

“Yes, we have books” : The Archival Assumption of Library Management

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ABSTRACT: By examining some of the core principals of archival theory and practice, such as appraisal of materials based on evidential, informational, and intrinsic value, this paper will argue that traditionally defined librarianship should become an integral part of archival enterprise. The practice of identifying, storing, retrieving and preserving the codex must combine the professional duties of the librarian and the archivist, a combination that will reverse the archival profession’s century-long insistence of a separate identity from the library profession.

A scene in the 1960 motion picture, *The Time Machine*, suggests a disturbing future for the printed word. When the nineteenth-century time traveler asks the child-like Eloi people of the future if they have any books, he is shown a dusty shelf of volumes in a forgotten alcove. The visual depiction of a book disintegrating in the hands of the time traveler startled many of the film’s twentieth-century audience, but few imagined within the next fifty years they would witness indications of that scene becoming reality. As contemporary university programs replace the word “library” with “information science” in their titles and library rubbish bins daily fill with volumes superseded by electronic surrogates, the signs of print’s accelerating obsolescence seem ubiquitous.

There was a time, two centuries ago, when practitioners of an important manufacturing trade fought a desperate and ultimately futile war against the steam powered looms that would make their wood frame devices obsolete. As the Luddites attacked factories in early nineteenth century Britain and smashed the machines that threatened their livelihood, they fought a losing battle against “progress,” a strategy that modern librarians have abandoned while facing similar obsolescence. Unlike the Luddites, twenty-first century librarians have embraced the new machines that threaten their livelihood in an attempt to find a role in their use. However, just as the most talented handloom weaver would find his expertise largely irrelevant in the configuration of a power loom, librarians are experiencing an evaporating demand for their traditional skills as book custodians as they struggle to establish their newly proclaimed function as internet information brokers. The tension resulting from this attempt to balance the new while retaining the old can easily be seen in library spaces. Once considered the source of

information storage in the form of paper resources, libraries are now slowly converting their buildings into bookshelf-decorated internet cafes.

To state the situation bluntly, we can no longer afford to rely on a preservation ethic among librarians because their contemporary emphasis is on “information,” and that information is becoming digital by default. Libraries at American universities seem almost reluctant to use the word to describe their facilities, choosing instead the more trendy “information commons” to label their computer-dominated reading rooms. Even the American professional literature of librarians has produced articles that decry the fact that their repositories continue to be branded by their alleged outdated function as book repositories.¹ Huge collections of bound journals are daily discarded as their digital surrogates become available for library acquisition, and the shift of a business model that formerly stressed the ownership of information resources to one that touts the benefits of renting the same is accelerating at a dizzying pace. Bound volumes have been assigned a peripheral place in American academic libraries much like the embarrassing bachelor uncle at a family dinner who is placed at the end of the table where he can be quietly tolerated.

Books are threatened by more than the changing role of the library and librarians, however. The entire practice of deep reading, either for amusement or edification, is becoming somewhat of a rarity, at least in the United States. In 2007 the National Endowment for the Arts released an important survey titled *To Read or Not to Read*. Based on years of careful data gathering and analysis, the report seems to validate the concerns of many contemporary educators that the impact of the internet has been devastating to the entire practice of quiet reflective reading, the type of extended text perusal necessary when reading a book. *To Read or Not to Read* presents chilling empirical evidence that nearly half of all Americans ages eighteen to twenty-four read no books at all, and that a shrinking number of American high school seniors are able to read above a basic level of comprehension. More alarming is the finding that both reading ability, and the habit of regular reading, have greatly declined even among American college graduates.² As the print reading ethic slowly evaporates from academia, it is no surprise that librarians seem actively working to disassociate themselves with the practice.

If we accept the conclusion that the only real future of the codex is within an archive or

museum setting, we must develop a rationale for their retention. As archivists, we have long understood that paper objects must be appraised by more than informational value, but that is the only consideration that most contemporary librarians employ for evaluating all resources. Two additional assessments that archivists routinely observe are intrinsic value, the actual worth of an object preserved in its original state, and evidential value, the clues contained within a given object that allow one to trace the activities of the creator. These two appraisal values should be considered in the practice of archival librarianship just as they are incorporated into our examination of manuscripts.

Intrinsic value is an easy consideration for appraisal decisions of paper resources because it is something archivists already practice. After all, there is only one Declaration of Independence, which sets the philosophical base for American law, and only one copy of Governor La Trobe's 1839 Instructions that gives recognition to the region south of the Murray River as a separate district within the Colony of New South Wales. These founding documents are valuable simply because they exist, and their existence establishes certain rights, obligations, and legal foundations in both of our countries. The value of an original signature on a document is recognized by such widely separate entities as courts of law and individual autograph collectors.

In the world of books, where more than one copy may exist for a given title, intrinsic value usually increases in direct relationship to its scarcity. Barring the unlikely discovery of additional copies of the Gutenberg Bible or the New South Wales General Standing Orders, their intrinsic value can be established with reasonable certainty. However, it is the exact determination of that scarcity which threatens the preservation of the book in the twenty-first century. Giant union catalogs such as OCLC in the United States contain millions of catalog records that trace each repository that reports holding the object, and if a given location does not have the object, they can apply to borrow from one that does. There is a certain complacency to this system because it is based on the supposition that the listings of the holding institutions are accurate. In the future, when more publishing houses make the switch to electronic distribution of their product, and more used books make their way to the pulping vats, libraries will be unable to indulge in such complacency. Even now there are indications that the throwaway ethic

will have serious consequences in the future. In a study conducted in 2002, a sample survey found that one out of five OCLC holdings records for fiction are inaccurate, and items published prior to 1900 stood at an appalling failure rate of 26.9 percent.³ We can only assume these figures have grown worse in the last ten years as millions of books have been lost, damaged, or discarded. Without a dedication to such holdings report accuracy, how will we even know when a given title or edition is teetering on the brink of extinction?

The main argument for recognizing the intrinsic value of a book can be described as the gold standard.⁴ When world economies abandoned the use of specie currency and instead adopted a system whereby paper notes were given a value based on the price of gold, there was still a sense that a dollar was worth a dollar. However, once these same countries adopted a system of fiat currency, whereby the dollar was worth what the government fixed at a given point of time, people began to distrust their money. It is not my intention to delve deeply into international monetary theory, but the analogy I wish to make is clear. Printed books are the gold standard for any digital surrogates; the indisputable evidence that a particular version of a codex had been available at a particular point in time. The existence of a printed, three dimensional object is the only thing that gives its electronic rendering value. Recognizing this intrinsic value of the codex is a concept that I believe modern librarians have failed to grasp.

Evidential value is probably the archivist's most significant departure from the professional practice of librarians. We know that the author of the book is only one creator that displays this evidential value. What about the publisher? What about those who owned the book over time? What about those who read the book and underlined, annotated, or otherwise altered its pages? The practice in most contemporary rare book collections seems to be the acquisition and maintenance of the most pristine copy available, a choice which makes the evidential value of the piece limited to its manufacturer rather than its owners. There is much to be said for recognizing this evidential value for repositories that strive to document the history of technology and mass production of consumer goods. The binding, signatures, collation, and chemical content of the adhesives, paper, and ink are all preserved and made available for analysis in the preservation of pristine copies.

When we consider the chain of ownership of a particular volume, we are recognizing an

evidential value that contemporary librarians dismiss. The stamps of various repositories, the check out slip dates, and even the dog ears of particular passages can tell us much about how often a book was used, and what parts of the book were particularly influential with its readers and owners. This is particularly true when pages bear marginalia and underlining. A reader so moved by the words on a page that he or she felt compelled to carry on a written conversation with the author leaves evidence of a passion for enlightenment unmatched in an electronic format. Curators of medieval manuscripts have long recognized the importance of marginal gloss on their documents, even tracing the progression of such annotations that, over time, have become erroneously incorporated as part of the main text itself. These types of “mutilations” can speak volumes to anyone concerned with evidential value. The progression of a scholar’s thought who perused the book numerous times can be revealed by the retention of such volumes. Even more important is the evidence of a given author’s corrections to his own book that never got a second printing (which accounts for the vast majority of all contemporary titles). The evidence of the author’s intent that these books display make them essential documents for anyone researching his or her activities.

If we accept the evidential value assessment for the admission of books into the archive, we must then deal with the responsibility of adopting library functions for their maintenance. For books there are two major areas where a significant departure from contemporary library practice is called for; cataloging and storage. It has become fashionable in the circles of current librarianship to use the term “metadata” in place of cataloging to convey the idea of item level description, but for our purposes we will retain the older term and its electronic application known as Machine Readable Cataloging (MARC). It is important to remember that library catalogs were automated BEFORE there was an internet, and that its application in a web-based environment has been largely supplanted by free-text searching. In my opinion the MARC format remains the best digital application of the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules yet invented because it requires conformity to various controlled vocabulary fields, the only way to guarantee precision in searching.

A MARC record for archival control over printed books would require minor adaptations. Of course the author, title, publisher, and date fields would remain as they are now, but there is

room for expansion specifically within the author field. Added author entries are allowed in a MARC record for those who have contributed to the text in addition to the main entry, generally in field 110. There is no reason why this field cannot also be used to identify previous owners of a volume, or those who annotated its pages, along with those who contributed to the authorship. All it would require for these additions to display evidential value would be the use of a standardized list of qualifiers such as “owner” or “annotator” that would properly identify the role performed by the named person. The notes field can also be used to clarify this additional evidential qualifier, but with obviously less potential for precision searching. Likewise additional subject headings which go beyond the current practice of limitations based on the rule of specificity can greatly expand access.

This added value cataloging will require some acceptance on the part of archivists who still maintain that item level description is too burdensome. There is, however, a corresponding decrease of cataloging tasks that can speed up the process can by the abandonment of subject classification assignment. In the pre-computer age the analog sorting of information required that like materials be shelved together, and a complex system of alpha numeric classification schema was devised to allow the convenient collation of new volumes within the area occupied by older titles. The Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress classification systems accomplished two goals: they allowed for shelf expansion while still maintaining a subject relationship between adjacent titles. In order to perform this dual function a cataloger would have to make the decision of what any given title’s main subject was, and then add a bewildering set of alpha-numeric characters to accurately subdivide that main subject into what was perceived as its various aspects.

We can say with certainty that subject classification of volumes in an archival setting is no longer needed. Our bookshelves, like our manuscript storage areas, are not publicly accessible, and there is no need to physically gather together volumes of a given subject to allow for convenient browsing. Books can be assigned simple accession numbers that relate to shelf positions and stored by color, shape, size, or even chemical composition depending on the needs of a given archive. The ability to maximize shelf efficiency by the placement of similarly sized volumes mirrors the same method in which we currently store manuscript collections and record

groups, and the rejection of subject classification in favor of a simple location number saves a great deal of wasted intellectual effort in attempting to fix the main topic of a given work.

Those who would argue that subject classification is an essential part of maintaining a book collection should admit that this practice, which takes so much effort to implement and maintain, has been undertaken primarily for the convenience of browsers. Although library users have for at least the last 150 years found the serendipitous search for a book partially dependent on the luxury of walking along the shelves and reading the spines, I believe researchers of the future will be much more comfortable with surrogates to physical browsing because that will be the summation of their online experiences. We already have a preview of this behavior in the United States provided by the demise of national franchise video rental stores. Just two years ago one could enter a Blockbuster or Hollywood Video store and peruse the spines and covers gathered in broad subject categories to make a suitable selection. However, this business model has failed, and both of these retail giants declared bankruptcy in 2010. American consumers have shown a rapidly growing preference for selecting all types of entertainment media online, and businesses such as NetFlix have no physical library setting for their collections. I am using the video rental industry to illustrate the idea that contemporary information consumers are even now losing the physical browsing ethic that used to make a visit to the stacks a pleasing, leisurely excursion. You cannot expect people of the future to miss something that they will have never experienced.

Closed stacks have several advantages, control being the first and foremost. Just as the environmental conditions can be controlled, so can the accuracy of shelf order maintenance. The New York Public Library proved this decades ago when they closed their own stacks in favor of a retrieval system using human clerks. Retrieval of any given title at the New York Public Library can be measured in minutes because shelving order is never disrupted by casual browsers. Monitoring the condition of the pieces retrieved is another advantage of closed stacks, since staff is able to evaluate the structural integrity of any book before providing access.

Of course if archives assume an active role in preserving examples of the printed word, serious considerations for a very limited selection will have to be made regardless of appraisal based on evidential and intrinsic value, or the subsequent responsibility of closed-stack storage

for perpetuity. In *The Time Machine*, the end of the film finds the time-traveler disgusted that his dinner guests have dismissed his story, and after they leave his home he again mounts his machine to return to the future. Filby, his closest friend, returns to the house just as the machine departs and notices that three books are missing from the time-traveler's private library. Deducing that his friend has purposely selected the volumes to assist the Eloi in rebuilding civilization, Filby wistfully asks the question that all future archivists will have to answer, "Which three books would you have taken?"

NOTES

1. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Information Science, The University of Washington Information School, and the Syracuse School of Information Studies, are all examples of graduate programs that have jettisoned the word "library" from their titles. Calling the association of books with the library brand "disturbing," one writer has advised librarians to ape the internet's convenience to change public perceptions. Roy Tennant, "Digital Libraries: The Library Brand," *Library Journal*, 131, 1 (January, 2006): 38.

2. National Endowment for the Arts, *To Read or Not to Read; A Question of National Consequence* (Washington D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2007), 5. Ironically, this important study is only available as an "e-book" on the internet in the library where I work.

3. Jeffrey A. Young, "The Impact of Collection Weeding on the Accuracy of WorldCat Holdings," (M.A. Thesis: Kent State University, 2002).

4. Carl Posy, "The Value of an Original in the Internet Age." Lecture delivered at the Montana State University Library, Bozeman, Montana, February 28, 2012.