Waving Not Drowning: Rare Books in a Digital Age[1]

Sidney F. Huttner

Had I titled this paper a few days after I committed to the one above, I might have taken the title from a review in the *Time Literary Supplement* of a recent book about Joseph Kennedy, the ruthless tycoon who fathered John, Bobby, and Teddy.[2] The first sentences of the review read: "On the golf-course one day, Joseph P. Kennedy showed his teeth to another player who waved at him across the green. 'You know,' he remarked to his partner, 'that guy thinks I'm smiling.'" Sharks seem to look that way, too; which fits, in its own way, with my theme: the difference between what we do and how it is perceived.

* * *

My title, however, is drawn from a poem by English poet Stevie Smith, whose papers are housed at the University of Tulsa. In her 1953 poem "Not Waving but Drowning"[3] she wrote:

> Nobody heard him, the dead man,
> But still he lay moaning:
> I was much further out than you thought
> And not waving but drowning.
>
> Poor chap, he always loved larking
> And now he's dead
> It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way
> They said.

Sidney F. Huttner was Curator of special collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa, 1984–98. He currently serves as Head of Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries.

On no, no, no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

Smith later insisted that the idea for this poem had come to her from a newspaper story about a drowning man whose friends thought he was waving to them. Among her papers, however, is a newsclipping headlined "Needless Dash to Bather on Rubber Float," about a man who was thought to be in danger of drowning but proved to be waving to a friend on shore. This bit of confusion, if confusion it was, enriches my theme: if we are to build effective programs of public outreach and thereby reach our constituency, we must know who "we" is and who "they" are. "We" must know, moreover, whether in fact we're waving or drowning, and "we" must know whether "they" think so too.

We all work with books

To begin, I must confess an emotional peculiarity. Rare book, manuscript, and special collections librarians, as a matter of professional posture, are supposed to feel, or at least exude, a sense of mission, a kind of "calling," apart from, and usually superior to, the mission of other librarians. Most of us are not stupid, of course, so we do not often *say* this to other librarians. We are even circumspect in talking about it among ourselves. We know that many of our colleagues are jealous already of what they see as the prerogatives of special collections folk. We are, after all, permitted to describe charming old books and glamorous manuscripts patiently and fully—while they, in contrast, snatch abbreviated, undigested, online copy under the pressure of production statistics. While our colleagues manage a herd of largely unappreciative undergraduates, we are free to give close attention to a small number of individual readers. We wine and dine collectors and donors—who take small interest in other librarians and *their* needs; and *we* wheel and deal with booksellers, while *they* worry unsympathetic jobbers with boring serial claims. If this accurately describes our lives and theirs, is jealousy groundless?

We all work with books, however, and all artifacts carry an undeniable aura, which is sensed by anyone whose emotional response is not completely closed down. Philip Larkin, poet and librarian, speaks of a manuscript's "magical value": "this is the paper he wrote on, these are the words and he wrote them, emerging for the first time in this particular miraculous combination." This "magical value" he distinguishes from the manuscript's "meaningful value"—i.e., "the degree to which [it] helps to enlarge our knowledge and understanding of a writer's work."[4] Larkin's distinction holds for all artifacts, whether they are manuscripts, books, documents, photographs, or vintage films.

The magical value of some objects, particularly those suffused with beauty or great age, stops nearly everyone cold. Most auras are more subtle and depend on what we know, can recognize, and can relate to in light of our knowledge or recognition: there is the document that illuminates a great event; a letter written by someone we admire or who we know is widely admired; the first edition of a book that has moved us, from which we have learned, or which we know has moved others.[5] Julian Barnes, quoted in the June 21, 1996, *Times Literary Supplement*, puts the point succinctly: "holding in your hands the first edition of admired authors induces a rich feeling, though quite why I still do not understand: it seems a mixture of impulses, a cross between a vibrant, imaginative historical sense and a desire to show baby-pictures—pictures of very *old* babies, at that."[6] These auras certainly affect scholars, teachers, students, booksellers—and librarians. If, like these colleagues and most other professionals, we are increasingly found in the glow of a cathode ray tube, we also live directly surrounded and often touched by these spirits.

As auras influence us, however, I have never been able to believe that their relative strength or weakness somehow changes the nature of the organizational, descriptive, and interpretive work we do so that "our work" as rare book and manuscript librarians differs in some distinct way from the work of other librarians. Libraries and librarians force the creation of special collections because we insist on separating materials by format, removing dustjackets, labeling spines, inserting pockets, binding the unbound, subject classifying, shelving by classification, and opening our stacks to a diverse public. It would be senseless to place valuable, vulnerable, and unique artifacts in open stacks, just as it would be senseless to spend resources educating an ever-changing reader population to the peculiar needs of a large number of eccentric bodies of materials. So we do not: we shift this work to a specialized staff in a separate department.

This obvious administrative solution clusters special collections with rare books (which are troublesome to replace if not actually valuable) and with manuscripts and archives (which for reasons of organization and/or legal obligations require supervised use) to create a department, division, or library whose charge it is to administer those holdings that cannot be fitted into the policies and procedures of an open general collection. General library staff can then be optimized to handle the flow of much routine work, while the special collections staff is optimized to deal efficiently with a collection of collections that resist routine handling. Libraries typically arrive at similar administrative solutions for other difficult-to-handle formats like sheet music or sound recordings.

My vision of the role of special collections may seem, therefore, rather pedestrian: they are no more valuable, but also no less valuable, to the research community than other tools and resources: laboratories and museums, classrooms and computers, fresh air and good light, decent food and hot coffee. They are an integral part of any library of significant scale and a scope that supports research. Like other resources, they must be judged by what they have in the past contributed and by what they will offer in the future to the institution's mission. They must be developed intelligently, administered economically, supported adequately. Unlike some resources, however, special collections are a permanent investment; you do not buy them by the slice, as we now buy journal articles from electronic databases, and they are hardly ever used up. Indeed, the opposite seems true: the more they are used, the more in demand they become. Thus, a library—and by extension an institution—expresses its uniqueness relative to other institutions in the kind and quality of its special collections.

This view of special collections gives me a logical problem in attempting to talk about "our constituency." At base, I cannot believe that "we" have a constituency that is more than trivially separable from the world of readers and students and scholars that all librarians serve. Stanley Katz, president of the American Council of Learned Societies, put the point sharply in his 1992 keynote address to the Harvard Conference on Special Collections in the 21st Century:

> As the library as an institution loses its intellectual authority on the campus (as I think it has done to a considerable extent already), a reconceptualized specialized collections center and a transformed special collections scholar-librarian can emerge as significant and creative elements in the reconfigured university of the next century. Ironically, the rare book operation may move from the snob periphery to the intellectual core of the university as it behaves less as an inventory than as utility, as it becomes more intellectually proactive in its behavior.[7]

Once collections are closed, the library as a whole and the staff charged with their administration are handed new challenges, because closure must in no sense imply unavailability; that would remove the fundamental reason for institutional ownership. If direct access is limited or prohibited, then we must provide catalog records, finding aids and inventories, staff to page and reshelve, and staff to supervise use. If their eccentricity is worth preserving, then it is worth advertising. Hence tours, exhibitions, publications. If they are valuable, they must be made secure. If part, perhaps much, of their value is in their artifactual form, then the preservation of that form assumes paramount importance. If they have been accessioned with understandings regarding conditions of access, or with dollars to support continued acquisitions, those understandings must be remembered and respected.

These challenges more often contend with than complement each other. The more successfully one advertises one's jewels, the greater grows the concern for their security; the more one stimulates and encourages use, the more one increases the preservation challenge. The more time one takes to understand and interpret collections, the less time one has to evaluate potential acquisitions, encourage potential donors, participate in collegial and professional activities, or anticipate the impact of changing research strategies and new technologies. And as the size and variety of the collections and operations grow, so too do the managerial challenges of selecting and training an appropriate staff and supervising its activities, assuring adequate supplies and equipment, and planning the use of space and facilities.

At the same time, directly mediating between scholar and scholarly resource offers spectacular opportunities to share in the process of discovery, both to share one's own knowledge and to learn from others. This happens at all levels, as undergraduate pages are trained to recognize and respect the different handling properties of case and tight-back bindings; as readers explain their needs not in terms of specific books but with ideas and arguments and evidence; as we work with faculty and students on exhibitions and publications; as we relate to the aspirations of collectors and donors. By the same token, special collections staff are frequently called upon to introduce individuals and groups to the mysteries of medieval manuscripts, old books, papyrus, parchment, paper, and of how and by whom they were made, printed, and bound; to whom they were sold and how they were read; and why they remain important, why the past is needed by the present and future; to explain, in William Gass's phrase, that "shelved-up present which passes for time in a library."[8]

These opportunities are also, of course, challenges. By training staff not only to do their work but to understand it, some will be trapped into rewarding careers. By exciting people—adults and children—about something as old and familiar yet as new and mysterious as a book, some will take up the challenge of further learning. By bringing to the attention of a scholar unimagined but relevant resources, one sometimes shares in the creation of new knowledge. By forcefully and imaginatively reminding our colleagues that shifting one part of our shared burden to special collections does not end, but rather increases, their responsibility to understand all library operations, including ours, we may hold their support.

If, then, I deny constituencies attached uniquely to special collections, I think I can argue without logical conflict, as indeed I just have, that rare books and manuscripts librarians have unique opportunities to contribute to the way in which libraries build effective programs of public outreach. Libraries should design programs that appeal to a broad public. They should, perhaps must, remember the collective strength of the "magical value" of all those artifacts they contain.

Under attack

All our cultural institutions are under attack, and not merely at the moment by a Republican Congress. Symphony orchestras are in decline, opera and ballet companies and theaters are trying to find young audiences.[9] Tenure-track slots for young language faculty are few. Even the Shriners and Lions, according to my local newspaper, are unable to find new members in the face of "television, the necessity of two-income families, and the prevalence of one-parent households."[10]

College freshmen, now born long after events like the Vietnam War that shaped my generation, do not read much, and with books ubiquitous about them, they do not share our sense of either their potential or their real value. Nor, emerging from schools with "dumbed down" curricula taught by products of "dumbed down" schools of education, do they know much about themselves, their world, or the complex culture they will inherit. A recent study, several years in the making, tells us they average four hours a week on homework, but that two-thirds spend at least fifteen hours at part-time jobs and are, as a consequence, often too tired to succeed in difficult courses. They register for easier ones.[11]

Two things are up: first, country music, concerned with "getting older, raising children, and learning to survive in that new American frontier, suburbia." Garth Brooks is about to become the highest-selling artist of all time; according to one survey, 36% of country music fans have a post-graduate degree.[12] Second, museum attendance is up, apparently the result of blockbuster exhibitions which promise consumable novelty in a comfortable social setting without requiring intellectual effort.[13]

Fighting for shelf space

What might it mean for us to move from snob periphery to intellectual core? There is nothing wrong with programs that focus on the fact of the treasures we have stored up in our vaults, that offer the image of the cathedral of learning, that stress the extraordinary privilege we grant when we permit a member of the unwashed (or perhaps the newly baptized) to touch one of the holies. There is nothing wrong with programs that demonstrate our erudition to those equally erudite. But presenting *only* programs like these is evidence that we are drowning: we are "too far out" and ripe for death. And these are, I fear, the programs we have for some long time presented.[14]

How do we, as librarians, put "magical value" to work? If we do exhibitions, we must create them not to the lowest common denominator but for broad appeal. We must do our utmost to assure that everyone knows about them, comes to see them, and has opportunities to question, experience, and interact with them, and that everyone takes away a lasting memory of them. These exhibitions need not be expensive, but they must be attractive, witty, lively, and accessible.

If we sponsor lectures, we must demand that speakers address issues in ways that make them available beyond specialists, and we must find ways to attract people who would not have thought to come without our urging. To attract friends, we must appeal to values more democratic than "rarity," the ivory tower, and the arcane tastes of a "cultivated elite." Many rare book and manuscript librarians work in attics or basements, often posh attics or basements, but nonetheless far from the front door. We must compete for shelf position as vigorously as cereal salespeople in a supermarket. We must find and focus on those means by which rare books and manuscripts can be put into the hands of common folk.

(As I wrote that last sentence, I realized how incredibly successful we have been, collectively, in locking things up. What would happen if we dropped the locks? Would anyone care? Thieves would no doubt soon have a field day, but would more normal people welcome this as an opportunity to raft gently among schools of colorful fish they had never seen? Am I alone in doubting that many would? Booksellers assure me that they rarely fight off crowds of buyers competing for their prize books—except in the field of modern firsts.)

Where is it written that we must deny our students and scholars the pleasures and the excitements of rare books and manuscripts? We should rather entice all first-year students to hold in their hands a rare book or a very old manuscript. We know that their doing so by itself offers them an opportunity to go on a quest to understand. And if it is done in a context that requires them to take into account other human factors—a friendly bookseller, a faculty member they respect, a personable librarian eager to share knowledge—we stand an even greater chance of igniting the spark of inquiry that education is all about.

We cannot do this alone, of course. We must prevent our colleagues from drifting into the easy comforts of an electronic ether while thinking they are still librarians. This will not be easy. The most direct access most libraries have to their institutions' curriculum is by way of what a short time ago were "bibliographic instruction" programs, but which have now become, I believe, "information literacy" instruction. If "bibliographic" has disappeared, we can be pretty sure that instruction about primary sources has too. How many "user instruction librarians" themselves write understandable memos, let alone competent research papers? An article in the June 1996 *C&RL News* talks about Purdue University's "readily accessible interactive, [sic] learner-centered World Wide Web information literacy module," which is supplemented by "Physical orientation to the libraries . . . available to beginning students [6,000 to 7,000 of them every year] through a number of existing programs including an audio tour of the Undergraduate Library and a videotape."[15]

How do we move our colleagues from patter about the intricacies of keyword searching and bookmarking Web sites to a curriculum with intellectual weight? The "needs" that drive current programs will quickly pass; by the time today's children reach college, with years of America Online and its successors under their belts, they will not consider paying tuition for dubious "service" like this. How do we use our positions to influence the instruction programs that will replace the current ones? It seems to me another arena in which we cannot hesitate to take our lesson from the cereal sales staff and jockey not only for position but also for survival.

We must also work with professors, many of whom have removed themselves from the cultural, even the educational, fray and drifted into narrow specializations, which they communicate in private language to a few scholars who are, at once, both friends and enemies. Once faculties realize the danger of being themselves "much too far out" in all their lives, they may welcome alliance—and appreciate once again the "magic value" of our books and manuscripts.

Tips from engineering

The University of Tulsa has a young but highly successful program, based in computer engineering, that brings high-ability freshmen directly into grant-sponsored faculty and graduate student research groups. Although playing a full role in the research group, TURC (TU Research Challenge) students remain responsible for regular degree requirements and must find and volunteer for a social action program. They are busy, but happy and productive. They have made real, measurable contributions, and as the first group of them moves toward graduate school, they are being recognized with nationally competitive awards.

Some of us are beginning to think about how to transfer this model to the humanities and to students of more average ability. If, for example, our faculty reshaped its research and teaching to include team components, and if every team had at least one librarian as a member, in a few years we will have a well defined constituency that knows what we do and what contribution we make to research; a constituency whose knowledge would flow to and inform their friends, classmates, and families; a constituency that has joined our program as we have joined theirs. We would be on the boat with colleagues, not on the beach worrying about the surf, and not in the drink wanly waving for attention. That kind of change might be called "transforming."[16]

Notes

1. This paper was written for the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries Preconference, Ithaca, New York, July 3–5, 1996, whose theme was "Getting There from Here: Setting the Agenda for Special Collections in the 21st Century." "There from here" was understood as the near future, the next five to ten years. It was read during a plenary panel titled "Reaching Our Constituency"; it has been revised for publication.

2. Rhoda Koenig, "Transactions of Vanity, Love and Commerce," *Times Literary Supplement* #4859 (May 17, 1996), p. 36. Reviews Ronald Kessler, *The Sins of the Father: Joseph P. Kennedy and the Dynasty He Founded* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996).

3. Published in *Not Waving but Drowning* (London: Deutsch, 1957) and widely anthologized.

4. Philip A. Larkin, "A Neglected Responsibility: Contemporary Literary Manuscripts." Read to a 1979 SCONUL (Standing Conference on National and University Libraries) conference and collected in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces, 1955–1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 99.

5. This effect has been observed before. In Mark G. Dimunation and Elaine D. Engst's *A Legacy of Ideas: Andrew Dickson White & the Founding of the Cornell University Library* (Ithaca: Cornell University Libraries, 1996), which quotes White's

Autobiography (New York: Century Company, 1905, p. 10), we find: "No rhetoric could impress on a class the real spirit and strength of the middle ages as could one of my illuminated psalters or missals; no declaration upon the boldness of Luther could impress thinking young men as did citations from his 'Erfurt Sermon'. . . ." White's sentence continues with a list of six examples of French Revolution documents which had equal impact; he concludes, "and all accounts of the Empire were dim compared to grandiose statements read from the original bulletins of Napoleon."

6. H. R. Woudhuysen, "Forster in Park Lane," *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 June 1996, quoting Barnes's introduction to an Antiquarian Book Fair (June 27–29, 1996) catalog.

7. Quoted from *Rare Books and Manuscript Libraries in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Richard Wendorf (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 19. Also published as *Harvard Library Bulletin*, New Series 4.1-2. The three sentences which precede those I have quoted, though too long for me to include in my text, establish a context of interest: "I suspect that a long-term advantage of the rare book library is that it cannot be easily disturbed, that it will remain at the university's center—at least physically. The challenge will be to bring it to the center intellectually. And here it proceeds from a position of strength, for the rare book library is increasingly the last realm of the scholar-librarian and the artifact-dependent scholar."

8. William H. Gass, "Imaginary Borges," in *The New York Review of Books* 13.9 (November 20, 1969), p. 8. The two sentences that form the paragraph in which this phrase appears, while not directly relevant to my purposes here, are irresistible:

> We may indeed suspect that the real power of historical events lies in their descriptions; only by virtue of their passage into language can they continue to occur, and once recorded (even if no more than as gossip), they become peculiarly atemporal, residing in that shelved-up present that passes for time in a library, and subject to a kind of choice, since I can choose now to read about the war on the Peloponnesus or the invasion of Normandy; change my climate more easily than my clothes; rearrange the map: while on one day I may have traveled through Johnson to reach Goldsmith, they are not villages, and can be easily switched, so that on the day I may arrive directly from De Quincy, Goethe, or Thomas Aquinas. New locations are constantly being created, like new islands rising from the sea, yet when I land, I find them never so new as all that, and having appeared, it is as if they had always been.

9. See, for example, Vince Stehle, "Light-Hearted Marketing Strategy Draws Young People to Serious Art," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* 8.16 (May 30, 1996): 12–13. Stehle quotes a National Endowment for the Arts Report (*Age and Arts*

Participation, With a Focus on the Baby Boom Generation [Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 1996]): "The report suggests that people who are now middle-aged or younger do not attend orchestra concerts, musical theater, and other art activities at the same rate as people in their 50s or older. The decline is troublesome to arts groups not only because of the drain on ticket sales and admission fees, but because many arts groups are counting on a new generation of patrons to become donors as well." His article also reproduces graphs showing the percentage of each age group participating in seven arts activities.

10. Kris Dudley, "Clubs Experiencing Sinking Ships, Organizations Search for Ways to Battle Declining Memberships," *Tulsa World: Your Community World*, May 29, 1996, p. 1.

11. Laurence Steinberg, B. Bradford Brown, and Stanford M. Dornbusch, *Beyond the Classroom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). I have not been able to consult this book directly and rely on statistics cited by Albert Shanker in his "Where We Stand" advertisement, *The New Republic*, June 24, 1996, p. 19.

12. Bruce Feiler, "Gone Country," *The New Republic*, February 5, 1996, pp. 19–24. Feiler also claims that the 36% for country music fans contrasts with 30% for adult contemporary and 22% for rock and that "40 percent of individuals with annual incomes over $40,000 listen to country music, as do a third of individuals who earn over $100,000 a year." He cites a Simmons Study of Media and Markets.

13. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* 6.8 (May 30, 1996): 40, notes an article in the May 1996 issue of *USAir* magazine quoting Edward Able, president of the American Association of Museums, "In the late '70s annual attendance at American museums was roughly 389 million; now it's in excess of 600 million," and Paul DiMaggio, a sociology professor at Princeton University, "One reason museums have done so well in attracting visitors . . . is that people like the range of options available at museums. 'Because of the Internet,' he told the magazine, 'younger visitors are used to having a lot of information and entertainment options.'"

An article by Jan Larson, "The Museum Is Open," *American Demographics* 16.11 (November 1994): 32–38, using a 1992 NEA survey conducted by the Census Bureau, "Public Participation in the Arts," concluded: "For urban museums, reaching out to minorities and low-income visitors isn't a matter of altruism—it's a survival strategy. Market research can help by making museum exhibits more relevant and accessible to diverse urban populations. Community support and interactive technology are also helpful, but the most important job is building long-term relationships with museum customers." The number of Americans that visit museums increased from 22% in 1982 to 27% in 1992; but in 1992, museum visitors were disproportionately white (28% versus 19% for black adults) and of above-average income (44% with incomes of $50,000 or more versus 17% with incomes under $25,000).

In an extended and fascinating piece, "Art, Politics, and 'Splendors of Imperial China'" (*The New Republic*, July 29, 1996), pp. 26–30, Stephen Owen reviews the exhibition assembled by the Metropolitan Museum. The objects displayed come from the Palace Museum, Taiwan, and their loan caused considerable controversy in that country: one widely discussed fear was that the United States would keep the artifacts, returning clever facsimiles in their place. Owen comments:

> After viewing the show at the Met, I went to the China Wing, which houses the museum's regular collection of Chinese art. Far less can be displayed in its very limited space, but crowded together there were famous paintings and works of calligraphy every bit the equal of most of the pieces sent over from the Palace Museum. And in contrast to the crowds that made it difficult to move or view more than fragments of the great handscrolls in the exhibition, the China Wing was deserted except for myself and one elderly couple. Clearly the "Splendors" have a value of their own that goes beyond simply viewing works of art. (p. 28)

14. I recently had the privilege of visiting one of America's most distinguished collections. In an unimposing display case against one wall was a volume of the Gutenberg Bible, open apparently at random to a central page (to minimize stress on the binding?). A caption, discussing in detail the probable number of copies printed, was placed flat in the case so that one had to be tall enough to lean over the case to read it. "Children not invited here" was the message, though I was told that in fact the facility is visited by hundreds of children every year. Across the room was a quite imposing wooden press, virtually uncaptioned. Here were the makings, utterly unexploited, of a terrific exhibition. With the support of a video presentation or a collection of monitor-displayed images and texts, the objects could be brought into relation to each other and to the times in which they were made and used in such a way that few would leave the area without being touched in a memorable way.

15. Ann Margaret Scholz, Richard Cary Kerr, and Samuel Keith Brown, "PLUTO: Interactive Instruction on the Web," *C&RL News* (June 1996): 346–49. My comments on this article may suggest that I am opposed to creative use of technology. This is far from the case, and in fact the Purdue PLUTO program seems to be, judged on its own terms, an adequate tutorial designed to teach and test a few specific, limited skills. Even its creators, however, are unlikely to claim any intellectual merit for it—which is the point I wish to make.

16. In an editorial about the announcement of the governors of ten Western states that they will cooperate to create a "virtual university," which students will be able "to tap into on their computers," Steve Lohr quotes Eli Noam, director of Columbia University's Institute for Tele-Information:

> There will still be jobs for professors, says Noam, but their role will be very different. Basic lecture teaching might be the work of a handful of on-screen stars, so some universities would need far fewer instructors. At elite colleges, Noam predicts, professors would not be lecturers but mentors, advising students and guiding them in their educational pursuits. Technology-aided education, he adds, may even prompt tutorial-style teaching. That would be a paradoxical turn of events indeed. The last time tutorial learning was considered revolutionary was at Oxford and Cambridge Universities in the 13^{th} century. (Lohr, p.2)

"When the Alma Mater Ends with '.edu,'" *The New York Times, Week in Review,* July 7, 1996, p. 2.