Intelligent Design and the Evolution of American Research Library Collections

A Personal Reflection

By Hendrik Edelman

This paper presents a personal overview of the development of collection development and management as a specialization within the practice of librarianship. It gives particular attention to the activities among academic librarians and in academic libraries in the 1960s and 1970s that led to the creation of special interest groups within the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services.

As this conference is dedicated to looking toward the future of collection development and management, now seems an appropriate time to take another good look at the forces that have shaped American research library collections. Are they the product of careful planning, or did they evolve as the results of a series of random occurrences spurred by environmental influences? Are there past or recent trends to take into account in planning for the future?

The title of this introductory paper, alluding to contemporary debates in other segments of American society, is not to be taken too seriously. No acts of God to be reported here, although I can recall many devilish tricks from faculty, librarians, and university administrators trying to thwart the progress of building collections. The topic of this paper is really the evolution and accomplishments of our profession, particularly in the collection development field—a celebration of an intelligent and industrious profession.

I will talk about how collection development emerged as a professional responsibility in the second part of the twentieth century, and how the profession has empowered itself through research, methodology, documentation, and education. I will limit myself to the American experience. The profession in Europe developed differently, although in recent years there is much similarity. I also will limit myself to research libraries. Having taught general collection development for twenty-five years with great conviction and satisfaction, I am still convinced that much of the research results apply across the spectrum of the profession. However, we must recognize that the impetus for collection development interest and innovation really came from the research library community.

Academic Libraries Prior to World War II

If we are to celebrate our accomplishments today, it is good to remember it was not always that way.[1] Until World War II, library collection development was

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in the hands of library directors, with considerable, albeit very uneven, faculty input and effort. In several cases, the university president or the graduate school dean played an active role. Faculty recruitment and retention was the highest competitive priority, and, very often, library collections and the promise of acquisitions were the lure. There were, of course, some formidable library directors, such as William Warner Bishop, university librarian at the University of Michigan, 1915–41, who paid much attention to buying books, periodicals, and collections and soliciting gifts. In departmental and professional libraries, the faculty played the dominant role. The library profession, small as it was, was mainly concerned and identified with cataloging and classification.

With the decline in purchasing power in the 1930s also came concern for the collections. Library surveys in various parts of the country tried to assess the collections and explore the potential for resource sharing. Robert Downs, dean of library administration at the University of Illinois, 1915–41, developed the standard technique for collection description, an art that regrettably was lost for some generations.

The same concern for the fate of the collections was expressed in the meetings of the newly founded Association of Research Libraries (ARL), established in 1932, as well as in such scholarly societies as the American Historical Association. Studies intended to facilitate regional and national cooperation were commissioned, one of which, by the indefatigable and ubiquitous bibliographer and typographer, Douglas C. McMurtrie, has yet to be studied in detail.[2] No action was taken until 1942, when the foundation of the Farmington Plan, a national attempt to coordinate collection building, was laid.[3]

Academic Libraries after World War II

The end of World War II marked the beginning of the great expansion of American higher education. New universities were founded, and they needed collections, while existing libraries needed upgrading. The need for librarians to manage this process brought an influx of new talent to our libraries. Several came out of the intelligence branch of the armed forces, such as Robert Taylor (who eventually became dean of the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University, 1972–83) and Fred Kilgour (who founded the Online Computer Library Center OCLC), but many were well-educated soldiers, for whom a quick library degree offered great promise. David Kaser (university librarian at Cornell, 1968–73), John P. McDonald (dean of University of Connecticut Libraries, 1963–87) and Carl Jackson (director of libraries at Pennsylvania State University, 1966–72) come to mind. All started their careers as acquisitions librarians and quickly rose through the ranks to become the new breed of library directors.

At the same time, the talent of several Jewish exiles from Germany and Austria were added to the ranks. Rudolph Hirsch at the University of Pennsylvania and, especially, Felix Reichmann at Cornell greatly influenced the ambitious foreign acquisitions and were able to translate faculty needs into a more cohesive program. The model followed was still the one set by the larger and older American libraries, which were, in turn, heavily influenced by German academic libraries of the nineteenth century. Retrospective purchases were boosted by a large-scale reprinting program started during the war. Acquisitions and serial departments were the place to be. The money was there, and faculty knew it. Dorothy B. Keller, head of the acquisitions department at the University of California at Berkeley in the 1950s and ’60s, at one time had a staff of seventy.

The new programs also spawned a group of ambitious, well-organized booksellers in Western Europe who supplied both new and antiquarian books and periodicals. With the Library of Congress leading the way, book dealers developed the capability of blanket orders, based on their national bibliographies. This allowed a more orderly flow of new materials in languages that libraries often were not staffed to handle. The Library of Congress became even more prominent as a pacesetter with the establishment of Public Law 480, National Program for Acquisition and Cataloging, as well as other international cooperative programs between libraries and booksellers.

The need for more international library staff became apparent in the 1950s, when the United States government, under the National Defense Education Act, began to fund faculty and students in newly established university centers for various area programs, notably in Asian, Eastern European, and Latin American studies. Often starting as catalogers with special language expertise, several librarians also became bibliographical specialists, and soon the major libraries had a corps of bibliographers for each of the programs. In these new area programs, faculty involvement was considerable, and many times took place in the form of overseas buying trips. Large amounts of material from all over the world entered United States libraries, often without much selectivity. There was no previous bibliographical model available. This was a new territory with new rules. At this time, faculty participation in collection development for the general library collections was waning, partly because there were few rewards for the amount of work involved, and partly because the new generation of faculty members was often no longer conversant with the bibliography of their fields.

It is not surprising that some library directors were beginning to be concerned about the lack of oversight over these large and expensive programs. Collection development did not fit in the traditional library administrative model. It was not yet recognized as a legitimate professional

occupation. Nominally, collection development was still the domain of the faculty. Technical and public services positions were well established. At Cornell, Felix Reichmann, in recognition of his work, carried both technical services and collection development titles for a while, but that was unique. Some libraries had established the position of university bibliographer as coordinator.

The Emergence of Collection Development in the 1960s and 1970s

Here is where I insert myself into the story. I had started working for Martinus Nijhoff in The Hague in 1958, and was sent out to the United States as their sales representative for new and antiquarian books and periodicals in 1961. I traveled throughout the United States and Canada for four years (four months each year in the fall) and became familiar with library directors, acquisitions librarians, bibliographers, and influential faculty members. When David Kaser, then library director at Vanderbilt University, learned through the grapevine that I was interested in change, he invited me to become the first university bibliographer at the Joint University Library in Nashville. I arrived in 1967 with the assignment to wrest away faculty control of selection and build a more systematic program.

Shortly afterwards, David Kaser succeeded Steve McCarthy as university librarian at Cornell. His first concern was replacing the retiring Felix Reichmann, whose reputation with the faculty remained stellar. I became the lucky choice, and I moved to Ithaca in 1970. Those were challenging days at Cornell, with the presidency discredited and the faculty badly split over the university's response to student unrest. Olin Library was firebombed in my first week of work. The new administration was faced with rebuilding confidence and a shortage of funds. The library expenses, notably those for acquisitions, came under university administration scrutiny. The need for increased accountability became apparent, and Kaser tried to bring more sophisticated management techniques to the organization. I was in need of help.

For several years, the heads of technical services in the larger research libraries had been meeting at American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conferences and Midwinter Meetings to discuss common interests. To my surprise, there were several important collection development issues on their agenda. While I worked well enough with my Cornell technical services colleague Ryburn Ross, I nevertheless felt that I should be at least present. When I voiced my frustration in the ALA corridors to Helen Welch Tuttle, a long-time friend and then associate university librarian for technical services at Princeton, she suggested that I simply convene my own group and take control of the collection development agenda—and so it happened. I sent invitations to the top fifty or so libraries and eagerly awaited response. About eight gathered at our first meeting at the 1971 ALA Annual Conference. The other universities had no one to send, but we were an eager group in attendance at the first meeting. Word about our agenda quickly spread, and, by the 1972 Midwinter Meeting, there were approximately twenty-five participants, including some library directors.

With strong pressure from Harvard's Gordon Buchanan, the earlier mentioned Farmington Plan became our first concern. It soon became clear that there was no longer interest in the program and that we should recommend that ARL officially declare it no longer relevant. The program had never worked well and was largely superseded by the Library of Congress's blanket order program, which was being replicated by many larger libraries. The old guard at ARL was not happy with the young upstarts, but we did represent the major libraries and had support from our directors. Discussion about the reasons for the demise had the most stimulating and far-reaching impact.[4] There was agreement that the lack of evaluation tools had led to all the confusion, and that no other cooperative program could and should operate without such tools.

The question was how to address the lack of collection evaluation tools and techniques. Micha Namenwirth from Berkeley suggested that we invite to our next meeting his colleague LeRoy Ortopan, a cataloger at Berkeley who had developed an elaborate shelflist measurement scheme (first used in 1966 at Northwestern and Wisconsin and later at Berkeley) with a standardized breakdown of the major LC classes. His scheme was adopted, and the decision was made to produce a collective edition, including the data of all the participating libraries—the first national shelflist count.[5] Library automation had already advanced enough to produce it efficiently. Now we had a tool for collection analysis and comparison and a method to monitor growth, albeit with many faults.

Simultaneously, a small group of us, dubbed quickly the collection development "mafia," had infiltrated and taken over the leadership of the ALA Resources and Technical Services Division's (RTSD; now the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services [ALCTS]) Resources Section Collection Development Committee to work on the rest of the agenda. There we committed ourselves to preparing a series of collection development and evaluation manuals, bringing together the best of our professional knowledge and practice, and organizing a series of ALA programs to introduce the topics to the profession. The culmination of all these efforts was the first collection development preconference in June 1977 in Detroit, sponsored by the Collection Development Committee of the RTSD Resources Section; papers presented at this preconference were published in *Library Resources & Technical Services*.[6]

Meanwhile, at Cornell, pressure continued by the university administration to justify continuing acquisitions budgets. The 1972 dollar devaluation hit very hard everywhere,

and we were showing deficits that could not be addressed without good plans. The first efforts of serial titles cancellations began to take their political toll around the country. Unfortunately and erroneously, the blame was laid on the publishers rather than on the lack of appropriate funding, and the off-and-on, thirty-year war with scientific, technical, and medical publishers has taken an unfortunate toll on the library's credibility. Meanwhile, David Kaser had left to teach in the graduate library school at Indiana University, his home state, and the university was unable to recruit a suitable replacement. Gormly Miller, a senior and respected long-time library staff member was appointed, and he and I tried to develop a strategy to increase library credibility with the university administration, which was simultaneously changing presidents. To give a flavor of the atmosphere at the time: our provost, a physicist and a respected gentleman, declared that in the formula of library efficiency, the number of volumes should be in the denominator. More acquisition funds would lead to more books and subscriptions, and thus a need for more catalogers and, ultimately, more space.

We approached the Mellon Foundation, which had been funding library projects in private universities, and proposed to do a thorough study of the Cornell collection development processes in the hope that the lessons learned would be applicable in other research libraries. We established a project plan and an outside advisory committee, and went to work. At the time, Cornell had made some splendid appointments of young and energetic librarians, and they proved ready for the experience. In what was probably one of the better outcomes, we tried to apply the cumulative knowledge then available in the staff seminar on collection development. The ultimate results were published in two reports. The first report, written by Dan Hazen and myself, was positive and optimistic.[7] The second report, prepared by Gormly Miller after I left Cornell and the project was complete, had a much more conservative tone.[8] I had left Cornell and the project for Rutgers by that time. The grant, however, had an unforeseen by-product with unfortunate, long-term implications. I had used the Mellon funds to replace myself in the day-to-day selection process in Olin Library with three part-time bibliographers, all of whom were already on the staff. When I left and the grant was concluded, the salary line was gone as well. It took Cornell a decade before the next assistant director for collection development, Ross Atkinson, was appointed.

Significant Developments with Lasting Impact

Several more important developments took place in the 1970s with considerable consequences for the profession. First was the emergence of collection management (decisions about collection on hand) as a much-needed, additional component of the collection development process. The profession began to take a closer look at what had been wrought during the times of the great expansion. Space had become a universal as well as a Cornell issue. Unable to convince the university administration to provide for more traditional library space, Cornell designed and built a major storage facility, requiring a process of triage in the stacks, which took a great deal of planning.

Collection management issues also spawned a series of doctoral and other studies, using the techniques of operations research to better predict and respond to user demands. A significant corpus of knowledge was acquired, but, unfortunately, not all the wisdom has filtered down to the operating levels. The issue of copy versus title depth is still not resolved on some campuses. Studies of patron failure in the stacks also were convincing in theory, but have not always been followed up in practice. The sophisticated bibliographical databases and the improved delivery techniques, two of the most important requirements for effective library cooperation, have led to an explosion of interlibrary loan and document delivery programs, greatly improving service to library patrons and decreasing some pressure on local acquisitions. The old adage "build it and they will come" was being proven false in many libraries, where increasingly underused collections and dwindling faculty interest were prevalent. Taking the cues developed in our great public libraries, research libraries have now joined the ranks of library marketers, with an array of educational and informational public programs on their campuses to increase knowledge and use of their collections and services.

One of the bigger collection management issues was the apparent physical decline of the collections, due to use, environmental conditions, and paper acidity. This is not the time to review all the considerations of the preservation wave in the 1970s through the 1990s, funded largely by Congress, after effective lobbying by ARL leadership and historians. The professional knowledge about physical preservation and restoration acquired since that time is deeply impressive, and it is now an integral part of the research library program. Preservation microfilming, however, is another story. Controversial from the beginning, it raised serious issues of physical destruction of original copies, storage and retrieval of microform masters, and coordination among participants of the many projects, none of which have ever been satisfactorily resolved. Microforms, projected as an interim solution when introduced in the 1930s, will be with us for a long time to come.

Perhaps the most controversial question about microfilming was the decision-making process. Who decides which books or periodicals should be filmed and what the selection criteria are? Two schools of thought emerged. The first was the bibliographical faction. During the unprecedented American Imprint Inventory project, directed by McMurtrie between 1938 and 1942, some ten thousand American libraries were canvassed, resulting in more than fifteen million slips with bibliographical information and

location indication.[9] The statistics proved overwhelmingly that unique copies of American imprints were distributed among hundreds of libraries, rather than in the ten largest research libraries. Adherents to this bibliographical theory, including myself, tried to make the case to those in power, essentially a small group of library directors surrounding Jim Haas, president of the Council for Library Resources in Washington, 1978–91, that in order to achieve the goal of preserving America's bibliographical past, a systematic effort should be undertaken to preserve, year by year, volume by volume, America's cultural heritage, combined with a good evaluation process. The national newspaper project, organized and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), has been based on this concept. It has been very successful in reaching deep into the corners of the country, state by state, region by region, to ferret out unique newspaper files. The fierce criticism by conservationists about the resulting local decisions by libraries to discard or sell their hard copy when film became available, is justified. In retrospect, it is clear that the NEH project should have had a conservation component.

The other school of thought, composed largely of powerful library directors, subscribed to the so-called Great Library theory: Give the money to the largest libraries, let them decide what is best, and all will be taken care of. In the discussions leading up the Farmington Plan, the same debate took place without a firm decision being made. This discussion is taking place today once again as we contemplate the Google and Yahoo! initiatives. The Great Library theorists won the preservation microfilming battle; we will shall see what happens in the digital process. I am sure it will be on this conference's agenda, and I urge you to seriously consider the arguments of bibliographers and conservationists. It may be the profession's last chance to accomplish a comprehensive and systematic conversion project, based on international cooperation, with each country taking responsibility for its own heritage, even if many of their unique copies reside in American libraries.

One of the most significant and exciting developments of the past twenty-five years has been the incorporation of the archival profession and its practices moving into mainstream librarianship. As research libraries became more and more actively interested in collecting source material, the processing techniques used by archivists became a necessity. Once again, there is a Cornell connection. While I was serving as chair of the board of the Research Library Group, Cornell's Tom Hickerson, associate university librarian for information technologies and special collections, and his archival colleagues developed the compatible bibliographical standard that allowed the integration of archival records with those of books and periodicals. It is most rewarding to observe the great impact that these merged files and programs have had on the research and teaching community as well as on the profession in many of our universities.

Conclusion

Recognizing the rich and diverse talents as well as the accumulated experience and wisdom of the professional collection developers present for this conference, I am confident that the future of our great research library collections is in splendid hands. The dilemmas, the challenges, and the stakes are substantial indeed, and I look forward to your guidance.

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