



THE SCHOLAR/LIBRARIAN GOES DIGITAL: NEW TIMES REQUIRE NEW SKILLS AND APTITUDES

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Abstract:

The digital age may well be considered a golden age for Special Collections. Treasures that have long been locked in vaults and available only to researchers onsite are now accessible at the click of a mouse from anywhere in the world. However, for every stunning rare book, photograph or art work that is available electronically, thousands more are still inaccessible. Some libraries have been slow to realize the potential for digital access and have not built the infrastructure needed to put these collections out into the public eye. This paper addresses questions such as: are we hiring the right people for Special Collections; are we retooling current curators so that they are technically adept; are we providing our Special Collections Libraries with necessary resources such as marketing and graphics design staff to develop websites for digital exhibits; have they developed a strategic plan that outlines their long-term goals for incorporating technology; what are the consortial opportunities that will help our Special Collections Libraries; are we working closely enough with library schools and rare book programs to ensure that graduates have the skills, aptitude and attitude that we need?

“Some things have changed, other things have not.” So said Richard Wendorf, director of the Boston Athenaeum in 2000, at the fourth Flair Symposium, held at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, in reference to a 1992 conference at the Houghton Library (Wendorf, 2002). The thrust of this paper is that, 12 years later, the same statement is applicable. Although some Special Collections librarians and archivists – our scholar/librarians - are comfortable in their sense that it is okay to be running about 75 years late, today’s Internet-based culture requires more urgency, a consolidated focus and an entrepreneurial bent in order to take advantage of this extraordinary opportunity to move their collections center stage.

The scholar/librarian stereotype was well described by Nicolas Barker in his introduction to *Celebrating Research: Rare and Special Collections from the Membership of the Association of Research Libraries* (Barker, 2007). “If some of the books were, so to speak, an odd lot, so too were some of the librarians. Many of them seemed to have drifted into position, rather than being appointed to it.” Barker was speaking of the special collections librarians he knew in the early 1970s, but this concept has been alive and well since the time books were first collected. Before libraries became big business operations, enmeshed in issues varying from intellectual freedom and publishing to digital rights and high tech space planning, the quintessential academic library director was thought of as a scholar/librarian of the highest order. Some familiar names come to mind – Lucas Holstenius, librarian to Henri de Mesmes in seventeenth century France, Richard Garnett, Keeper of Printed Books at Oxford in the nineteenth century and in the 20th century, the English poet Philip Larkin, who was director of Hull University Library for 30 years and historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie at the Bibliotheque Nationale.

In similar vein, the US has consistently passed over librarians for scholars to fill the position of Librarian of Congress – held most recently by Archibald MacLeish (poetry), Daniel Boorstin (American history), and James Billington (European history). The most important attribute was an intellectual reputation of the highest repute (often validated with a Ph.D., Pulitzer Prize or equivalent scholarly record). According to Boorstin, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter had advised President Franklin Roosevelt not to worry about picking a librarian for the job but to select someone who “knows books, loves books and makes books” (Krucoff, 1986). Roosevelt took his advice and ultimately selected poet Archibald MacLeish.

In today’s world, however, this concept seems almost quaint. Library directors at great libraries may well be academically gifted (such as Robert Darnton at Harvard), but they must also come with a multitude of other skills and aptitudes that enable them to succeed in the 21st century and to play a leadership role in the changing culture on their campuses. These aptitudes must include the ability to develop a vision for the library in the digital revolution; to move material into the electronic realm while often maintaining large print collections (and entrenched attitudes about using them); to support the information needs and environments of students

(digital natives) and faculty (often proud to be digital Luddites.) Today's library directors must be skilled in positioning their units in leadership roles or suffer the consequences in concomitant funding declines, loss of resources and a move to the sidelines of academic life. Daniel Traister was referring to Special Collections Libraries specifically when he said "Managers of such collections must seek innovative ways of increasing their functionality or expect to see these collections cease to exist." (Traister, 2000)

New research-based competencies for leadership in this complex environment have been identified by Mary Wilkins Jordan. Her research demonstrated that the competencies most selected as important for library directors were vision, communication skills, customer service, credibility, interpersonal skills and creativity (Wilkins-Jordan, 2012). Although Jordan's focus was on public library directors, there is much to be learned from her research for academic libraries. For instance, it is clear that the competency of 'credibility' for a director of a Special Collections or rare book library (referred to here for convenience as SCL) would be manifested by credentials in a particular relevant discipline. In order to build relationships with the faculty and other scholarly users, credibility and subject expertise remain a constant. Today, the additional aptitudes for a library director must be also mirrored in the SCL directors and reflected again in their hiring of curatorial and library staff. An ability to understand new approaches to learning is essential. Douglas Thomas and John Seeley Brown described the three principles on which they see the new 'culture of learning' is built, "(1) The old ways of learning are *unable to keep up* with our rapidly changing world. (2) New media forms are making *peer-to-peer* learning easier and more natural. (3) Peer-to-peer learning is amplified by emergent technologies that shape the *collective* nature of participation with those new media." (the italics are theirs.) (Thomas, Brown 2011). Some of these new competencies are also listed in the Council on Library and Information Resources' (CLIR) seminal work *No Brief Candle: Reconceiving Research Libraries for the 21st Century*. (CLIR, 2008)

So, is the scholar/librarian model still valid and/or still in play? Even as far back as 1997, there was an awareness that "The function of the librarian seemed to be evolving from the keeper of the books to that of network navigator." (Rice-Lively and Racine, 1997) On many campuses the scholar/librarian can often be found directing SCLs, such as the immensely successful Thomas Staley (James Joyce scholar) at the Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRC) of the University of Texas at Austin. However, there are many small SCLs and historical societies without such 'rock star' directors, and which have not yet successfully made the leap into the 21st century. What do we need to create the appropriate culture and incentives for growth and innovation in the SCL??

At many academic institutions, the SCL has a bimodal reputation – the star of the show for many a trustee board tour or exciting exhibit, but a backwater as far as general access to these collections and willingness to look at different ways of doing things. Libraries that include renowned special collections bring significant prestige to their institutions (Fister, 2010). However, these former backwaters are now roaring rivers of extreme whitewater, poised to become magnificent waterfalls or to dry up altogether. In 1992 Stanley Katz, at that same conference at the Houghton Library, was quoted as exhorting academic librarians “to move from the periphery to the center, to make the library genuinely play a role at the heart of the college or university.” (Wendorf, 2002) It is clear that the SCL can be enormously effective in assisting in this goal. There is no question that the HRC today is a very large diamond in the UT crown, with its director reporting directly to the president of the University of Texas, not to the Vice Provost and Director of the University of Texas Libraries.

One of the challenges a library director faces today is to change the culture and set a vision for 21st century library services. It is commonly cited as one of the most difficult challenges – harder than securing resources or increasing space (Spiro and Henry, 2010). But even if progress is being made throughout the library as a whole, SCLs are specifically charged with preserving the past and may not yet be convinced that digital technology and the Internet are their friends. What are the characteristics that we should be looking to hire for to bring about culture change (CLIR, 2008)? The StrengthsFinder Profile Tool, created by Gallup, Inc. (Rath, 2007) is one of several tools available to help analyze and parse this conundrum. This writer’s research has shown that the most common set of strengths for academic librarians are those of Input (inquisitive, collecting things) and Learner (love to learn, enjoy the process.) For SCL librarians, these strengths can be combined with Context (looking back to understand the present). Clearly this latter is a strength to be valued, but should it perhaps be combined with other strengths such as Strategic (saying ‘what if?’) and Futuristic (fascinated by the future) which might provide for a better blend for the 21st century?

This approach can also be used to look at how to revitalize current SCL directors, as well as to hire for the additional competencies we might need. Peter Hernon’s research in this area enabled him to develop a list of attributes for the library director, and he was amused to find that a goodly number of Deans and faculty members were still looking for a scholar/librarian – someone who was “both a producer and consumer of scholarship.” (Hernon, 1998) He went on to qualify this finding, “Those individuals mentioned, however, might not be regarded as that successful as managers of complex and fast-changing organizations.” Interestingly enough, the seemingly comprehensive Association of Research Libraries (ARL) report on special collections (ARL, 2009) omits any reference to the need for training and/or staff development in SCLs.

We also need to examine what we are asking our SCL directors to do? For instance, we expect them to adhere to and expand appropriately the mission of the unit under their aegis (clearly, building content is king); manage the facilities; develop resources; nurture and manage staff; develop a strategic plan for the future of the unit – the traditional tasks of managing a branch or specialized library within a larger institution. But one of the most important tasks of an SCL director today is to ensure that the unit’s functions and activities are keeping pace with their changing communities and that they are serving their constituencies as effectively as possible, abiding by John Cotton Dana’s vision of “an accessible institution committed to the dissemination of useful knowledge.” (Weil, 1999) Today, this means using digital technology to make the collections accessible when the physical building is not. The expectation – of our digital native students and of many of our faculty and researchers – is that most of these primary resources will be digitally available. The creation of large text databases such as Early English Books Online and Early American Imprints only fuels this expectation. When archives and manuscripts are donated, the first question asked by the donor is often along the lines of ‘When will you be able to have them digitized?’ (ARL 2009)

The SCL constituency is more broad-based than might be thought at first. Many SCLs serve a much wider community than their home base of campus faculty, students, and the odd visiting scholar. SCLs will often have more users from outside the immediate university family. The advantages of the Internet for expanding the user community were noted by Barker “The Internet and international databases have had a liberating effect on individual libraries, their contents, and how they are used. Synergy, hitherto undreamed of, has grown up between libraries and researchers geographically distant.” (Barker, 2007) The opportunities afforded in the digital environment were underscored by Sarah Pritchard in her *portal* editorial “Special Collections Surge to the Fore” (Pritchard 2009). She makes the important point that the values of access and preservation should not be set in opposition to each other. Imagine how both excited and overwhelmed SCLs would be if the millions of hits they receive annually (Tom Staley cited 17M hits for the month after the HRC had digitized the Gutenberg Bible [Taliaferro, 2009]) were physically made manifest by individual researchers walking in to look at or use their collections. This use rate could not be sustained in the previous access mode.

It is abundantly clear that staffing requirements to address the new functionality and expectations have grown considerably. SCLs need talented technologists, metadata specialists, graphic design artists, marketing professionals, publishing and programming experts. The staffing infrastructure needed at the HRC in order to create and maintain its high level of collection acquisition, digital infrastructure, exhibits and public programming is phenomenal. A 2009 article lists 88 full-time staff, 7 graduate interns, 30 work-study students and 15 temporary workers. (Taliaferro, 2009). If SCLs themselves are not able to support the appropriate infrastructure, it must be provided for centrally. But this in turn provides a dilemma

for the library dean or director. How to decide between funding electronic resources for expanding research programs in the sciences, or creating an infrastructure to support arguably more prestigious but usually lesser known/used collections of rare books and manuscripts that are sometimes more valued off than on campus? Here the potential fundraising skills of the SCL directors might come into play to bridge the funding gap.

Meanwhile, some institutions are taking advantage of pooling resources and collections to create consortial opportunities for partnerships, particularly in the museum world. The *Online Scholarly Catalogue Initiative*, a joint initiative by the Getty Foundation and the J. Paul Getty Museum, aims to “transform how museums disseminate scholarly information about their permanent collections to make them available through web-based digital formats.” (Getty, 2012) The project brings together a consortium of nine premier museums. The intent is for readers to be able to study the artworks online and “overlay them with conservation documentation, discover scholarly essays in easy-to-read formats, take notes in the margins that can be stored for later use, and export citations to their desktops.” (Getty, 2012) A recent ARL briefing statement states that for libraries “A multi-institutional approach is the only one that now makes sense.” (ARL, 2012)

SCLs need to move ahead in the same way. Some seminal success stories are beautifully and lavishly illustrated in the previously mentioned ARL publication on special collections (Barker, 2007). A very small example from my own institution is that of the Texas Artists digitization project. A small grant from the State of Texas enabled Southern Methodist University’s Central University Libraries, the Dallas Public Library and the Dallas Museum of Art to digitize the drawings, sketchbooks and manuscripts of the early Texas artists in their collections. Staff created a showcase sampler collection that could then be used as a tool for additional fundraising. Today, there are over 1,500 images in that collection <http://digitalcollections.smu.edu/all/cul/tar/index.asp> In order to encourage institutions to provide access to their ‘hidden collections,’ CLIR has developed a new program specifically focused on funding access projects for ‘hidden collections,’ and many of the larger libraries with mature digital operations in place have taken advantage of those grants. (CLIR, 2008)

There is also a movement to reconverge museums, libraries and archives (in the nineteenth century, when these organizations first came into being, there were few separate units) with an eye to looking at what could be gained by expanding education and training to include a more broad-based curriculum that would involve elements of each. Thus the museum takes on more of the library’s public service role, the archives look at making access more of a priority, while the library expands its holdings beyond written sources. (Given and McTavish, 2010) This sets the stage for a merger such as created in Canada in 2004 with the merger of the National

Archives of Canada with the National Library, resulting in the Library and Archives Canada (LAC.) Certainly for the users, the lines are becoming blurred. (Given and McTavish, 2010).

This topic was also the theme of the 47th RBMS preconference – “Libraries, Archives and Museums in the Twenty-First Century: Intersecting missions, Converging Futures?” Participants from fields outside the traditional rare books libraries and SCLs were specifically invited. (Whittaker and Thomas, 2009) However, more progress in this area requires that each branch move beyond its current disciplinary boundaries. The American Library Association (ALA), for instance, has no mention of curators, archivists or museologists in its ‘career paths for librarians’ <http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/careers/paths> Nor do any of the listed accredited programs specialize solely in archival or museum studies. (Given and McTavish, 2010) Students interested in museum or archival studies do not have an accredited system to guide them, and will most likely be experiencing a curriculum that is lacking in some of the user-centric courses that imbue library values. (Whittaker and Thomas, 2009) Many SCLs already include a University Archives repository under their aegis, a reporting structure that can occasionally provide some friction with conflicting priorities, educational training and customer service models.

Few of us ever get the opportunity to create a SCL from scratch, but if we were given the chance, how would we begin? Which SCLs would we take for our benchmark and aspirant models? For sure, one might aspire to be a library such as the HRC at the University of Texas, but most of us might want to start with a scaled down version that would be appropriate to our institution. So first, one needs to look to the mother ship: what kind of SCL is appropriate to support the mission – research, teaching and learning – of the institution. Clearly one will usually start with a collection corpus – what then is needed to preserve and maintain the collections, to make the collections accessible, and to expand them as appropriate? The number of staff needed to provide these basic functions can be developed and their basic skill set. We have already ascertained that we want to hire, if possible, digital natives skilled in Web 2.0 technologies and cognizant of the importance of technology to enable access. Can we add program development and exhibit staff? (Whittaker and Thomas, 2009) Should we add content specialists who might spend some time in curatorial duties, but other hours in the classroom with faculty, engaging the student in experiencing the thrill of using primary resources in the classroom? (Mitchell, 2012) Who sets the vision? Why not a SCL Director who comes with a background in one of the content specialties, but also with several years of managing a small museum which won prizes for the innovative use of technology to increase the number of visitors and a record of consortial initiatives? (Given and McTavish, 2010) This Director would also be skilled in prioritization, understanding that in order to do more, one occasionally really does have to stop doing something, and so is able to engage staff in buying into this process and examining their daily tasks and responsibilities so as to free themselves for some of those

essential higher level duties. He/she is creative and innovative – but does not need to do everything himself/herself. Delegation is imperative, and will require use of the SCL's time in coaching and training staff to take on these duties.

It doesn't hurt to blue sky, to put down what you might actually want to do, if given the chance. You never know, but in doing this you might actually find that some of these 'dreams' have legs and can be set in motion. Perhaps the Dean of Libraries can be persuaded to provide more time/funds centrally for cataloging, or fundraising, or support of digitization. My experience is that a Dean will often prefer to have more ideas than she/he can fund than to have to spend time trying to pull ideas out of people.

Conclusion

I began this paper with a quotation from Richard Wendorf and would like to close with him. In the essay previously mentioned, Wendorf reminds us that, no matter how big or complex a SCL might become, "the primal encounter still takes place when the student ... takes pen, pencil, keyboard or Dictaphone in hand and begins the hardest task of all, which is to make interpretative sense of the material he or she has been examining." (Wendorf, 2002) And that is where the magic happens! We are fortunate indeed to have a role in creating magic, and at the same time to be part of one of the greatest revolutionary developments of all time – the world wide web of digital information.

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