
Introduction: Alternative Print Culture

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I sometimes tease my colleagues in history, English, and other traditional humanities disciplines that they have consistently undervalued the importance libraries have played in their own scholarly lives. To prove my point, I refer to *Name of the Rose*, an award-winning novel published in 1980 in which author Umberto Eco constructs a world of mystery and murder in a fictitious thirteenth-century European monastery. Contained in the monastery is an Aedificium, which houses one of the largest collections of multilingual book manuscripts in the then known world. At the conclusion of the novel, the Aedificium burns to the ground because a disgruntled monk worried that the contents of one particular book he was hiding there would change the world he knew. What if, I ask my humanities colleagues, that Aedificium had actually existed, survived to the present without loss of any materials, and was only recently discovered? Medieval studies would be significantly different; so would all historical studies that grew from it. This is an excellent example of what Michel Foucault calls the influence of the “archive” on “discourse.” Any collection of information materials preserved through the generations will inevitably influence how we interpret the past. Conversely, the absence of information material silences historical voices, which are then lost to history.

That really was the premise grounding my decision to ask Jim Danky in the fall of 2005 how he felt about being sent into retirement in 2007 with a symposium in Madison, Wisconsin, that assessed the influence of the collections he had amassed at that venerable institution, the Wisconsin Historical Society,¹ where he had been employed since 1973. At first he hesitated; he has always been uncomfortable with praise, and he knew how academics like me could mix it into a thick frosting that masked what in his mind was considerably more important, the work he had accomplished at the Society. Before giving me his approval, he decided to consult his

most trusted advisor—wife Christine Schelshorn. She would know if this was a bad idea, he reasoned, that is, one that was more self-serving than productive.

A week later Jim said Christine approved the idea. Together, they authorized me to move ahead with the project as long as it concentrated on work Jim had done at the Historical Society. Together, Jim and I then crafted a plan for the symposium that would be entitled “Alternative Print Culture: Social History and Libraries.” On the one hand it would consist of presentations addressing areas of studies influenced by the collections Jim had put together as Newspapers and Periodicals Librarian at the Society, including women’s studies, African American history, Native American studies, radical and labor history, zines, and the periodicals and serials of the radical left and right. On the other hand, two essays would evaluate the influence of Jim’s own scholarly writings, and the Center for Print Culture History in Modern America, a joint project of the Wisconsin Historical Society and the University of Wisconsin–Madison that he helped establish and then codirect with me between 1992 and 2002, and after I left Madison in January 2003, he directed himself until October 2006, when Christine Pawley took over as his successor.

Finding authors for these essays was easy; they would be drawn from the scores of scholars who had come to Madison to study the very collections Jim had amassed, and whose own scholarship referenced these collections repeatedly. Not only were these scholars lifelong friends, they also knew how, as one scholar put it, “those odd periodicals and books” Jim had been collecting for decades gave voice to historically marginalized groups on the periphery of dominant cultures, and thus influenced the directions of scholarly study in their own research areas.

Once we put an initial plan together, I contacted the editors of *Library Trends*. With the understanding that the essays would concentrate on Jim’s work, they quickly agreed to publish the proceedings, to be co-guest edited by me and Christine Pawley. Christine had willingly joined our team of planners when she arrived on the Madison campus in September 2006, and in several months generated the funds necessary to bring speakers together for a “Dankyfest” on April 13–14, 2007. The volume you hold in your hand constitutes the proceedings of that symposium. In a sense, this is a story of the amazing “Aedificum” Jim built with limited funds at the Wisconsin Historical Society in his thirty-five-year career there. And although I’ve known Jim for more than two decades, in those two days I learned much more about how the unique collections of information materials he had collected at the Society have influenced historical research than I did from the many conversations we had over those years. That is testimony not only to Jim’s modesty, but also to the influence of his professional practice. By putting together this issue of *Library Trends*, Christine and I hope it will demonstrate to coming generations of library

professionals the quiet but awesome power library collecting practices can exercise on society in general, and scholarly study in particular.

James Philip Danky was born and raised in Los Angeles, and somehow found his way to Ripon College, where he graduated with a degree in history and philosophy in 1970. From there he gravitated to the University of Wisconsin–Madison Library School, where he received a master’s degree in 1973. Upon graduation he was hired by the Wisconsin Historical Society (then the State Historical Society of Wisconsin) and became Newspapers and Periodicals Librarian. In that position he has been awarded more than \$3.8 million in grants, including five from the National Endowment for the Humanities that funded the United States Newspaper Project from 1982 to 1989, and the African-American Periodicals and Newspapers Project from 1989 to 2001. The latter resulted in *African-American Newspapers and Periodicals: A National Bibliography*, published by Harvard University Press.

Along the way Jim has also been awarded the Bowker/Ulrich’s Serials Librarianship Award in 1987 and the Isadore Gilbert Mudge–R.R. Bowker Award in 2002, both given by the American Library Association, was declared a “Media Hero” by the Institute for Alternative Journalism in 1993, was Resident Fulbright Scholar at the British Library in 1991, named a Fellow at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard from 1997 to 1999, elected a member of the American Antiquarian Society in 1996, and in 1994 was justifiably named Distinguished Alumnus of the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s School of Library and Information Studies.

NOTE

1. In 2001 the State Historical Society of Wisconsin changed its name to the Wisconsin Historical Society.

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