with certain specially-focused libraries whose needs can be met solely with digital resources. Once more, each institution must decide for itself what is appropriate for them.

What we do need when deciding the future investment in paper resources is impartial, non-political, reasoned decision-making because the consequences are sweeping and, to an extent, final. Once those paper resources are gone and only digital resources remain, the institution has become financially indentured to the electronic provider and dependent upon their goodwill with regard to future pricing, maintenance, and customer service. The finality of these decisions should not paralyze the decision making however, but make the commitment and subsequent business "marriage" of library and vendor a sober and carefully formulated romance.

What we do not need in these discussions are overstated generalities, parroted ideas, pontification, and lemming-like followership by those who are unable or unwilling to provide true institutional leadership. It is interesting to note that the common image of lemmings stampeding to their deaths over a cliff in a suicidal frenzy was an event staged by Disney studios for dramatic effect in a wildlife documentary called "White Wilderness" in 1958. In reality the lemmings were herded and driven over the cliff as cameras rolled. Aside from the animal cruelty and the moral depravity of this action, it has fostered a myth that however inaccurate, has endured and become a cultural image of how easily groups of these rodents and their human counterparts can be manipulated into a disastrous scenario.

Simply following the latest trend does not necessarily serve the needs of the patrons of our particular institution. Also, libraries do not need to have our institutional and managerial decisions be directed by those with a financial or political interest in a particular product or agenda. We also need to listen with a critical ear to any librarian who appears to have an evangelical zeal for a certain product or strategy. These librarian "heralds" have been around for quite some time and while sincere and charismatic, may not have a full understanding of

the product or innovation they are promoting. A clear sign of their heralding is the dismissal of reasonable questions and an unwillingness to discuss the reservations regarding what they are proposing.

At the famous **Charleston Conference** some years ago, I heard a colleague and friend pontificating at length about the supposed success of a certain managerial strategy at his institution. Upon closer examination, I learned that this innovative strategy had been implemented less than three months before being heralded as a success. My friend admitted that this was the case and that his enthusiasm for the program has perhaps caused him to claim success prematurely. I suggested that a year's implementation followed by an objective analysis before claiming success was a more prudent strategy. Managerial strategies are proven valid by their longevity.

The ancient Roman statesman **Marcus Tullius Cicero** once said: "Never go to excess, but let moderation be your guide." We need to listen to new and innovative ideas and products and access their value in terms of our particular library organization. We need to be able to freely question these ideas in order to distinguish actual facts from sweeping generalities and hyperbole. Behind all of our thinking must be the following questions:

1. First and foremost: Is this product or idea appropriate for my particular institution? If I reduce the number of titles on my shelves, how will my institutional accreditation be affected?
2. Do I really know what my patron population wants or needs? Have I made any effort to find out? You may think you know the answer to this question, but remember those needs may have changed over time. What does my institution's circulation data indicate about the actual usage of my print collection? How does it compare to the usage of my digital resources? How long have these e-resources been implemented and do I have enough reliable data on their usage to do an accurate comparison?
3. What impact can I expect from the implementation of such a product or innovation? What sorts of patron populations will be impacted? What will be the potential organizational impact of this innovation on those

librarians and staff I ask to make this product or program a success? Will they need some form of additional training and/or organizational re-focusing? What sort of promotional campaign will be required to ensure acceptance and adequate usage? Remember that with the continued evolution of electronic resources, we as institutions are moving away from a passive relationship with our patrons to an active, dynamic, engaged posture with lightening speed.

4. What other resources can I develop if funds not spent on print resources are made available? As an example, institutional repositories are a valuable supplement to any library's holdings, and should be developed wherever possible and practical.
5. Am I basing my decisions on real data from reliable, objective resources? Where did I hear of this product? How many institutions have actually implemented this product? Will the vendor allow me to speak with them? Am I reacting to this innovation on impulse, out of fear, or as a carefully considered option? Am I making a decision based on what I know of my particular environment or am I simply chasing a trend?

As you can see, most of this little piece does not deal with the pros and cons of paper and digital resources or the future of the stack-based library, but on the process of decision making regarding these important managerial decisions. While we all can gather data, print reports, and construct policies, many of us may not have adequate background in the sort of decision-making required to successfully implement the changes this type of innovation engenders. As a library director once remarked to me after one of my managerial seminars: "Any director can buy new furniture, and invest in the trendy products of the day, but it takes real skill and leadership to analyze, make decisions, and implement those innovations that are appropriate for your particular institution and follow through afterwards."

Bibliography

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Rumors
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to the **College of Charleston** by the famous naturalist and artist, **John Henry Dick**. A breathtaking venue. And though **Donna** is retired she says she loves writing for **ATG!** See her article in this issue about **Freedom of Speech**, p. 34.

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Future Dates for Charleston Conferences



	Preconferences and Vendor Showcase	Main Conference
2015 Conference	4 November	5-7 November
2016 Conference	2 November	3-5 November
2017 Conference	8 November	9-11 November
2018 Conference	7 November	8-10 November
2019 Conference	6 November	7-9 November