

“In Defense of the Book”

By: Daniel Greenstein

There is a profound (even perverse) irony in the academic library’s future. To continue its historic mission – providing persistent access to scholarly information– it will relinquish many of its local operations. As a consequence, the library will fundamentally be transformed so that it may remain the same.

- The greatest transformation will occur in collections. Collections will be
 - increasingly digital;
 - licensed from and served up by third parties much as online journals and reference databases are today;
 - populated by agents that act on library’s behalf, fulfilling its collection development goals by acting for it in an increasingly complex world of information providers; and
 - managed in print and digital repositories that are shared by many institutions and exist remotely from them (because the cost, technology, and space required will outstrip that available to any single institution).

- Resource discovery services (from record creation to search) will be sourced externally.

- The space required by the library will be vastly reduced thanks to the diminished need to care for and feed collections. The space that remains will continue to be optimized to support the new and evolving ways in which people interact with each other and with information in their creation and transmission of knowledge and ideas.

- The library’s technology footprint, too, will be reduced. The information services they rely upon will continue to rise to the network – that is trans-institutional – level where they will become both more economical and more powerful.

- Special collections will increasingly focus collection investment. Alongside essential user services that connect a world of information to an institution’s specific needs, they will define a library’s distinctiveness

- And the humanists for whom the local academic library has served historically as a living lab, will at last have access in the massive Internet accessible collection, to their CERN equivalent.

These trends are not new. The transition to e-only journal subscriptions, the evolution of WorldCat (now WorldCat local), and the emergence and role of the book jobber are all evidence of it. Respectively they reduce or eliminate the need for libraries to acquire and manage print journals; develop maintain, and render accessible well organized collection catalogs; and enable libraries to outsource the thousand and three implementation details involved in satisfying collection goals.

What will be different in the coming decade is that the trend will encroach in transformative ways upon the extensive print collections that once served (appropriately in a world when access to information required physical proximity to it) as evidence of a library's quality and its standing within the community.

Economic drivers will encourage the trend. But in these times of global recession it is too easy to assume that money (or the lack of it) is the root cause of all change. There are other forces at work here. The emergence of Google Book Search and possibly other regionally or even nationally oriented mass digital libraries will surface legacy collections to the Internet. This won't be the end of the book as a physical object. But it will make the network-accessible edition the shop-window which opens out onto a variety of distribution modes and formats (including, of course, the printed book). For new or in-print works, the digital edition will become the copy of record, even for those distributed in print. And in this context, the rationale for the library's physical collection (persistent access) is challenged fundamentally

While it is interesting to discuss and debate this vision for the library, it is vital that we prepare for it. Nothing so important is at stake as the future of our past, the stewardship of our cultural record, and the history of the book. And it is in defense of the book that I offer the following as contribution to the academic libraries already crowded applied research agenda.

1. Collection management and the print repository.

A host of questions remain to be answered and should consume our attention now and deliberately rather than in a decade's time and rashly after so many libraries have already transitioned wholeale top e-only access and begun aggressively to de-accession print holdings.

How, for example, can print repositories taken as a whole ensure the collection breadth and redundancy that are both essential for the stewardship of our printed record? In the past they were assured by a hidden hand in an anarchic market place of libraries acting almost independently of one another – each fulfilling local collection goals. The sheer volume of collecting effort coupled with the idiosyncrasy of institutional orientation worked to fulfill a broader societal need. It isn't clear that the same effect can be achieved in a world where the volume of collecting effort will dramatically be reduced; not at least without some attempt at coordination. What will that coordination look like, how will it be implemented, financed, and governed? There are models that appear to work, for example, in the Center for Research Libraries, but they work at a scale that is dwarfed by the scope of what is envisaged here.

Scoping decisions need to take account of a work's condition as well as its content. Drawing on experiences with JSTOR - building repositories for the print materials underlying the JSTOR journal collections – one might argue for selection principles that emphasize the best –the most complete and cleanest – copy. The criterion works well when the repository's objective is to preserve print in order to recreate digital facsimiles that are corrupted or destroyed. It works poorly in preserving works whose layered marginalia, underlining, and annotation help illuminate the history of a people – their society, culture, and ideas.

Repository use, too, is a non-trivial problem. Under what conditions can the print be used, and by whom? Presumably the digital copy is the primary means of access and would need to be produced by the repository if it did not already exist. This isn't a simple production problem. There are licensing issues for in-copyright works (perhaps a partnership with the purveyors of mass digital libraries might evolve?), but also gating ones. When is access to the digital (or the print-on-demand copy derived from it) so inadequate as to trigger access to the historic print. More complicated still is the problem inherent in reproducing in a digital domain the free public access to in-copyright works that multiply redundant physical collections enable, albeit on a limited scale (any copy of a printed work can only be accessible to a single reader at any one time). Unless we are willing to sacrifice the civic function of the academic library (I for one am not), this is the most challenging access issue that needs to be resolved.

2. The orphaned library.

This is not a new problem but it will be exacerbated as more small and highly specialized libraries – many housed in academic departments – fall victim to the trends outlined above and are closed. Historically university and college libraries have grown up in part through their absorption. What will happen when the university and college libraries collecting efforts and capacities are themselves diminished? It isn't solely a matter of securing the legacy materials. There are future acquisitions to consider, and oftentimes these are based on materials that only specialists can find, or that are made available only because of personal relations built by the librarian over a period of years. Are there generalizable means that can be put in place to provide a home for orphaned libraries:

- digitizing legacy print materials so they are accessible and considering them for inclusion in a print repository;
- finding a home for continued collection development and the knowledge and relationship management that may entail; and
- sharing the cost of continuity – not as stand-alone organizations but as part of a broader effort to effect stewardship over our cultural heritage

Is an adoption agency one of the library services that emerges at a networked or trans-institutional level?

Looking out across this future path one is struck by yet a second irony. While individual libraries see their collections diminished; collectively they are consumed by the design of a whole new collecting paradigm – one that ensures good stewardship of our cultural heritage in a pervasively networked and increasingly digital age and that acts, in effect, in defense of the book.