

Time Horizon 2020: Library Renaissance

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In thinking about the event horizon of 2010 to 2020, it is already clear that this will be a period of unprecedented change for libraries. More specifically this coming decade will mark the renaissance of technical services and a complete transformation of collection development. While the last ten years have witnessed a significant re-conceptualization of public services, it is technical services and collection development that will be at the center of the next significant phase of library transformation.

The 80/20 rule, wherein only 20% of the collection accounts for 80% of its use and circulation, is not an economic model that university administrators will continue to support. However, with the coming eradication of the out-of-print status of books because of print-on-demand technologies, building a user-driven collection just-in-time will be possible. Unfortunately, the result will be the short-term delivery of needed collections prioritized, through economic necessity, over the long-term delivery of a balanced collection. As budget dollars quickly shift from purchases to access and interlibrary loans, the distinction between acquisitions and interlibrary loan will likely dissolve.

Within the collection of monographs, the decision will no longer be between paperback or hardback but rather electronic or print format or some level of both. Following the unfortunate pattern of serials, libraries will be forced to repurchase large portions of their monograph collection that they currently own in print and/or microform in an electronic format; this, necessitated by the changing research and academic practices of their students and faculty. The Google Book Project seems poised to be the dominant vendor in this arena and print-on-demand book machines, such as On Demand Books' Espresso Book Machine, will become common equipment in most libraries.

Ironically, I think the Google Book Settlement will cause a resurgence in the use of the current print collections of libraries as users discover content that was hidden by the difference between searching a full-text index and a MARC record. As these books are rediscovered, there will be a shifting of resources in technical services towards the identification, preservation, and some level of republication of books held uniquely by each library. Regional collaborations around the identification and preservation of last copies, shared off-site storage, and cooperative collection development will open doors towards more formalized sharing of regional skills, infrastructure, and resources. I believe academic libraries will model partnerships that their academic institutions will later need to follow as higher education as a whole retrenches through economic and demographic necessity.

Over the next ten years, I suspect that the emphasis of technical services will change from the acquisition of content to the user's discovery of content. A library's success will be qualitatively and locally defined by whether its users are finding the best materials easily and quickly, rather than by quantitative metrics of its collections. Myriad services, customized to the library's local needs, will emerge that will sit on top of a library's broad print and electronic collections. The success of these services will be dependent upon the availability and quality of metadata, but in recent years an appreciation for the expertise of metadata creation and enhancement has been lacking in many of our libraries. The need for all content to have some online manifestation, whether a full-text scan or a metadata record, will force all of a library's hidden collections into the light, including manuscripts, images, and other special collections.

Another shift in technical services in academic libraries will be towards the facilitation of discovery and access of locally created materials. The rising importance of open access and the growing acceptance of download counts as part of an academic's impact metric will cause higher education institutions to focus on achieving the widest possible distribution of their locally created content. Dissertations, articles, books, working papers, technical reports, and other such content will flood into the campus libraries for curation, description, and distribution. Technical services staff will find an increasing percentage of their work shifted away from the procurement of external content to the care and distribution of locally created content.

An emerging area in which the expertise of technical services staff in academic libraries might well be applied is that related to gathering and maintaining institutional metrics. The need for a higher education institution to demonstrate its impact on society and the return on investment to its state, federal, foundation, and alumni donors will drive the coordination and consolidation of institutional data, such as publications, citations, and grant outputs. The library is a natural locus for such operations, in part as a service related to the institutional repository.

The year 2020 will still find the members of ALCTS creating, collecting, organizing, delivering, and preserving information resources; the fundamental “what” of technical services and library collections will not change. However, we must be ready for a radical transformation in the “how” and “why” of these activities. I believe the focus will shift from external to internal content, from just-in-case to just-in-time collection development, and from disparate silos of information resources to a mandated expectation that those silos can communicate and interact in ways that meet the expectations of library users. ALCTS members should be ready for an exciting decade ahead.