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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations-Patronized

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Patronized

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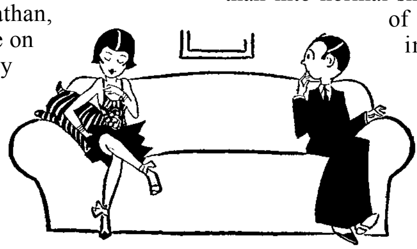
Patrons of academic libraries are riding high today, but when I was one, patrons were cattle. Back then if you managed to find space for yourself in one of the teeming public areas, it was sure to be an uncomfortable, anti-ergonomic chair at a crowded table, or on a good day, in a little desk carrel offering the faintest hope of privacy. There you could line up your books on a small shelf at about eye level as you sat, moving the ones you'd looked at into a grouping separate from the ones you hadn't, hoping you could deal with or dismiss enough of the books on the spot so as not to have to haul too many away for the tedious check-out process, and then carry them the long way back to your room. Backpacks then were a not-as-yet universal accessory, and so carrying under the arm even as many as a half-dozen books across a campus that might be tundra or might be tropical, sometimes through crowds, or up and down steep walkways, was probably the day's or even the week's major physical exertion, since working out at the gym was another not-as-yet widespread practice.

This was after you'd gathered the books in the first place. The efforts of "library science" to that point had largely been devoted to devising systematic ways for a library to identify good books and then for patrons to learn which books their library owned. But the next step, actually putting your hands on the books you wanted, was often an exercise more problematic than scientific. There was a hole in the science there, partly due to maze-like buildings, partly to poor signage, partly to ancient local classification schemes still on life support, partly to lackadaisical re-shelving, and partly due to the contributions of fellow patrons who would lose, steal, or simply neglect to return the books they had borrowed.

Buildings were the worst of it. Already, then, they weren't large enough to hold the print collections. While that made for impossibly tight shelves when you did find the desired book, patrons were in a worse fix with the older books moved to "storage" or "annex" or whatever the local word printed in the top corner of catalog cards was for the remote storage location. Prior to the days of slickly-automated, high-density storage operations, prior to the days of efficient van and courier systems, prior to the days when universities decided that making students routinely stand in lines for one thing or another didn't need to be a campus-as-normal state, the working library assumption for offsite retrieval, a service that laughed at Ranganathan, was that patrons had time on their hands and what they wanted probably didn't matter anyway. The experience of filling out a retrieval slip and submitting it across the desk was similar to the experience of lining up for registration at the beginning of term to enroll in a particular class. You walked away, you hoped, you waited, you were grateful when requests were filled, but never surprised when they weren't.



Except, with these "item-not-found" books, there were no avenues for backdoor maneuvering when the front door was locked shut. Inter-library loan, assuming a patron had ever heard of it or had any notion of what it was, or if an undergraduate, was eligible in the first place, would likely take weeks and whether or not successful, a student in the end was as liable as not to have forgotten the original request, thereby giving weight to the library's anti-Ranganathanian law that whatever a patron asked for probably didn't matter much.

And then there were the books you could get to, after following clues as to their locations. Many libraries, as their collection grew, had been expanded serially over the years, and so understanding where a book was shelved required some level of understanding of how a building's parts were named and of how they had been grafted on to one another. So, with a classification number gained from the catalog card, next patrons had to find a wall chart outlining how the collection in its components was distributed throughout the building. The chart might show, for example, that the Ps were located in 2N, meaning, that Literature (P) was shelved in the North wing, level 2. "Level 2" might mean the second floor, or for older buildings with a central book core system, it might mean level 2 of the mezzanine, which did not necessarily correspond to the building's floor numbers, and so might be expressed as 2M North. Libraries were most helpful when the classification wall charts were complemented with a schematic map of the building's floors, wings, rooms, mezzanines, and other parts.

In time, regular patrons got the hang of it, at least for those areas of the collections they needed most often. For the new or occasional library visitor, though, navigating the older main libraries had to have been among the low points of the entire collegiate experience. The mezzanine systems — still going strong today in quite a few libraries — were like a building within a building, an iron substructure of narrow walkways and packed shelving aisles arranged on tiers connected up and down by short, steep stairways. The height of one tier was less than the height of one floor, so it was possible to fit more books into mezzanines than into normal shelving on an actual floor of the building. The lights in each aisle were usually off, with no windows nearby, so patrons, once they found the right area, turned them on themselves, and off again once done, with switches located at either end of their aisle. Tight quarters, every inch, and for a user something like the experience of moving through the ghostly metallic passages of a submarine.

"Bibliographic instruction" was in its infancy, and in those days no one was thinking about "information literacy." The closest anyone came was "library instruction," which basically meant tours of the library, tours perfunctorily given on the part of librarians, and in turn perfunctorily taken on the part of students. "Outcomes" were not on the radar, and a good thing for that. I recall being part of a group of senior-year Education students brought upstairs to the "Social Sciences" floor of our library for an introduction to the ERIC system (Education Resources Information Center) by a woman who must have been the Education subject librarian. ERIC, then as now sponsored by the **U.S. Department of Education**, is today an online database with a legacy microfiche component. It was microfiche all the way back then, however, and for our introduction to ERIC, the class gathered around a bank of cabinets and listened to the librarian talk about what was inside. From my spot on the outer edge of the group I don't believe I understood a word she said, not that I was trying hard to engage with her talk. If I used ERIC once that year, I don't remember doing so.

All of this seems a little harsh as I write it, since beginning to discover the uses of a library was actually a high point of my student years. It's just that you did that on your own in those days, when libraries didn't give a lot of thought to patrons, who were expected to come in, do what patrons do, and leave. Academic libraries were in transition then — as usual — toward the end of the postwar, post-Sputnik growth era when so many components of the university remade themselves — from Physics Labs, to Athletic Departments, to Admissions Offices — each becoming a formidable institution in their own right, within a larger institution growing so quickly that who could keep track?

Today, academic libraries are bent on serving patrons. No library of standing is without its café, a sea change from the "No Food or Beverages" days. Nice study space has displaced many miles of book and backfile shelving, countrywide. Patron-driven book programs are everywhere. Friendly Google-like search boxes on library Websites have elbowed aside the complicated OPAC, now demoted to a separate "classic" or "traditional" link. Reference librarians have tried every form of 2.0, and embedded or roaming librarians have reached dorms and offices and other sites around campus. You could see the whole movement almost as a form of penance, atonement for the years of patron abuse. It's all to the good though, so long as the latest "patron" idea isn't mostly to punch a ticket to a conference, or to draw blogging attention, or to do what everyone else is doing.

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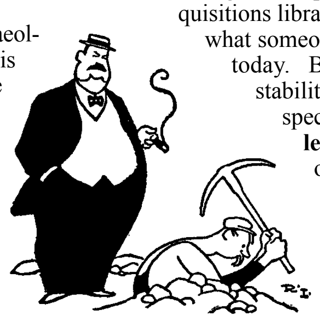
Acquisitions Archaeology — Islands in the Stream

Column Editor: **Jesse Holden** (Head, Acquisitions, USC Libraries, University of Southern California) <jholden@usc.edu>

History in general and archaeology in particular illustrate two closely-related but contradictory manifestations of time: change and resistance. Though the exact nature of time remains a matter of lengthy and intense philosophical debate, I will follow **Harmon's** assertion that an inherent resistance in the "being" of the world (that is, in its ontology) prevents everything possible from happening all at once.[1] Hence, some possibilities unfold in a temporal sequence, which in turn prevents some possibilities from happening at all. Moment to moment, the universe around is constantly changing, but not everything changes at the same rate. Some things (e.g., properties of elements or physical laws of the universe) appear not to change under any circumstances, resulting in universals. To such universals we can add less tangible and slightly less fixed abstractions like ideas and concepts, which may be changed over time but may also be resistant to change.

History and archaeology show us that some of these abstract elements within culture indeed can be resistant to change. The resistance found in many practices and productions (be they material or ideological) is highly variable. The course of time revealed through the study of the past helps us mark the winding course of change in time while simultaneously sketching the outline of those islands of resistance or relative constancy. Sometimes the juxtaposition is so sharp between change (contingency) and consistency (resistance) over time that it shines a bright light on the human condition at a particular point in time.

So, too, in acquisitions archaeology, it seems. The year of 1991 is just over two decades ago. In the scope of history, twenty years is not an expansive period of time; it is approximately a single generation. However, if time is a river rushing past the islands of relative constancy, then two decades are enough time to experience some profound change. The impact we can observe, if not in the immensity of years, may be measured by the profundity of its rate.



In June of 1991, **Richard Brumley** explores what it means to be an acquisitions librarian.[2] Though anyone who has spent any significant time in acquisitions during the last twenty years intuits that the changes in the profession have been profound, it is surprising how current **Brumley's** description feels. Breaking the idea of the acquisitions librarian into three parts, he surveys a fairly complete and entirely familiar island of acquisitions work. His overview is enough to suggest that acquisitions librarianship is fairly constant, if not universal.

Starting with the "skills" required for the job, he lists the requisite library skills, business skills, and managerial skills that an acquisitions librarian must possess. The second part of **Brumley's** article includes the "attributes" needed for success. Attributes are personal qualities that are needed in acquisitions work, such as ability to take on new tasks and responsibilities, a service orientation, and tact. Finally, there are "elements" generally needed in the academic workplace that are no less necessary for acquisitions librarians: collegiality and professional development.

In all, **Brumley's** take on acquisitions reads as quite contemporary. Within the framework of three parts, he discusses the challenge of losing staff positions, the problems encountered in managing subscriptions, and the need to be comfortable and innovative with technology. This general approach to describing the "acquisitions librarian" is reassuringly similar to what someone in the profession might say today. But rather than demonstrating stability by showing the constants in specific acquisitions *work*, **Brumley** has delimited the boundaries of an island in terms of general *qualities* — delimiting in the process an isolated constant in the river of temporal contingencies by which we mark change.

This dichotomy can be illustrated by considering a seemingly unrelated article. In the immediately preceding issue of ***ATG***, perhaps the last article dealing with "Soviet serials" as a current event was published.[3] Prefacing the article is an editorial note announcing, "just as we were preparing this issue for publication, the following article [about Soviet serials acquisition] came in from **Collets**. Very interesting given all that's going on in Russia." The article itself addresses concerns about periodical supply, exchange programs, printing quality, and publishing delays. Of course, any and all such concerns can be a factor in acquisitions work wherever it is done, but here the elements are framed specifically in the now-historical context of Soviet politics and information production. **Lytton** concludes that "the days of cheap Soviet books are over." This remark is remarkably, if unintentionally, prescient: the Supreme Soviet would dissolve itself before the end of the year, and the days of Soviet publishing would come abruptly to an end.

The historical period or archaeological stratum of 1991 offers an opportunity to observe the contradictory forces of time in a space that is both relatively close to the present yet absolutely distant. The definition and even the scope of acquisitions librarianship uncovered in **Brumley's** 1991 article stands out as a constant: a set of generalized competencies and connected practices that remain hardly changed at all in concept. The construct of "academic acquisitions librarian," however, exists within the information environment of the library, the academy, and the universe beyond. Therefore, the librarian that we recognize, if an island, is surrounded by the political, cultural, and technological streams that create an always moving, ever-changing context.

In the end, the constant we call "acquisitions librarian" provides a reassuring framework in which to structure strategies and develop processes, but it is not enough to hold back the force of change. Even while performing a similar function through time, the particulars of acquisitions are shaped by the information flows in which they are surrounded. The world of Soviet Communism, itself a strategic framework established to resist change, has been swept away, and the stream in which the librarian is now situated is no longer the same — even if that stream is still just as turbulent.

A universe without change would be a frozen picture unmarked by movement, immune to forces (like gravity) and processes (like entropy) by which we experience and track the movement of time. A universe of change without distributed points of resistance would, again following **Harmon**, expend all of its potential immediately. While ideas and concepts may be outside time, resistant to the currents affecting physical bodies, the universe in motion is likewise in a perpetual state of change. Even assuming some abstractions may be impervious to external forces (like entropy), such islands are created by the flows of change that swirl around it. In this way, we can measure the profound change over the past twenty years not by the way that we define ourselves as librarians but how as librarians we interact with the changed (and ever-changing) world around us.

Endnotes

1. **Graham Harmon**. *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Open Court Press: 2005.

2. **Richard Brumley**. "Acquisitions Librarians – Jacks of All Trades?" ***ATG*** v.3#3 (June 1991), p. 40-42, 45.

3. **Steve Lytton**, "Soviet Serials: What's Next?" ***ATG*** v.3#2 (Apr. 1991), p. 36.

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All patrons are not created equal, after all. Many will be happy enough with the café alone, not much desire for a personal bibliographic trainer or for book-picking opportunities, thank you. Many, post-graduation, will live happy, fulfilling, and all but library-free lives. A few, on the other hand, will find the library the very best thing about their student years. Who knows, maybe an embedded librarian would have helped me, and I wish there'd been a better way, those years ago, to learn more about the library. For that, as it was, I needed to go to library school.