Collection Development and the Value of the Library

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In the last year, I've noted a number of librarians, publishers, and scholars raising significant questions about the future of book publishing. Google’s recent entry into the eBook marketplace prompts me to try to highlight several recent events and conversations that point to the need to re-conceive library collections and collection development. I want to point to a number of voices raising the issues, identify significant issues that will/could impact the future of print publishing, and sketch a possible scenario for the future.

Voices of Concern

I've suggested for a number of years that traditional collection development is rooted in a pre-Internet, print (analog) model of librarianship. It has been primarily a pedagogical tool for academic librarians. In an era before high speed data networks and easy access to information beyond a library’s physical collection, librarians worked with faculty to collect those materials that were essential to support the curriculum and research of the faculty and students. Subject specialists in libraries "vetted" the acquisitions to insure the best use of funds and to insure that students and faculty had access to high quality materials. In an economy of information scarcity, the goal of collection development was to insure that sufficient information resources for teaching, learning, and research were available in the local collection. The information economy has changed.

Scarcity of information is no longer an issue. The number of publications each year escalates rapidly. In 2006, Brian F. Lavoie and Roger C. Schonfeld report that their analysis of the OCLC database revealed that "approximately half of all books held in the system-wide collection were published after 1977." The Internet provides ready access to the journals and books traditionally vetted by librarians as well as an enormous amount of information available on the Web. And of course, student information seeking patterns have changed. OCLC’s College Student’s Perceptions of Libraries and Information Sources reports that 89% of college students begin their information searches with a search engine like Google while only 2% begin their search on a library web site. 96% of college students agree that Google provides worthwhile information while 84% agreed that library web sites provide worthwhile information. We already know that many students never come to the library. OCLC’s study also reveals that the information sources that libraries provide on their web sites aren’t as highly valued by students as the sources they are able to find via Google. Collection development is no longer an effective pedagogical tool, nor does it address the need to teach skills in critical assessment of information sources to students.

Eric Hellman suggests that in a print world, libraries’ ability to aggregate a physical collection has been perceived as a significant value in that the shared resource is perceived as a way to save money by a local community. In a digital world,

...local libraries lose their advantage in collective acquisition when books become digital because there is no longer a necessity for users to be geographically close to books. Smart publishers will want in on this action, as will other entrepreneurs. As Evan Schnittman, a senior executive at Oxford University Press told me, "Lending models of scale are coming... but I doubt
consumers will turn to libraries en masse to get their eBooks, as capitalism has a funny way of turning demand (at any price) into financial opportunity."

Eric Hellman

Tim Spalding’s recent discussion of feedback loops for eBooks on Thingology reminded me of Malcolm Gladwell’s The Tipping Point. Tim suggests that the tipping point for a shift from print to eBooks will be greatly impacted by the publishers’ business models and the cost difference between print and eBooks. That’s to say that as eBooks become more popular, the cost for publishing a book in print will likely have to be spread across fewer copies sold. If Tim is correct, and I think he is, one must ask where the tipping point is. That is, when does the price of print books become high enough that consumers who might otherwise prefer to read them in a print refuse to buy them because of the price, thus creating what Tim calls a feedback loop that makes publishing books in print no longer commercially viable. (In the fall 2010, eBooks represented about 7% of the total book market.)

My contention is that eBooks rise far above 20%, becoming the dominant book format, because the logic of ebook success has built-in feedback loops. You can call it “success breeds success” or “vicious cycles” as you like. Tim Spalding

Eli Neiburger claimed that we have already reached the tipping point in his presentation at the Library Journal sponsored EBook Summit

Part 1: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqAwj5ssU2c&feature=player_embedded

Part 2: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bd0IlKVstJg&feature=player_embedded

Neiburger differentiates between obsolescence and outmoded, claiming that while print books are not obsolete, a “circulating [physical] collection has become outmoded by the Internet.” Allowing the value of libraries to be tied to the “local copy” places the future of libraries in jeopardy.

A number of scholars, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, have been calling for major changes in scholarly communication. The American Council of Learned Societies published Crises and Opportunities: The Futures of Scholarly Publishing by Carlos J. Alonso, Cathy N. Davidson, John M. Unsworth, and Lynne Withey in 2004. NERCOMP sponsored an event in 2007 called A Day of Scholarly Communication: Developing Your Institutional Plan. And the eighth annual Scholarly Communications Institute that met in July issued a report that begins:

Current print-based models of scholarly production, assessment, and publication have proven insufficient to meet the demands of scholars and students in the twenty-first century. In the humanities, what literary scholar James Chandler calls “the predominate tenure genres” of monograph and journal articles find themselves under assault from a perfect storm of major dislocations affecting higher education. Publishers are struggling to remake
business models that are failing. Libraries strain to keep up acquisitions of print materials as the supply of and demand for digital publications escalate. The reliance of faculty on tenure and review models tied to endangered print genres leads to the disregard of innovation and new methodologies. And mobile, digitally fluent students entering undergraduate and graduate schools are at risk of alienation from the historic core of humanistic inquiry, constrained by outmoded regimes of creation and access.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick in her October 29 lecture entitled “Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy” at Boston University and her forthcoming book by the same title points to the inadequacies of the commercial publishing model to meet the needs for scholarly communication.

Side conversations at the Digital Library Federation and the Taiga-Six Forum in early November suggested that a number of libraries are moving to away from a hybrid model for libraries that assumes that libraries should collect both print and digital. Others will continue to collect print but will eliminate handling print materials in cataloging/technical services. Based on studies that indicate that the average book circulates once every 50 years, some consortia are beginning to adopt "single-copy" policies. The University of California system, for example, is considering a plan to purchase a single copy of a title for the system rather than a copy for each library in the system.

With Google's announcement of the opening of its eBook store, I downloaded the app to my iPad and within a couple minutes had also downloaded a copy of the 1881 American Publishing Company edition of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and the 1896 Harper & Brothers edition of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. (I could also have easily purchased and downloaded any number of books still protected by copyright.) The BU Libraries obviously have these and/or similar printings, in their collections, some in off-site storage. For those books published before 1923 (public domain), it is becoming increasingly difficult for me to justify the continued cost of keeping physical copies in the collection. As a user, it is hard for me to imagine why I would go to the library to retrieve a copy.

Issues that may impact Book Publishing and Libraries Collecting of Books

- Libraries ability to circulate print materials will be limited by challenges to the Doctrine of First-Sale and by the increase of the use of Digital Rights Management measures to restrict the ability to share books.

- Congress will continue to support efforts to strengthen publisher’s ability to use DRM to control access to content. Publishers will increasingly be able to publish “shrink-wrapped” content protected by license rather than copyright.

- The number of print books purchased will decline with the increase in popularity of eBooks. The cost of print books may begin to escalate at rates similar to the rates we have seen journal subscriptions rise as the number of print copies purchased requires the cost of publication be spread over fewer and fewer copies. Publishers will eventually only publish print books for niche markets.
Google, Amazon, Barnes & Nobel, Apple iTunes, etc. will continue to develop licensing models that are designed for individuals and restrict the ability to lend books.

Price discrimination and availability of eBooks will virtually eliminate the used book market.

Libraries will be forced to shift from an “ownership” to a “subscription” model.

Scholars will conclude that print publication is simply too limiting, preventing them from linking to data sets, including multi-media, etc.

Continued economic pressure on university presses may result in the collapse of one or more UPs and escalation of the trend to allow market pressures to trump editorial decisions about what books will be published. Junior faculty will be virtually shut-out of commercial (and UP) book publishing venues.

A “national digital library” may emerge providing free or low cost access to books. Such a service could allow libraries to reduce local the cost of local print management and to re-allocate physical space in library buildings to expand user services, develop learning and research centers, etc.

Print-on-demand machines will make creation of a print copy of a book immediately possible for users who desire print. http://www.ondemandbooks.com/hardware.htm

**Possible Scenario 1**

Within five years, academic publishers will cease publishing in print formats. Print books will be valued primarily as a means of creating ambiance, a user experience, or for ritual purposes. eBooks will be marketed directly to faculty and students via a contract with Google/Amazon/Apple/B&N that is negotiated by the University probably by BU Sourcing & Procurement. The eBooks that are acquired via the agreement will be governed by a “shrink-wrap” license agreement and DRM that prevents sharing. The collection budget for the libraries will be slashed to subsidize student and faculty acquisition of eBooks and journal articles that are not available via open access repositories. The Libraries will be asked to justify their value using metrics other than collections.

**Possible Scenario 2**

Within five years, a mass-digitized book corpus, such as the “national digital library” called for by Darnton or HathiTrust as proposed by Courant will provide access to the world’s books in the public domain. Free or inexpensive digital access to copyright protected books currently considered “orphaned works” will be accessible either because the US Congress has passed an “orphaned works” act, or, more likely, because of the Google Books settlement. Most print books (protected by copyright) will be accessible through services provided by regional shared print providers as suggested by Malpas. (Such a service might be created by the Boston Library Consortium.) Those books not accessible through these services (digital
or print) will be accessible through an unmediated (within defined criteria) purchase on demand system setup through Amazon or a similar online vendor. Books purchased in this way will not be cataloged or added to a permanent local collection. Access to these services will be managed by the Libraries.

Possible Scenario 3

Within five years, most research universities will establish a scholarly publishing service designed to focus on and support the publishing work of faculty within the university. All work published by such services will be digital (though POD may be an option), and in open access form. ARL libraries will be charged with managing the university publishing service in addition to “collecting” and preserving the published work of the scholars from their institutions. These publishing and preservation services may be accomplished either as single-institution operations or in consortial publishing arrangements. The publishing services will be fully supported by the university. (see Fitzpatrick)

Possible Scenario 4

Within five years, most research universities will shift to patron-driven acquisition and print-on-demand services to make immediate access to virtually all book and journal literature. Libraries will provide a print-on-demand service to allow users to print the books and articles they desire to have in print. (see Rick Anderson: http://www.katina.info/conference/video_2010_anderson.php)

References


