

Building Library Collections: The Horse Is Riding Us!

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Abstract

Unsound use of automation and digital idolatry are reducing access to research information. Technology should be the “means” not the “end” to better libraries. By understanding how digital information has been “captured” by multinational corporations, one must thread one’s way through the labyrinth of mis-information clones and data corruption to a more wholesome collection of diverse points of view. Collection building will always be labor intensive, and therefore time-consuming, because intellectual judgments are involved. Giving away selection to vendors and publishers only furthers the degradation of research and ultimately threatens not only intellectual investigation but also national security. The way forward is backward to the hard work of selecting.

Keywords : *Collection development; Collection management; Automation; Digital access; Reader’s advisor; Acquisitions; Intellectual freedom*

Introduction: Wrong Tool, Right Pew

Ralph Waldo Emerson once remarked that, “Things are in the saddle. And ride mankind.” For those institutions attempting to build better library collections the problem is not so much a lack of money as it is a lack of insight into the nature of the difficulty. Many have confused the tool for the final product and have little understanding of carpentry. Let me explain: librarians (the carpenters of building collections) must use numerous tools to build access to (and to preserve) varied stores of information, including research materials. However, one of the tools, digital technology, is fast becoming the end and not the means to better libraries. And, as such, it is reducing the effectiveness of libraries by limiting the amount and variety of information that they could provide!

In his book, *Technical Fouls: Democratic Dilemmas and Technological Change*, John Jacobsen in examining the complex analysis of the economic relationship among technology, science, and politics shrewdly points out that power refers “not only to formal political offices but to private economic and organizational resources devoted to influencing public policy

agendas and outcomes.”¹ He goes on to caution that when elite groups “capture” a technology (like when the oil industry captured the nuclear industry), it frequently results in less open discussions about the technology’s merits and implementation. (Many collection builders will remember the difficulty, especially in the 1970s, of getting information that reflected some of the negative aspects (health, environmental, economics) of the nuclear energy field.

Content Advocates

At present, the problem is the capture of “digital information” by Big Publishing and its international corporate owners. Content (and much of its research) has been captured, commodified, and its access controlled. As John Perry Barlow stated in a recent presentation to Western Council State Librarians (November 2002), “Librarians are the content advocates.” The problem, though, is librarians aren’t doing a very good job advocating.

While the 1990s saw the United States (and most of the world) enjoying the greatest concentration of wealth ever in history, the amount of the U.S. libraries’ share (in terms of purchasing power) for adding print materials to its collections actually decreased. Numerous authors have detailed the conglomeration, consolidation, and homogenization of the publishing industry worldwide. The outcome has been a commodification of information that has no regard for the public interest or the commonweal. The publishing industry, as part of a multinational New World Order, has “captured” the new technology of “digitized information”.

In pursuit of content that presents as many sides of an issue as possible, it is becoming increasingly clear that painstaking time and effort will be required to circumvent the vested interests that are daily exerting a stranglehold on intellectual inquiry, scholarly investigation and informed opinion. Too few publishing enterprises are in control of too much content (or what often masquerades as “content”). The desperate nature of the situation becomes evident when, in the 1990s, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) found itself compelled to foster the existence of the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) to promote “competition” in scholarly communication while simultaneously increasing access to information.

ARL realized that without drawing a line in the research sand, the health of intellectual inquiry would be significantly stunted. Big Publishing, however, had no intention of letting digital publishing go the way of print pub-

1 John Jacobsen, *Technical Fouls : Democratic Dilemmas and Technological Change* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), p. 4.

lishing with its historic concepts of copyright and “fair use”. With firm backing by the American Association of Publishers, Congress passed the incredibly restrictive Digital Millennium Copyright Act (1998), which is already having a deleterious impact on research, especially in the STM fields (Science, Technology and Medicine). GladysAnn Wells cuts right to the heart of the matter in her insightful and important observation that “Currently, we lose many digitally born documents when their creators decide they lack sufficient further market value. At this time, libraries often cannot obtain the legal or the technical means to make even one preservation copy. Therefore, in the digital environment, short-term profitability determines the longevity of born digital information that our children might need. Without a preservation copy the information will not exist.”²

Monopoly Owns Government and Science?

Big Publishing has been tireless (utilizing its stables of lawyers, accountants and political contributions) in redefining what is public domain, bypassing historic copyright laws’ intent and moving the agenda to digitized information, over which they hope to have a virtual monopoly. Through price controls, aggregate selling, and licensing agreements (many of which will provide “print” copies **only** if you purchase digital ones) they have successfully gained data control over wide swaths of content—especially in the sciences! Under the newly passed copyright conventions, licensing often permits publishers to determine how libraries are used and what information they can obtain. By seeking to control digital information and its production (and limiting the development of print collections by increasing prices astronomically on print materials), they are increasingly able to circumvent the more public-friendly copyright laws affecting printed materials. Carla J. Stoffle sums it up: “This market has acted to increase prices and limit access to information. The result is that small publishers are often forced out of business. It is the same market that is trying to control the Internet with restrictive copyright policies, licensing restrictions, which inappropriately attempt to control who can use our libraries, and encryption devices to identify and potentially bill users for even viewing information. By breaking this market monopoly, we can ensure broad access to information.”³

2 GladysAnn Wells, *Understanding Electronic Contracting : The Impact of Regulations, New Laws & New Agreements* by Practising Law Institute Chair, Raymond T. Nimmer (Intellectual Property Course Handbook Series, Number G-697), p. 964.

3 Carla J. Stoffle, “Social equity and empowerment in the Digital Age : A place for Activist Librarians,” *The Changing Culture of Libraries*, ed. Renee Feinberg (Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland, 2001), p. 106.

The Problem with “It”

While librarians have sought ever more ingenious ways to wring more efficiencies out of the shrinking library dollar by forming consortial groups with, hopefully, more purchasing power, by joining such preservation initiatives as JSTOR, and by supporting the efforts of SPARC, this Orwellian dilemma has also been aided and abetted by the library profession because it has regularly confused information technology (IT) with content.

Jim Dwyer recalls an ALA conference program where one of the participants remarked that, “Library X spent a million dollars on an automation system so it could circulate its book.”⁴ This confusion about its mission to provide and protect, and its “capture” by Big Publishing is not one that the library profession wants to hear, let alone admit. The Trojan Horse (and the one that is riding librarians and other information professionals) is called Digital Access. Librarians too often serve this new technology rather than the “art of selection of content regardless of format”. The very heart of librarianship is the “acquisition of the right materials”.

Technology Uber Alles

Interestingly, the rapid deployment of IT (fed by the needs of the elite who captured the new technology for an infrastructure to carry out their designs) elevated a new class of technician, not only in libraries, who are much more enthusiastic about digital “upgrades” than they are about the intellectual content purveyed. This new group has moved with alacrity into major administrative positions often becoming the Chief Information Officer. In addition, administrators and governing bodies (seduced by digital fantasies that whisper “the end of those expensive libraries”) excite themselves into believing that the Internet and digital technologies are the fast track to information nirvana. Thus, this leadership group (and its choir of technical supplicants) is more willing to settle for buying value-added, fast access impermanent data than investing in content for the long term.

Unfortunately, these technology-seduced administrators often have too little interest in intellectual diversity, or any ideas contrary to their fundamentalist belief in the role of digital information as the new philosopher stone. Again, it was not coincidental, that at the same time that there was an unprecedented economic boom, libraries suffered an economic retrenchment—with the notable exception of computer technology applications! The old infrastructure that was basically supportive of the historic balance

4 Jim Dwyer, “Books are for use? Keeping the faith in readings,” *The Acquisitions Librarian*, 25(2001) : 65.

achieved in copyright law and inimical to the total commodification of information was being replaced with one that was more in line with the wishes of the new controlling elite.

Jim Dwyer is just one of many who have written about the incredible budget cuts that libraries suffered over the past three decades, noting that “The seventies also saw the widespread implementation of library automation systems. Salespeople were sometimes able to bamboozle administrators into believing that library automation would save them money. Given the initial and ongoing costs of systems, some libraries found themselves reducing acquisitions budgets or laying off staff in order to pay for automation.”⁵

And of course, most of those acquisition budgets were never restored. Since Big Publishing now manufactures most new information in a different format (one that they control significantly more than they did print materials), and our national love affair with the “easy” and packaged (fired by Big Publishing’s cousin, Big Media) has convinced society of the necessity for “progressing” to a digital world, it only remains for the print troglodytes to die out. The automation infrastructure has been put in place at the cost of uncompromised research and print information (while there has been a decrease in the number of books purchased by libraries, there has been an increase in the number available) so that digitized information can be sold to the highest bidders and, more ominously, so that research, especially in the STM markets, can be more easily directed where the global corporations dictate. Remember that, “Scientists and, increasingly, physicians are ‘employees’ who rarely control the conditions under which they work, let alone the purposes to which their research eventually will be put.”⁶

Outside the Digital Box

Librarians must learn to work outside of their comfort zone and take up the battle for content (including assistance in birthing it) across the widest spectrum that present formats purvey—including, of course, digital! We must re-dedicate ourselves to the hard and time-consuming work of content selection, the prioritization of content expenditures within budgetary parameters (delaying, if necessary, automation and upgrades in favor of content), and preservation in all formats; or the independent research agenda and our democratic institutions will be further downsized. Nancy Kranich, past president of the American Library Association, recognizing Big Publishing’s deplorable monopoly on ideas, implores us to build balanced collections by “heavily investing in alternatives to the mainstream press. It is time we rec-

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

6 *Op. Cit.*, John Jacobsen, p. 2.

ognize our own values and ensure that we have diverse collections that truly represent the full spectrum of published opinion and thought.”⁷

There can be no doubt that we have the most data-rich culture ever, but it is arrogantly presumptuous, and ultimately a dangerous intellectual gambit, to equate an abundance of data with a wealth of content. Knowledge, let alone wisdom, demands content not just data. The “paperless library”, so far, is data rich and imagination poor. Critical thinking will not survive in this type of institution: its degradation is already discernible in the sciences. As Einstein reputedly once said, Imagination is more important than knowledge.

Understand that using a computer intelligently to access information requires substantial skills in critical thinking about how the information world is created, maintained, augmented; about who chooses the data presented and what are their likely motives and agendas. Many librarians are re-discovering the value-laden role of readers’ advisor, and the need to help people find the best content, not simply the fastest delivered. Most computer users have no understanding of the global information industry and multinational groups who have a vested interest in determining just what content is made available to the mass of digital supplicants, nor do they understand the content frailty of the unregulated internet. Librarians have the accent on the wrong syllable: the evaluation of documents must precede access!

The great librarian and scholar, Bill Katz, recently lamented the hoodwinking of the public’s trust by the information industry infrastructure. Having commodified digital information to make money, they have duped the public into thinking that access to computerized data will render libraries useless and reading a quaint habit of the pre-digital age. Katz, in bemoaning this all too calculated dumbing-down process, warned that, “Computers for the majority are masters, not servants. The masters are too rapidly substituting casual bits of data for knowledge.”⁸

If the *raison detre* for libraries is to provide the widest possible spectrum of content, given financial parameters, to its clients, then libraries, and librarians, are failing their mission. Content selection has received less and less attention. The emphasis on 24/7 speed and the expectation of immediate access has dulled policy makers into confusing speed for accuracy, packaging for content and ease of ordering for effective use of funds. Because we have allowed ourselves to be “captured” by big publishing, we expend over 90 percent of our budgets on only their point of view (and it’s a very

7 Nancy Kranich, “A Question of Balance: The role of libraries in providing alternatives to the mainstream media,” *Alternative Library Literature : A Biennial Anthology*, eds. Sanford Berman and James P. Danky (Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002), p. 111.

8 Bill Katz, “Introduction : Remembrance of things past and future,” *The Acquisitions Librarian*, 25 (2001) : 2.

narrow one, indeed, representing approximately only 10 percent of what book/journal presses produce). Charles Willett, founder of Counterpoise, relates that, “Most librarians don’t even know about the other presses, let alone how to track information about them and their publication lists.”⁹

Outsourcing Content

Librarians delegate a majority of their selecting to library vendors through approval plan services, database licensing, and standing orders. In fact, librarians have been almost systematically disburdening themselves of the tasks of collection building for nearly three decades now because it “takes so much time”. And, with the arrival of automation and digital information, the transfer of building library collections to others is almost complete! David Bishop, Director of a major U.S. Research Library, commented: “given the nature of electronic resources being leased, not purchased, and both the economic and practical advantages of networked, jointly-owned materials, directors have already lost control of their collections, they just don’t know it yet.”¹⁰

The new business model in Big Publishing is commodification and control of all data and information, especially in the STM fields where the most money can be made and future technologies “captured.” The only major problem is that the high prices of information are impeding access, not to mention the advancement of knowledge, but this is of no real concern to the for-profit enterprises. It should be a concern, though, of higher education since it is rapidly becoming absorbed into the business model by refusing to get back to the basics of unfettered intellectual inquiry. For some disciplines, where there is no commercial return, scholarship is either dying or drying up, while in the sciences the sellout is more advanced! No less a personage than Clifford Lynch, Executive Director of the Center for Networked Information, has been decrying the fact that “much of the information content we are now licensing resides in silos, which cannot be integrated—mainly because the organizations that own it do not want to see it integrated. Finding ways to achieve integration of such proprietary scholarly information will be one of our major challenges.”¹¹ Ironically, librarians and library organizations are often discounted as shrill when they take their profound

9 Ron Chepesiuk, “Charles Willett : An Alternative American Voice in International Librarianship,” *Alternative Library Literature, 1998/99 : A Biennial Anthology*, eds. Sanford Berman, & James P. Danky (Jefferson, N.C : McFarland & Co, Inc., 2001), pp. 26-27.

10 Sheila S. Inter, “Impact of the Internet on collection development: where are we now? Where are we headed? An informal study,” *Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services*, 25 (2001) : 312.

11 Ross Atkinson, “ARL Conference on Collections and Access for the 21st Century Scholar : A forum to explore the roles of the Research Library: A brief report,” *Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services*, 26 (2002) : 165.



concerns about protecting content and learning to state halls and capitals—not to mention the Washington, D.C. representatives of the people!

Research Data Corruption

In the sciences (STM), the pressures of commodification are leading to more publications being contaminated by data corruption, largely because of the significant financial stakes investigators have in the research outcome. William Rosenblum, a research neuropathologist, laments that “Inevitably, pressures to produce more and publish more lead to the formation of larger research teams; so, too, does the legitimate desire to answer scientific questions and the indisputable fact that modern scientific questions are often too complex to be answered by one person’s tools. But reliance on larger and larger teams lead to an increasing inability to detect fraud and control sloppy data gathering.”¹² Missing data, poor data collection, and outright falsification of data are on the rise. *U.S. News & World Report*, in a Special Investigative Report, stated that, “Arthur M. Horowitz, a respected regulatory consultant to medical companies, estimates that research fraud and misconduct occur in up to 5 percent of all trials.”¹³

Conclusion

When Big Publishing and its economic elites captured the new technology of digital information, it focused its efforts on controlling scientific publishing. While Western science has been a powerful contributor to the advancement and betterment of society, in general, the present capture of digital information by Big Business and the New World Order is stifling investigative inquiry and casting a dangerous pall over future advancements in intellectual thought. Already science is so compromised that scholarly communication is being imperiled and the outcome can only be a dire one to those who prefer democratic societies with diverse viewpoints.

Building quality libraries that contain as much diverse content as possible so that intellectual inquiry can be pursued will never be an inexpensive procedure, but if investigative inquiry is left in the hands of commodification the outcome will not only be contaminated research, but also a dehumanized and less democratic social order. Both the marketplace (privatization) and government (for the public good) have mutually beneficial roles; however, when you come to issues of public safety (e.g., airport security, identity theft, a living wage, and intellectual research), the profit motive

12 William I. Rosenblum, “What is an Author? The responsibilities of Authorship,” *Academe*, 83 (November-December 1992) : 34.

13 Kit R. Roane, “Replacement Parts,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 133 : 4 (July 29,2002) : 57.

doesn't work. If the present conditions persist, the intellectual Maginot Line that we are constructing will be more of a threat to national security, as other parts of the world slip behind our arrogant fortifications to pursue "our suppressed areas of research inquiry", than the wealth being generated by this present monopoly could possibly ever be worth.



