

Nailing Jell-O to the Wall?

Collection Management in the Electronic Era

by Robert Galbreath

When I was pursuing graduate work in history during the early sixties, a fellow student good-naturedly dismissed my specialty — intellectual history — as equivalent to “nailing Jell-O to the wall.” It was the first time I had heard the expression. Now, decades later, I find my subsequent specialty — collection management — often described in the same terms, particularly with regard to electronic resources and digital (formerly “virtual”) collections.

It is not difficult to understand why this should be so. If the library is traditionally understood to be a physical location housing an organized collection of selected materials (primarily on paper), then the advent of decentralized computer-mediated access to remote electronic databases and online resources clearly challenges the concept of a managed collection. Challenges — but does not negate. Collection management is now more complex, involving more factors, more decisions, and more participants in the decision-making process. It also entails reconceptualizing the nature of “collec-

tion” and some traditional components of collection managing, but the basic functions of selection/deselection, budget allocation, and user liaison have not changed fundamentally, and the need for collection management has not lessened. If anything, it is more essential than ever.

Based on a sample of recent administrative appointments and searches, collection management activity appears to be thriving within the University of North Carolina System. Chapel Hill is seeking to fill its long-established University Bibliographer and Head of Collection Development position. North Carolina A&T is searching for a new Collection Development Librarian. North Carolina State recently appointed an Associate Director for Collection Management, Organization, and Advancement, while East Carolina University formally established the position of Collection Development Librarian. UNC-Charlotte has expressed interest in creating a collection management post. Other collection management administrative positions exist at Appalachian State and UNC-Greensboro.

The need for continued collection management in the digital library has been emphasized by many commentators. At NCLA's 1994 College and University Section meeting on “Collection Management in an Electronic Environment,” keynote speaker Merrily Taylor of Brown University made it clear that

collection development is needed more than ever to navigate the surging river of electronic information.¹ Ross Atkinson, whose numerous essays constitute the most sophisticated analysis of collection management activities in academic libraries, has written that “the role of the library in general—and of collection management in particular—in a predominantly online environment can and should be more central and more vital to research and communication than in the era of traditional formats.”²

Why is collection management still needed? If nearly everything is available electronically, or soon will be, why talk about collections at all? What role is there for collection management in this context? How do collection managers manage, and what is it that they manage? In addressing these questions, I want to draw primarily on my own experience at UNCG — and that of academic libraries more generally — not because I think it is paradigmatic (“we did it right”) or remarkable, but because I think it is illustrative of the sorts of immediate, practical problems and questions that librarians are wrestling with throughout the state. Other important but less urgent issues, such as text mutability, archiving, preservation, and mediation or filtering of information, must be held for discussion at another time.

The Collection

Writing in 1987, James A. Cogswell defined collection management as “the systematic management of the planning, composition, funding, evalua-

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tion, and use of library collections over extended periods of time, in order to meet specific institutional objectives."³ A decade later, while the principle is still sound, the practice no longer seems as neat as the definition implies. What, to begin with, now constitutes a library collection?

Traditionally, a library collection was a locally owned and organized cumulative selection of physical items intended to provide timely access to needed information. Today the library collection is no longer a *physical* phenomenon, an organized array of discrete physical containers in one physical location. Increasingly it is an intellectual phenomenon or construct, a mixture of local and remote, paper and electronic, basic and advanced resources not located in one place, but assembled to assist users in a particular location, institution, or community.

Regardless of location and format, a collection still exists. It is a collection because it has been selected for provision (access) from a far larger universe of possibilities. In making qualitative selection decisions, collection managers are saying to their primary users (those for whom the particular library has been established) that these selected resources are most worth their immediate time and attention; these are most likely to get them what they need with (we believe) the least expenditure of time and effort. This ongoing process of selecting, or what Michael Buckland calls "privileging some resources over others,"⁴ is collection management at its most fundamental.

Ownership/Access

Some have objected that accessing is not collecting, that providing electronic access is not the same as building a collection. This view is correct, it seems to me, only if by "providing electronic access" one envisions laying down cables or turning on equipment. Otherwise, it is misleading to place ownership and access in an either/or relationship. Ownership has until recently been the preferred — because necessary — means of providing access. Items added to a collection once were called "accessions." Now there are numerous ways of providing access, of which ownership of physical items is only one and not necessarily the most cost-effective when rapid, multiple use of very current infor-

mation is anticipated. Electronic access is itself a variable: do we choose to own a CD-ROM, pay licensing fees in order to network a product, purchase searches for using a remote access database, or provide on-demand commercial document delivery?

The answer to these questions depends on perceived demand. At UNCG we have adopted a tiered approach, devised by our Electronic Information Resources Librarian, in which the access mode is correlated with expected use. Remote database access is for resources which we believe will be used most heavily, networked CD-ROM access (with a limited number of slots available) stands at the second tier for those products next in demand, and stand-

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alone CD-ROMs are employed for the least frequently used resources. The resources themselves, however, are selected on the basis of quality and support for local instruction and research, among other factors. In other words, their provision is the result of collection management decisions on what to provide and what not, within the financial and technical limitations of our institutional environment. They constitute a dynamic collection that is constantly re-evaluated to ensure that it coheres and functions as well as we can make it for our users.

The fundamental question is not ownership or access. The real question is access or not. Do we provide the resource or not? The next question then becomes: What is the best means of providing access for our users—paper or electronic, local or remote, owned, borrowed, licensed, or shared?

The Selection Process

The selection process in the online environment is much more complex. There is more to choose from: more formats, products, protocols; more possibility for duplication and overlap; more people involved; and more factors to consider, including equipment, technical compatibility, maintenance,

and number of simultaneous users. Not all of these are collection management responsibilities in and of themselves, but they cannot be ignored, and no decision to add an electronic product can be considered final until these factors are weighed.

With the number and complexity of issues involved in adding electronic resources, we have found that we need a combination of talents to make informed decisions: the subject specialist, the electronic information specialist, the systems librarian, and input from reference and serials. In an effort to bring focus to the process, we established an Electronic Resources Subcommittee of the Collection Management Committee with responsibility for evaluating new electronic products, reviewing those already in place (especially at renewal time), proposing appropriate access modes, and making recommendations accordingly. The ERS consists of the electronic information resources librarian, the systems librarian, a reference librarian, and on occasion the serials librarian. The subcommittee's existence symbolizes the all-library significance of electronic resources, and illustrates the complex and multi-

faceted nature of electronic resources which cannot be encompassed adequately by any one person or department. Clearly Wendy Lougee is correct in saying that the selection process in the online era is no longer an individual matter.⁵

Two additional points about the selection process should be mentioned. The first is that even when a decision has been made and implemented, it is not final. (It is not final with regard to books, either — there are subsequent "reselection" decisions to be made about preservation, remote storage, weeding, repairing, replacing — but these decisions usually come much later.) In the electronic world, change is so rapid that new products, new technologies, new packages and pricing structures, new upgrades and releases, constantly assail us. What we decide today may require reconsideration tomorrow. Additionally, not everyone who has access to computers will necessarily have access to our online resources. We have discovered, for example, that Macintosh users currently cannot access our networked CD-ROMs. The other side of the coin is that some of these users request us to purchase Macintosh products which we cannot run on the Library's equipment.

I cite these examples not as insuperable obstacles, but as issues which further complicate the selection process.

Dematerializing Collection Management

Once the collection is viewed as a fundamentally intellectual construct rather than exclusively as an assembly of physical objects (even though that assemblage is itself the result of intellectual work), our perspectives on a number of issues begin to change.

1. Collection Evaluation.

Collection strength has less to do with collection size in the sense of holdings than ever before. While accrediting agencies seek evidence that the local collection is adequate to support programmatic and institutional objectives, this criterion is not restricted to owned resources. In my experience, evidence of generally available remote access databases, shared resources, and document delivery service is regarded as integral to providing adequate resources. We continue to prepare reports on library resources and services in support of academic units undergoing graduate program review or accreditation review. This is an important service which is as instructive to the academic units undergoing review as to the librarians preparing the reports. They provide snapshots of where we are and indications of where we must go.

2. Collection Development Policies.

While accreditation reports are important, written collection development policies are not. Collection development policies can be time-consuming to prepare, with their levels of collection activity and specification of linguistic, geographical, and chronological limits. They do not accommodate interdisciplinary research easily, they date quickly, and they tend to be regarded after completion as "fixed" or "final," defining an illusory status quo. The worlds of instruction, research, and information are changing far too rapidly for collection development policies to be worth the expenditure of staff time. "Wasted words," Richard Snow has recently called them.⁶ Ultimately, it is the selection decisions themselves that determine collection development policy, not the reverse.

What we do find useful are guidelines, such as the tiered approach to electronic access or the urgent need criterion for paper subscriptions. We

also need alternatives to formal collection development policies, such as profiles of departmental research and teaching, which can be updated quickly, provide guidance in selection decisions, and serve equally well, perhaps better, as communication links with faculty users.⁷

3. Materials Budget.

We still call it the materials budget at UNCG, but it isn't. It pays for subscription databases, *FirstSearch* searches, access to *InfoTrac*, and now UNC-System shared databases. It is properly a "resources and access" budget. In our case, however, it pays only for the subscription, access, searches, and licensing; it does not pay for the equipment. This separation raises further problems. It is not possible to fund electronic resources solely through the "materials" budget. Equipment and its maintenance are part of the cost of these resources. Equipment and operating budgets are as much affected by the provision of electronic resources as the materials budget. Other budgetary questions arise over transaction-based or on-demand resource services, such as a database search or an article provided through commercial document delivery. Are these "free," i.e., subsidized by the library, or is the cost passed on to the user? Which fund will be charged for the subsidy? Which fund will receive the fee?

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Once again, these are not necessarily collection management decisions *per se*, but they must be settled, and they are part of the cost of doing business in the world of digital information. One aspect of budgeting for electronic resources is indisputably clear: expenditures for electronic resources are escalating at least as rapidly as serials inflation.

4. Serials.

Paper subscriptions increasingly are being restricted at UNCG to those which qualify as "urgently needed," that is, those that are so heavily used in the library to support the instruction

and research conducted on the campus that physical ownership of paper copies is the most cost-effective means of providing access. In some cases, owned paper subscriptions are necessary because of general interest, local interest, unavailability through other means, or inadequate reproduction of illustrative matter through document delivery. For those titles that are needed only occasionally, there are other options: inter-library loan, document delivery, and full-text electronic versions.

User Liaison

Liaison outreach to users, in this case the teaching faculty, becomes ever more central to collection management in academic libraries. We must stay informed about rapidly changing research interests and patterns of scholarly communication in the increasingly computer-dominated world of contemporary scholarship. What kinds of resources are needed in or through the library? What kinds of electronic resources are used or needed by faculty in different disciplines? We recently asked representatives in each academic department whether the library should provide electronic journals. Replies ranged from an emphatic Yes! to a cautious Perhaps (caution shaped, it appears, by fear of additional costs) to the negative (not interested; what are they?; I don't know of any in my field). The ability to order books electronically was strongly endorsed, but a few were satisfied with the current manual procedure.

Communication is a two-way process. Not only do we need to hear what users want; they need to hear what we have available already and what the online resources can do for them and their students. As the abundance of electronic resources grows, the need for guidance through their riches becomes self-evident.⁸ Guidance, navigation, instruction, mapping, privileging — call it what you will — will be a vital necessity to users, and collection management will increasingly be part of this library-wide public service.

Conclusion

Collection management in the online era is not an attempt to nail Jell-O to the wall, although it may occasionally feel that way when collection managers struggle to keep their heads above the rising flood of decisions, factors, consultations, reports, and deadlines. There are tough decisions to make and difficult problems to solve, and what works

well for one library will not be acceptable to another.⁹ Collection management has changed, not in its fundamental concerns with selection decisions, budget allocation, and user liaison, but in scope and complexity. Complexity in itself need not be negative. The complexity of electronic resources has had some positive consequences. By requiring the involvement of a much broader range of library staff, the provision of electronic resources is democratizing collection management and making it more collaborative. Other librarians are learning about collection management, while collection managers become increasingly knowledgeable about technology and user services. It is a learning experience for everyone, and it may well serve to bring more unity to library practice as lines blur and departmental responsibilities converge. Collection management has become a much riskier enterprise because the electronic environment is ever-changing and uncertain, but uncertainty and risk-taking provide greater potential for learning. Besides, if the digital world is removing walls, why try to nail anything to them anyway?

References

- ¹ Merrily E. Taylor, "The Shape of the

River: Collection Development in an Age of Change," Paper, NCLA College and University Section meeting on "Collection Management in an Electronic Environment," Charlotte, September 30, 1994.

² Ross Atkinson, "Text Mutability and Collection Administration," *Library Acquisitions: Practice & Theory* 14 (1990): 357. In the long term, he envisions collection management merging with the other "mediation" functions of reference and cataloging; see his "Access, Ownership, and the Future of Collection Development," in *Collection Management and Development: Issues in an Electronic Era*, edited by Peggy Johnson and Bonnie MacEwan (Chicago: American Library Association, 1994), 92-109.

³ James A. Cogswell, "The Organization of Collection Management Functions in Academic Research Libraries," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 13 (November 1987): 269.

⁴ Michael Buckland, "What Will Collection Developers Do?" *Information Technology and Libraries* 14 (September 1995): 155-59.

⁵ Wendy P. Lougee, "Beyond Access: New Concepts, New Tensions for Collection Development in a Digital Environment," *Collection Building* 14, 3

(1995): 24-25.

⁶ Richard Snow, "Wasted Words: The Written Collection Development Policy and the Academic Library," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 22 (May 1996): 191-94.

⁷ Roger E. Stelk, Paul Metz, and Lane Rasmussen, "Departmental Profiles: A Collection Development Aid," *College & Research Libraries News* 54 (April 1993): 196-99.

⁸ Buckland, 158.

⁹ For a thoughtful overview of the variety of problems facing electronic libraries, especially in collection management, see Cheryl LaGuardia, "Virtual Dreams Give Way to Digital Reality," *Library Journal* 120 (October 1, 1995): 42-44.

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