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Acquisitions Archaeology — Monographic Modes

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When looking back, it is often easier to assume that past times were simpler. The lack of context coupled with the benefit of hindsight makes great controversies seem substantially less than what they were. When considering the seemingly simpler acquisitions practices in the early 1990s, those practices were caught within the uncertainty of the emerging World Wide Web, the confusion of CD-ROMs, and the ever-looming (if not-yet-arriving) Serials Crisis. Times were not simpler, but undeniably the context was significantly different.

One of the issues of the day was a particular matter of format. *Format* can mean many things, but generally it can be considered to be *the mode in which content exists*. In many ways, when discussing “format” we are specifically discussing the *mode*: not *what* an object is so much as *how* it is. While at one time a format might have been thought of specifically in its tangibility (e.g., book or serial) or generally in terms of its medium (i.e., print vs. electronic), our present-day context requires a more nuanced use of the term. Also, the varying use of the term presents us with several approaches to describing a particular aspect of a given content-object: it can be in a “serial” format (temporal mode), a “CD-ROM” format (physical mode), or an “archival” monograph printed on acid-free paper with reinforced binding (quality mode). Though format has a shifting, often vague, connotation within the practice and discourse of acquisitions, it also is one of the critical ontological considerations that grounds our work and drives our conversations about it.

The distinction of format is an important one in contemporary acquisitions practice because newer formats are not necessarily as fixed as “traditional” ones; a physical object, once printed or recorded, cannot be easily changed, only supplemented or superseded. The object itself is, ontologically speaking, permanent. Not so with digital modes which can (and perhaps should) be dynamic; that is, digital objects may be constantly changeable without leaving a trace of those alterations. These modes are not fixed the same way; an updated Website or eBook may suddenly become a different object but without any indication of what it was before. In print, local alterations to a text do not result in changes to the original work, while changes to a content-object in a digital environment may be simultaneously and universally reflected in all their simulacra without leaving a record of their alteration. In the case of physical modes of expression, investment must be made in

perfecting the work before the content-object is produced.

The advantage, however, for a dynamic digital content object is immediately obvious: corrections, additions, deletions, commentary, etc., can all be incorporated instantly and seamlessly in a way that is invisible and easily accessible to the end user. While this destabilizes our notion of the content object as a fixed item, it can also render decisions related to the acquisition of an object less determinate: content is becoming more malleable, and the concern must increasingly involve how an object functions rather than what it says at a particular moment.¹ In physical modes, the regime of decision making is different. At the start of the 1990s, there were certainly digital “formats,” and considerations of these formats constituted a large part of the contemporary acquisitions discourse of the time. But library acquisitions professionals were still focused on the print book, and the main questions relating to format therefore centered on the book-as-item.

In the early 1990s, the format debate in acquisitions raged around the format (and, more specifically, the mode) of the book to be acquired: paperback or hardback. Though a simple “either/or” kind of decision seems rather simple when compared to the likes of eBook pricing, access, and archiving models, this seemingly simple decision represented something much more to the practice of librarianship. For starters, the decision to *buy* a book is a permanent one. Unlike so-called “perpetual access” that typically assumes ongoing maintenance of an eBook by a third party (including periodic platform upgrades, interface improvements, content corrections, etc.), the print book you buy is the book you receive, circulate, maintain, and may eventually have to replace. Though the content is the same and the format is similar, the mode represented by a print book and an eBook differ quite radically.

As budgets were starting to tighten in earnest — that is, as a *trend* rather than a *contingency*, due in no small part to the hyperinflation of journal prices the preceding decade or so — the decision about binding was not just a question of *practice* in changing circumstances but ultimately a question of *values*. Books, still the metonymic signifier of the entire library enterprise, had already started losing their traditionally hallowed ground. First, of course, much ground had already been lost to serials, whose ever-increasing (rela-

tive) subscription costs were eating away at monograph budgets everywhere. But there was also the becoming-ubiquitous personal computer, and the new associated digital modes of content in a range of electronic formats. These new formats, which behaved so differently from the tangible fixed media of the past, were starting to challenge long-held assumptions of format and therefore collections in general. This brought the debate of paper-vs-cloth to the fore.

A 1992 “Lively Lunch” at the **Charleston Conference** confirmed that *many* librarians still bought a hardbound as long as it was available and that *most* bought hardbound if it was *all* that was available.² But change was already underway. Though there was “a time when libraries shunned paper editions and opted exclusively for the case,” **Maria Fitzpatrick** observes that everyone by the mid-90s was “well aware [that] in recent years budget constraints have prompted a variety of changes in acquisitions.”³ These changes included, among other things, a reflection on the priority, and in many cases the demotion, of the publisher-supplied hardbound book within the context of library collection-building.

Today, growing investment in eBooks combined with the accompanying complexities of licensing, delivery, and access models may make it difficult to recall the challenges inherent in the seemingly subtle difference between paper- and hardbound books. More than a simple issue of *value* at the item level, the sudden intensity of debate around this choice was more about *values* at the collection level. Indeed, as various modes of digitally-inscribed content were gaining momentum in the background, the debate about the nuances of content format and their associated modes of expression helped set the stage for the larger debate around eBooks and the intricate discourse on eBooks to come. 🍄



Endnotes

1. That is not to say that consumers no longer require the content to be correct or “true.” Rather, the content need not necessarily be considered fixed at a given point, because the content-object and its accessible simulacra can, at any time, be immediately and universally corrected. It is the *process* of finding the errors and making these changes (and the checks upon the mechanisms of change) that become critical.
2. **Celia Wagner**. “Book Pricing Update: The Paper Versus Cloth Debate, Round 2.” *ATG* 1993 (5)1, p. 13.
3. **Rosann Bazirjian**. “Group Therapy: Ordering Paper, Receiving Cloth.” *ATG* 1995 (7)1, p. 81.