Collaborative values and survival of the print record

Together librarians can preserve collections

by Stephen Enniss

The Modern Language Association's (MLA) 1995 "Statement on the Significance of Primary Records" made an important contribution to the ongoing discussion of the role of libraries in an increasingly electronic environment. The statement affirmed the continued role of the book in its original format for a range of scholarly inquiry, a role that will remain important even as other formats are adopted for specialized purposes.[1]

The following year, ARL formed a task force with representation from scholarly societies, libraries, and the archival community with the aim of translating the goals of the MLA statement into specific strategies. The Preservation of the Artifact Task Force sought to make the issue of the preservation and retention of materials in their original formats more widely known and sought to identify specific steps to address the multiple threats facing aging print collections.

More recently the dialogue has continued within the English and American Literature Section of ACRL and, this past summer, at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) Preconference in Washington, D.C.[2] What is emerging from these ongoing discussions is a dual emphasis on education and collaboration between librarians and their teaching colleagues.

Collaboration is necessary

While we should certainly welcome support for library collections from our college and university teaching faculty, and from scholarly societies such as MLA and the American Historical Association, we need to be clear about the breadth of the problems facing our academic libraries and the forms of collaboration that are needed.

Implicit in the original MLA statement and in much recent discussion has been the idea that scholars simply need to be more vocal in articulating to library colleagues what materials are most important to them. While this is certainly true—as it has always been true—librarians must take a longer view. It is worth reminding ourselves that the roots of our own profession lie in the systematic organization of broad fields of knowledge. The threatened loss of large portions of the print record calls for equally broad and sweeping responses. We will be better prepared for this challenge if we acknowledge that the primary responsibility for the survival of the print record rests squarely with librarians themselves.

Costs matter

The reaction against the original MLA statement was largely because the statement did not adequately address costs. Many were alarmed by the absolutist language of some parts of the document, such as: "The loss of any copy of any edition—from the earliest incunables to the latest paperback reprints—diminishes the body of evidence on which historical understanding depends." While we

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manage collections, we also manage costs, some were quick to point out. That, too, is an essential, though perhaps less inspirational, part of our work. Yet costs alone cannot lead. Any discussion of costs must be informed by a clear understanding of our home institution's values and mission.

One of the positive messages to come out of the RBMS session in Washington D.C. was Paul Conway's (Yale University) suggestion that brittle books may in fact be able to serve a useful life for years to come, even in their brittle state. If borne out in practice—and I defer to the preservation community on this point—it may be that costs of replacement copies can be staged over many years. Costs do matter, and costs will certainly effect the choice of strategies that can be adopted and effectively employed; however, costs should not by themselves redefine our mission.

Implicit in the current discussions is a subtle but deep-seated sense of crisis. Let's find out from the scholarly community what our top priorities are, some seem to be saying; others add, Let's be realistic about what we can afford to do. Both positions, however, are evidence of a retreat from the notion of large research libraries with comprehensive collections. Quietly gaining ground in these discussions is the idea expressed in a recent *New York Times* headline "We Can't Save Everything."[3]

We can't save everything and we shouldn't want to

This op-ed piece describes in compelling terms the rapid proliferation of electronic data and the challenges posed by the long-term preservation of information in electronic form. Yet many readers undoubtedly came away from the article with the assumption that the points were equally applicable to print collections.

What we are talking about, we need to remind ourselves, is not "everything" but that portion of the print record that already exists in the nation's libraries. Indeed, the accompanying illustrations, which show a researcher moving from a card catalog to the book stacks where he finds only a computer diskette, perpetuate one of the pervasive fallacies about library collections, that is, the notion that book collections will be stored in electronic format thus eliminating the need for large book stacks in the library of the future.

Such shifts occur often in discussions about library collections, even though it now appears that electronic texts will remain, for the foreseeable future, additions to the library's print collections rather than replacements for it. The demands of electronic and print collections are quite different (not to mention those of other formats), and we need to use caution when these differences are blurred. Similarly, we must also pay close attention whenever that statement "We can't save everything" is evoked. "We can't save everything" should never be used as justification for not saving anything.

What is often missing from these discussions is an appreciation for the librarian's traditional commitment to broad and comprehensive research collections. Among some, the very notion of big libraries seems antiquated, a relic of a pre-computer age, yet what library has stopped buying and adding new books? For many disciplines, books remain a remarkably cost-efficient and effective means for the preservation and the transmission of ideas.

At a time when faculty often remain at a given university no more than a few years, it is the library collection that provides institutional identity and advances the university's research mission. Yet at many colleges and universities, librarians themselves are in retreat. Collections assembled over many years are threatened as much by librarians' decisions as by the slow decay of acidic paper.

Faced with the brittle nature of 19th-century collections, some seem eager to cut their losses, reclaim badly needed shelf space, and move offsite or even deaccession portions of their 19th-century collections. While the poor quality of paper found in many 19th- century books is a major concern, it is by no means the only problem. A greater threat may be the attitude shift that occurs when books originally acquired for their contemporary perspective on a given subject long outlive their historical moment. As librarians we must strive to make informed decisions about the growth of our libraries' collections and about the ongoing management of costs.

The tension between those who say "we can't save everything" and those who resist "the loss of any book" is a false one that

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I believe that libraries *should* acquire some revisionist materials (and not filter online access to it) . . . because they . . . are examples of anti-Semitism and prejudice that could, and should, be utilized by students and teachers as primary source materials to illustrate firsthand the ugly face of bigotry.

How to classify?

Aside from acquisition, access is the other problem relating to these materials. Neither the Library of Congress nor Dewey have created a separate classification for Holocaust revisionism, so libraries that own these books generally have them classified in the Holocaust history section, shelved side-by-side with the standard works. However, libraries that do not find this suitable could classify Holocaust-denial to more accurately reflect its content—anti-Semitism and prejudice are but two of the examples that have been offered as alternative classifications in the literature, which would move them from the history section.

Admittedly, this is a very sensitive issue, but it is one that is not going to just go away. Although we have tried to ignore them, revisionists continue to publish and distribute this material (which now includes videos) and the deniers have become very active on the Internet, frequently targeting young people, who are by nature skeptical of "established history." The major purveyor of this material in the United States is the Institute for Historical Review, which (along with its sister organization The Noontide Press) is a subsidiary of the Legion for the Survival of Freedom.

Within the next decade or two, there may be no Holocaust survivors still living, leaving no one able to point their finger at a revisionist and say, "You're a liar! I was there." As librarians, we believe in intellectual freedom and abhor censorship, nevertheless, doesn't fighting to include Holocaust-denial literature in library collections leave a terrible taste in one's mouth? ■

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misrepresents the complexity of the issues. No single library can or should acquire and retain everything. To do so would be to disregard our home institution's mission and to squander its resources. However, collectively we should be concerned with the survival of the print record broadly conceived. The Preservation of the Artifact Task Force is right to urge greater collaboration; however, the collaboration that is most needed, I believe, is collaboration among librarians themselves. Collecting, preserving, reformatting, and deaccessioning decisions should all be made with a sensitivity to the range of historical evidence the book embodies and with attention to the collecting programs of our colleagues in other libraries.

As I hope we all recognize, the problems facing research libraries are big ones. While there are many good reasons to embrace electronic texts, restraining the growth of a library collection is not one of them. The solution—or solutions, I should say—will continue to include big library collections. They will involve a substantial commitment of resources for unfashionable things like shelving and preservation measures. In order to serve our institutions well and serve the long-term interests of scholars, part of the solution must also be meaningful collaboration among librarians.

We should applaud the efforts of the Preservation of the Artifact Task Force for pushing for a greater recognition of the issues and for its advocacy on behalf of libraries. Even as we do so, however, we must also recognize that the 19th-century print record will survive or not, based on decisions librarians are making today. What we need are forms of collaboration that advance the mission of our research libraries, rather than strategies that retreat from that mission.

Notes

1. The "MLA Statement on the Significance of Primary Records" was drafted under the auspices of the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of the Print Record and included representation from both the scholarly community and the library profession. The statement appeared in *Profession 95* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995): 27–28.

2. For a report on that discussion, see *C&RL News* 59 (September 1998): 570–71.

3. Deanna Marcum, "We Can't Save Everything," *New York Times* (July 6, 1998): A15. ■