



PRESENT AND FUTURE ISSUES FOR SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Michèle Valerie Cloonan and Sidney E. Berger

The 1987 *Library Trends* issue¹ provides a useful starting point for considering some present and future issues for special collections. We hope that some of these, which we identify here, may offer fodder for future editors of and contributors to *RBML*. The *Library Trends* issue was devoted entirely to rare books and manuscripts. The opening article by Sidney E. Berger, “What is So Rare . . . : Issues in Rare Books and Special Collections” (pp. 9-22), discusses the primary concerns of rare books and manuscript librarians a dozen years ago. The world has changed in many ways since then, yielding new issues, yet some of the issues of those days have always been—and will always be—of deep concern. There will always be a focus on the basics of librarianship (not just for special collections): acquisitions, cataloging, funding, security, access, scholarship, preservation and conservation, space, and so on. Added to these are the higher-tech issues of digitization, new methods for conservation, innovative approaches to bibliographic scholarship, the creation of online finding aids, expanding approaches to cataloging that include the description and preservation of digital and other new formats, legal issues concerned with electronic information, scanning materials for remote access and preservation, new expanded audiences, the education of the information specialists of the future, and so on.

Michèle Valerie Cloonan is Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles. Sidney E. Berger is Head of Special Collections, Special Collections Library, University of California, Riverside; e-mail: sidney.berger@ucr.edu.

In fact, this last topic is partly at the root of one of the major concerns of the profession: What will libraries look like in the future, and, based on an “accurate” answer to this question, what kind of education and training must there be for tomorrow’s librarians? Cloonan’s 1995 *RBML* article, “The Future (Imperfect) of Special Collections and Library School Education,”² painted a rather pessimistic view of library and information science (LIS) education based on the then recent rash of program closures. The general outlook for LIS programs has improved, with many programs expanding. But in one key respect, Cloonan’s prognosis was correct: the number of programs offering courses in bibliography and rare book librarianship has dwindled to fewer than a dozen (such as those at Indiana, UCLA, SUNY—Albany, Texas, and Catholic University, to name just five).³ Archives has fared far better. Archival skills are applicable to a variety of environments, both traditional venues and with respect to digital asset management and electronic records. But most archival programs do not include a bibliography/rare book component.

At the same time that rare book offerings are dwindling in MLS programs, librarians continue to find employment in a wide variety of settings, including museums. While historically museums have excelled at the exhibition and interpretation of their collections, the pressures to organize and disseminate images of their collections on the Web⁴ have made them call upon LIS graduates to organize the images and design information retrieval systems.

With the “object orientation” that special collections librarians have, we can expect to see many synergistic museum/library collaborations in the future. However, we will continue to need venues like Rare Book School at the University of Virginia to provide courses in traditional as well as emerging subject areas. And professionals will need refresher courses throughout their careers.

We are only beginning to develop the conceptual framework for the new archive/museum/library world, but the frequency with which we now use the terms “cultural heritage” and “cultural heritage information” demonstrates the beginning of a shift in our thinking.

What we are suggesting is that the present (and future) state of our profession will necessarily be an amalgam of multiple worlds: the world of books as artifacts and historical documents, housed in museums, libraries, archives, preservation societies, and other institutions, and the world of cyber-information (which may not be viewed as institution specific). We cannot ignore either or we will be doing a major disservice to the profession.

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So, what are the issues? Has the world of Rare Books and Special Collections management changed appreciably in the last dozen years?

In some respects the answer is no. Books are still being produced in record numbers. Libraries get bigger every year. Predictions that the library of the future will be solely a virtual world are unfounded and short-sighted—even embarrassing. Libraries will continue to add books and manuscripts to their collections for generations to come. Hence, the traditional concerns will remain: How will they be able to afford these? Where will these be stored? How will they be conserved? How will the cataloging of the future differ from that of today? How will libraries encourage donors to give books, manuscripts, and money? Will we be able to keep security systems ahead of increasingly sophisticated thieves? How will collection development continue to tie its efforts to researcher and other user needs? What are the legal issues concerning acquisition of gifts, literary and republishing rights, copying, reformatting, access, and so forth? (Not to mention the cyber-law issues.) How will the world of the bookseller/vendor continue to affect our lives? Should items be loaned out? What is the safest and best way to put on exhibitions? Should we weed from the collection? How shall we educate future librarians/information specialists? and should they be considered faculty? staff? or something else?

In some respects, the answer to the question (Has this world changed appreciably in the last dozen years?) is an emphatic yes. Back in 1987 we could just barely conceive of libraries without the word *library* in their titles; libraries without card catalogs—even old ones not being added to; research done increasingly at a computer terminal; communication of all kinds (book searches, bibliographic control, contact with scholars all over the world; simple and complex searches for materials; inter-office, intra-campus, inter-institution, and international communication available instantly at one's fingertips) that take up an increasing part of the day of those who run the "libraries"; and perhaps the most startling of all promises, the possibility of true universal bibliographical control.

To be sure, that last promise, not even on the horizon in 1987, is still a long way off. But we have seen computers and the world of online information burst forth in their glory in the last few years, with supercomputers with seemingly endless capacities offering databases of library holdings throughout the world, supplemented by instant access through various kinds of searches (key word, name, date, format, medium, etc.). Scanning is getting more and more sophisticated, with the promise of accurate OCR just around

the corner. Machines that transcribe from oral sources already exist and await "perfection." And can we achieve reliable, long-term preservation of all media, whether physical or ethereal?

Electronic information is dynamic, inspiring scholars and fiction writers to approach writing and publishing in new ways. We no longer need to write in a linear stream, and we no longer publish only in a print-based world. The process of refereeing scholarly work is already changing in the electronic publishing environment. How will these changes affect what we acquire and how we acquire it? the uses of special collections? How will the resources which we need to provide information to our users change?⁵

The information specialist of the future needs to know these things. So current education in the field must prepare not only "librarians" but also those who work in museums, in the field of film and television, and in other cultural heritage environments. It is clear that narrowing the focus of a School of Information Studies to the traditional curricula of "Library School" students is short-sighted and unproductive.

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As we have noted, some things in the profession have not changed, and there is no sign that they will for some time. Items from our collections are still being stolen and mutilated, so more sophisticated security systems (and more money for them), along with efficient international reporting of the problems, will always be a priority. Though at present the economy has improved, libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies must continue to strive to receive a significant portion of the "new wealth" that is around, perhaps with innovative relations with development officers both within and outside the individual departments. Libraries, archives, museums, historical societies, and the like are expensive institutions to run, and those assigned to their funding must continue to find new sources for support and collaboration.

In the area of acquisition, the burden has never been greater, considering that more books than ever before are being produced, and they are joined by Internet-based and new digital media. Many of these newer media are ephemeral and fugitive and the preservation issues for them are complex. The most pressing issue is to develop effective strategies for dealing with obsolete information technologies. (No, emulation programs are not a panacea.⁶) What risks are we taking by committing our collective memory to digital technology? In organizing the 1998 *Time & Bits Conference*, the Getty Center organizers brought together many professions, businesses,

and non-profit organizations to consider these issues. Many more such gatherings will need to take place to insure collaboration among these communities. Then some of these problems may be resolved by all of the stakeholders.⁷

We must find answers for the questions, How can an institution maximize its use of funds and offer its clientele the greatest number of items that they need? And how do we even determine that need? (These questions are centuries old.) Users' needs continue to be complex. Special collections librarians will need to find innovative ways to bring analog and digital resources together.

New media require new ideas about cataloging and access. Remote electronic access, for example, is becoming more of a reality for many of our collections' holdings. But for the world to know about these holdings, there must be some kind of universally accessible finding aids, such as those offered through EAD, which, themselves, pose great challenges in their construction, maintenance, and standards.

Controlled vocabularies must also remain current, for they enhance access to collections. These and other descriptive standards provide both collection- and item-level access to our holdings, and they yield perhaps undiscovered potential for researchers. Libraries and all their cousins must keep up with the latest developments in software and hardware.

The electronic databases of the present and future will allow for a burgeoning clientele. The issue of fees for services must be worked out over the next few years, since the increased usage will put heavier burdens on the disseminators of information. Increased usage will necessarily entail conservation and preservation problems. Allied to this is the fact that all the paper-based and other materials now extant in our institutions are being joined by a flood of new materials in old and new forms. Hence, we will need to continue to train conservators and preservation managers in traditional and new approaches to collection care. The expanding menu of things that institutions are collecting, preserving, and cataloging leads to increasingly complex legal issues.

Though many institutions have legal counsel available, these issues nonetheless need to be part of the curator's education. Continuing education is time consuming and expensive—but indispensable. With increased usage, larger staffs will be important; well educated staffs will be crucial.

And on and on. Some things do not change. Some things do, and special collections librarians must learn how best to support today's needs while advocating a sensible, well reasoned approach for the future.

Notes

1. *Library Trends* 36.1 (Summer 1987); ed. by Michèle Valerie Cloonan.
2. Cloonan, *RBML* 10.2 (1995).
3. *RBMS Education Opportunities: A Directory* (<http://www.princeton.edu/~ferguson/rbmsed/rbms-edr1.htm>).
4. Victoria Newhouse wrote in 1998 that 5,000 museums had Internet sites. See her *Towards a New Museum* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1998), p. 12.
5. For a good discussion of linking scholarly resources with “computer power,” see Walt Crawford, *Being Analog: Creating Tomorrow's Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1999).
6. Computer scientists advocate emulation programs that mimic the behavior of earlier, sometimes obsolete, hardware and software. These programs enable us to read obsolete digital documents. However, numerous problems must also be considered: multiple versions of information, copyright issues, long-term responsibilities, and funding. Jeff Rothenberg will consider these issues in a forthcoming report to be published by the Council on Library and Information Resources in 1999.
7. Margaret MacLean and Ben H. Davis, eds., *Time & Bits: Managing Digital Continuity* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute and the Long Now Foundation, 1998). A future digital landscape, including stakeholder interests, is described in Donald Waters and John Garrett, *Preserving Digital Information, Report of the Task Force on Archiving of Digital Information* (www.clir.org/pubs/abstract/pub63.html).