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Is the Library Collection Too Risky?

by **Rick Anderson** (Associate Director for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Phone: 801-721-1687) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

Like many (maybe even most) of my colleagues, I've been thinking a lot lately about how to allocate a suddenly diminished materials budget. Only a year ago our biggest worry was how to deal with serials inflation in an environment that offered insufficient budget increases. Those were apparently the good old days. Now we're dealing with double-digit budget cuts and the promise of more to come, and this means (or had better mean) a more fundamental reassessment of our collecting strategies.

At the same time that library budgets are tightening, a seemingly unrelated development has been quietly emerging in the publishing industry: the phrase "out of print" is finally beginning to disappear from the corporate vocabulary. The **Google Books** project has made millions of out-of-print books available to search and, in many cases, to actually read on people's computers and (much more significantly) phones; **Amazon's Kindle** eBook reader, while not a runaway success like the **iPhone**, has proved popular enough to justify a new version and an additional model, with potentially significant implications for the future of reading; the **Espresso Book Machine** has finally made real-time print-on-demand services a possibility in both libraries and bookstores, and is being adopted slowly but steadily and widely, and with increasing speed. Each of these would be a significant development in itself. Taken together, they are changing the fundamental character of both reading and publishing.

But what do they have to do with tightening library book budgets? In fact, all of these factors come together to change the way we should be thinking about risk factors in collection development.

Let's step back and think for a minute about why it is that we build library collections — why we stockpile books and journals and other documents, whatever the format. It's easy to think that building collections is our reason for being; that the purpose of the library as an organization is to create and care for a collection that meets the research needs of our users. Much of our everyday language about librarianship reflects this belief.

But this mindset confuses means with ends. The real reason we build collections, I think, is so that we will already be prepared to meet our patrons' needs in the moment that our patrons realize they have them. We buy printed books so that when our patrons walk into the library the right books are waiting for them to check out; we subscribe to online journals so that when our patrons go looking for available articles on a particular topic, the ones they want will already be accessible and ready to download. Of course, there's a fundamental problem with this approach: we don't always guess correctly what our patrons are going to need. In fact, we guess incorrectly with distressing frequency. But guessing has always been our only reasonable option, for two main reasons: first, we were dealing mainly with print (which was hard to find, expensive to move, and slow to deliver); and second, scholarly books went out of print very quickly — if we didn't buy a copy from the first print run, which often consisted of only a few hundred copies, there was a strong likelihood that we wouldn't be able to get one later.

Here's a simpler way of putting it: in the print era, budget dollars were relatively abundant and documents were relatively scarce. This meant that the risk of misspending a dollar on the wrong book was counterbalanced by the risk of failing to buy the right book — and therefore, it made sense to throw more money after documents on a speculative basis. Yes, you were running the risk of buying the wrong thing, but for many libraries it made sense to spend more money on a very large and inclusive collection that was more likely to meet all patron needs rather than try to save money by building a very tight and selective (and therefore limited) collection that ran a greater risk of failing to meet those needs.

But everything's different now. Budget money that was once relatively plentiful is now drastically scarcer, while older books that were once difficult or impossible to find are now often both easy to locate and cheap to buy through online sources like **Amazon** and **Bookfinder.com**. And there is no longer any need for a book to go out of print. Millions of books that were until recently lost to the public's view are now freely available online, thanks to **Google**; current books that are still in copyright but can't be distributed normally in an economically sustainable fashion can be sold one at a time through print-on-demand utilities like the **Espresso Book Machine** (not all publishers make their books available in this way, of course, but the option to do so now exists where before it did not). And ebooks don't have to be purchased in advance of demonstrated patron need at all — services like **Electronic Book Library** and **MyiLibrary** will provide libraries with catalog records for some or all of their offerings, and then charge the library only for those that patrons actually use. These factors combine to constitute a radically different book-buying environment from the one that existed just two years ago.

In other words, the risk inherent in buying the wrong book has increased (because each budget dollar is now scarcer than it once was), while the risk inherent in failing to buy the right book has decreased (because it's increasingly possible to buy only what is needed when it's needed, and it's much easier to quickly and cheaply correct any failure to buy the right book). Both of these developments support the same conclusion: that most research libraries should seriously reconsider their traditional strategy of meeting patrons' needs by building large, inclusive, speculative collections that attempt to anticipate them.

Several years ago, in this column, I offered a crazy idea — that maybe it was time for libraries to start moving beyond the idea of a permanent collection at all.[1] At the time, the idea sounded crazy even to me and I saw it mainly as a stick with which to stir up some new ideas about collection strategies. Three years later, I'm becoming increasingly convinced that the near future of most research libraries really does lie less in brokering access to an artificially small subset of the huge universe of available documents, and more in showing our patrons everything that's available and buying only what they say they need, in the very moment they realize that they need it. For online content, that reality is already here. The combination of **Google's** massive library of scanned print books and a service like the **Espresso Book Machine** (which can print and bind a 300-page book in a few minutes) has suddenly made such a service possible for printed materials as well. In light of these new developments, with materials budgets being cut everywhere, and with circulation rates falling, why would we ever again buy a book that we aren't sure anyone wants? 🌿

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not be surprised. In 2005, **CIBER** found that less than ten per cent of authors knew "a lot" about institutional repositories; 58 percent acknowledged that they knew nothing about them (**Rowlands I.** & **Nicholas D.**, *New journal publishing models — an international survey of senior researchers*, **CIBER**, London, 2005, *www.slais.ucl.ac.uk/papers/dni-20050925.pdf*). Nothing much appears to have changed in the intervening years.

There are lessons in this for all of us. Publishers have been negligent in making clear to their authors how their copyright policies operate in practise. That they increasingly will accept a license to publish with the copyright being retained by the author, and that they generally permit posting to Websites and repositories and reuse in teaching and in further research, need to be publicized and better understood.

Those who want to see the disappearance of journals and journal publishers — including many academic librarians and their professional associations — must stop wilfully misleading the community about authors' rights. In a changing scholarly environment, arguments about the best way to serve the information requirements of scholars and scientists need to be based on evidence rather than prejudice. To do otherwise puts at risk a scholarly information structure that has, with all its imperfections, served the interests of scholars and researchers for 350 years. 🌿

Endnotes

1. **Anderson, Rick**. "Crazy Idea #274: Just Stop Collecting." *Against the Grain* v.18# 4, Sept. 2006, pp. 50-52.