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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Janus

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Janus

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How many collection development librarians does it take to change a paradigm? It didn’t use to take many, according to former Cornell University librarian Hendrik Edelman, now of the Palmer School of Library and Information Science, Long Island University. Edelman was among the organizers of a 1971 conference that drew seven attendees out to shape a new field called “collection development.” In that era, when faculty or library directors selected the books, collections were idiosyncratic, haphazard, and undesired, one cause of “dwindling” interest in academic libraries. A second conference drew twenty-five, including some directors “who wanted to know what was going on,” recalled Edelman. By 1977 enough had gone on that an ALA pre-conference in Detroit on collection development was a landmark that defined the field for a generation.

How many collection development officers would it take to change today’s paradigm? Last October, Edelman was among the speakers at the Janus Conference on Research Library Collections, a meeting held at Cornell. Over seventy-five collections librarians and directors from most of the largest research libraries in the United States and Canada attended this invitational event and spent the better part of three days on the Ithaca, New York campus discussing what the next generation of collection development—if there was to be one—should look like.

At the heart of the collection development model Edelman and his cohort created was the subject bibliographer, librarians who worked tirelessly and expertly to build great book collections. Today, with the book under siege from all directions, bibliographers performing title-at-a-time selection on one campus after another seems, to many critics, as archaic a notion as a network of monks and scriptoria. While much of the work in today’s research collections libraries would be entirely recognizable to any bibliographer from Edelman’s era, in fact everyone knows that everything has changed for collections librarians. But, no common idea of collection development in research libraries has as yet replaced the vision that coalesced decades ago in Detroit.

“Is it time to relegate collection development to the dustbin of history?” asked the Janus prospectus. How entrenched are the values and traditions established by Edelman’s generation? Edelman himself, at Janus, was at once a delegate from the past and a living example of rupture with the past. Can today’s research librarians take their own turn as revolutionaries?

Clearly that was the hope of the conference organizers. Each Janus attendee received a list for discussion and action of “Six Key Challenges for Collection Development.”

1. For every research library to transfer annually ten percent of its materials budget into a central fund for mass digitization projects overseen by a national committee.

2. To all but stop buying print by 2008.

3. To end the redundant local work of building core collections and instead to identify core materials centrally, again by committee, and then simply buy them.

4. To define fair price ceilings and refuse to buy anything above them.

5. To send print material published between 1830 and 1960 to regional repositories, and to establish an electronic repository for permanent storage of all digital materials.

6. For each research library to give highest priority in its budget to a local open access repository focused on a single subject; and so as a group create a new channel for scholarly communication, under library control.

The draftsmanship was partly tactical, a way to find out how far collections librarians might go in an attempt to revamp today’s system of scholarly communication. How hard could a point be pushed? In flushing out opinion on these questions, the statements were an unqualified success. Janus, a symbol of change, was the right deity to preside over this conference, continued on page 72
where several overarching dualities informed every moment of discussion in Ithaca.

Local or collaborative action. Of course nobody has to wait for a conference to begin changing the world. Among the libraries that started years ago to reshape collection development was the University of Michigan, whose Mark Sandler, Collection Development Officer at Ann Arbor, delivered a talk to his PowerPoint slide entitled “Collection Development in the Day of Google.” Michigan was a digitization pioneer even before signing on in 2004 as one of the “Google 5” libraries who agreed to work with the Mountain View, California search engine company to digitize their collections at a pace previously unimaginable. A principle of the old collection development, Sandler said, is that “all collections are local.” That’s similar to the thinking of the neighborhood shopkeepers Sandler recalled from childhood, most of whose businesses shuttered long ago by Wal-Mart, Amazon, and the other retailers who created a mass shopping experience that had little to do with locality.

Are local libraries now more insulated from change than the long-gone hardware stores, clothing shops, and butchers of Main Street? Sandler pointed to the “de-skilling” of local collections work, thanks to vendor services like approval plans and aggregated packages of online content. Should collections librarians be spending their time on rejection decisions at the approval plan review shelf, instead of working on what Sandler argued is truly needed, the infrastructure to build a national collection?

He noted that while Michigan continues to buy heavily in print, the library also employs more than thirty staff members in a digitization division — separate from the Google operation — that has produced projects such as “Making of America,” which enables anyone with a browser to access more than 8,500 books and 50,000 articles from the nineteenth century, items physically brittle and once seldom used but today general-interest readers in tens of thousands of online users each year. Thanks to projects like this, today a library’s constituents are everywhere. Research libraries, Sandler said, should be doing less warehousing and more marketing, working with one another to create collections accessible to the entire world, and so helping to facilitate the social creation of knowledge. “Librarianship,” he said, “is a team sport.”

Or is it? Today’s most prominent digital projects, like “Making of America” and Google Library, have by and large been local stories, no more collaborative than bibliographers have been in picking books for their own offices for the past generation. Search “Making of America” on Google and the first two hits will be Michigan’s project followed by Cornell’s identically-named effort. Begun as a Mellon-funded collaboration, today the two projects run independently, connected only by mutual links from inside pages on their respective sites.

Sandler, on the road frequently as a Michigan spokesman for the Google project, has down pat the timing of a comedian. “Please God,” he joked, describing his first look at email each workday morning, “don’t let there be any otherbirthing.” Does a success at Michigan in fact diminish Cornell, Yale, and Wisconsin? Every Saturday in the Big 10, the SEC, and the other conferences, teams win and teams lose. While it may not have a TV deal, how different from big-time college football is today’s big-time ARL librarianship?

Maybe Sandler’s idea of librarianship as a team sport is on the mark. The question would be — and no other was more central at Janus, one played out in private and public throughout the three-day conference — will ARL libraries be willing and able to play on the same team? Will these libraries and their parent institutions cede a measure of local control to centralized committees, as proposed in the Janus challenges? Will they carve some percentage from local budgets and hand the money to a cooperative agency? Or, will they continue in the manner of Edelman’s generation to build collections mostly on their own, vast electronic silos to complement the treasures of print that still define institutional prestige?

Print or electronic. If the goal is to break with the past, where else to start but here? Action for Cooperation members have had the challenges: “Subsequent to 1 January 2008, research libraries will no longer purchase materials published in North America or Western Europe that are not in digital form.” If anyone at Janus actually thought print-buying would be done within two years’ time, they didn’t speak up. Conference participants saw a future that was largely electronic and some already see print collections more as problem than resource. The consensus, though, was that research libraries should work in every way possible to accelerate the shift from print already in motion. But nobody seemed ready today, or in 2008, to walk away from print.

The designated advocate for print at the conference was Mark Dimunation, like Edelman a former Cornell librarian, now Chief of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division at the Library of Congress. “Containers?” he asked, referring to the wording of a 2004 OCLC report which called books containers of content, “they’re calling them ‘containers’?” Dimunation, who looks more like everyone’s idea of a Hollywood leading man than a rare books librarian, warned that disregard for the cultural meaning and weight of books, physical books, would be a tragic mistake. He argued that every embrace of a new technology brings the threat of loss. “Library collections themselves,” he said, “are a product of a cultural moment.” Dimunation’s message to the librarians at Janus was that they were on the cusp of an irreversible cultural misstep.

Most of today’s digital projects, he argued, are self-contained “steles” on the landscape, without connection to one another, sometimes without internal coherence, and usually without the digital sophistication that now can offer an experience approximating that of the actual physical book, showing examples of this from an online exhibit mounted by LC. Mere images of scanned pages achieve “delivery” of a text, he said, but don’t provide true “access” to a book. While even the best digital projects will never se adequate substitutes for books, librarians must move beyond the “shatter of potential” in the digital age to fulfill their mission of preserving an unbroken line in our cultural record.

Collections librarians and others. “I am one of the animals,” said Jean-Claude Guédon, professor of comparative literature at the University of Montreal, as he opened his Janus address. Guédon, with Edelman, Sandler, and Dimunation a principal speaker at the conference, was responding on his feet to Sandler, who in urging librarians to act had remarked, “we care for the animals, but they don’t run the zoo.” Guédon, tall and white-haired, wearing a tartan suit and jacket, returned to this theme throughout his talk, ad libbing in a French-accented English to make the point that there is no point to a zoo — or to a university — other than the animals.

The idea behind Janus — which came close to being a librarian-only event — was to see whether or not consensus for radical change could be built during these three days. Certainly other groups would sooner or later need to be accounted for, but it would be librarians to take the lead. Guédon’s message was that they would not get far alone. A leading proponent of open access publishing, he was principally addressing the Janus resolution on local digital repositories, pointing out that in the zoo, professors are “peacocks.” Any new system will have to appeal to vanity, something repositoires so far, lacking reach and depth, have failed to do. They are not “branded” as collections of distinction. The peacocks aren’t interested.

Guédon, who began his career as an historian, talked about the seventeenth-century origins of modern science, when knowledge was created from the interplay of scientists, or “virtuosi” as known then, not only with one another, but also with objects, instruments, and texts. “Collections,” in the best sense of the word, are a type of community and should be free of barriers, whether cumbersome passwords and procedures or lack of access to a needed resource for any potential member of the community. Librarians, in whatever system they attempt to build, said Guédon, must be aware that collections of any kind, print or electronic, are meaningless apart from their users.

Beyond the peacocks in academic departments, remarkably little was said at Janus about other groups having something to do with scholarly communication. Not only was Janus nearly a librarian-only event, it was nearly a collections librarian-only event. Will they notice on the technical services side? Vendors, it was acknowledged, might have a role in delivering core collections. Students were not mentioned at all. Janus demographics, in fact, were daunting: one-third of the group of fifty — in contrast to Edelman’s recollections of long-haired library radicals in the 1970s, “young, energetic, fearless librarians” who seized the day from their elders. Janus attendees are today’s elders. Will the next generation of librarians pay attention?

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resolution on price ceilings, of course. But serials pricing issues are such old news that book publishers actually generated an equal amount of discussion at Janus. “Does anyone think that was a friendly question?” quipped Sanders, when asked from the floor why his vision of electronic publishing on campus made no mention of the university press. He said that at Michigan the library was disappointed in university press reaction to the Google digitization project. (The Association of American University Presses has been outspoken in complaint over what publishers see as massive copyright infringement.) Revenue generated by the University of Michigan Press has been a “roadblock,” as Sanders put it, to the transformative projects only possible by working on a scale enabled by Google. “It’s not the football team, after all,” he said, referring to that revenue, and describing a “tense time” in university press-library relations.

“We’re all mesmerized by Google Print,” remarked Ross Atkinson, Cornell’s Associate University Librarian for Collections. “We’re like rabbits caught in the headlights.” Or did he say “headlines”? No matter, the point is the same: It’s not libraries that are shaking the foundations of scholarly communication, but an outside force, Google. Atkinson, the last major speaker at Janus, is a sparse and intense individual, given at once to abstract ideas, references to philosophy, and dry humor. He spent his hour on stage, just before the room divided into working groups to address the challenge statements, barely stopping at the podium, instead pacing, gesturing, reflecting with arms folded, his voice rising, falling, then rising again.

Those statements can be read as a précis of many arguments for radical change that Atkinson has made for years in writings and presentations. In many ways the conference was a tribute to him. A brochure announcing a forthcoming collection of Atkinson’s writings was included in the conference packet, and he received a standing ovation on the final day of Janus, just before the conference broke up. Recently Atkinson’s health has not been good. Sometimes at Janus he looked drawn. But he seemed energized on the stage, and every moment of his years at Cornell since 1988 must, to him, have seemed to precede that hour.

“Hedger says,” he said at one point, and at others referred to “notification sources,” “vertical contingency,” and the “axis of non-equivalence,” using simple Zen-like figures projected in black and white onto a screen to diagram tensions within scholarly communication. “Maybe we can’t do it,” he acknowledged in a moment of decrescendo; but in the next, appealing to “the people in this room,” colleagues for more than twenty years in collections meetings everywhere else who this time had traveled to Ithaca, Atkinson exhorted these librarians to take what he said might be the one opportunity by cooperating rather than competing with one another — to reshape not just collection development, as Edelman and his generation had, but the entire system of scholarly communication.

“So that’s what we want to do this afternoon,” said Atkinson at the end of the hour, finally standing still, his voice dropping, not a sound in the room, collections librarians from most of the great academic libraries in North America about to find out, in the months and years to follow Janus, whether they had attended just one more conference, or had enlisted in a crusade.

Group Therapy
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GRIPE: Submitted by Helen M. Aiello (Serials/Electronic Resources Librarian, Wesleyan University Library)

Now that Scopus has entered the sci/tech database field, I wonder what institutions who subscribe to ISI’s World of Science are planning to do? Since I suspect that many schools do not have the financial resources to run both products, if Scopus proves to be a viable product this may present a difficult choice down the road, and, further compounded by the fact that many subscribers have purchased “perpetual access rights” to ISI. Any comments on how your school may be approaching this topic will be most appreciated.

RESPONSE: Submitted by Rick Anderson (Director of Resource Acquisition, University of Nevada, Reno Libraries)

Like many schools, we were recipients of a full-court marketing press from Elsevier when Scopus was released. Their sales pitch was completely appropriate, and the arguments and strategies they used to strengthen the sales pitch were reasonable: they enumerated some of Scopus’ obvious strengths as a product, offered us a significant discount (technically because we’re Science Direct subscribers, though I suspect the discount would have been extended even if we weren’t), gave us multi-year payment options, and even offered to give us a year of free access following which we would have the option of cancelling without penalty. To Elsevier, this last offer was really the trump card. A year’s worth of no-strings access at no charge — what, they asked, did we have to lose?

The answer is that we stood to lose plenty. The problem is not with the product itself; Scopus looks like a wonderful tool, and subscribers whose opinions I trust have told me that they and their patrons all love it. I have no reason to doubt them. The problem is the price, combined with our budget situation. Our materials budget is flat this year, which means that we will have to find cuts matching the rate of inflation in order to avoid going into deficit. The purchase of a new citation index at a price in the tens of thousands of dollars is simply not feasible right now — and making it available to our patrons for a year would only set us up for a political firestorm later, when we have to cancel a product our patrons have gotten used to having (because we still won’t be able to afford it).

We do subscribe to Web of Science, which is more expensive than Scopus. Is it possible that we might cancel Web of Science in favor of Scopus? Yes. But not without consulting extensively with the affected faculty at our institution, many of whom are deeply attached to Web of Science and may or may not agree that continued on page 74