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# The Continuing Development of Special Collections Librarianship

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## ABSTRACT

THIS ESSAY INTRODUCES the overall subject of the present issue of *Library Trends* and puts into a contemporary and historical context all the pieces which follow. The authors look at the current world of special collections, showing how it has evolved and how, in many ways, issues of the past are still with us. Libraries change, in all of their capacities and departments. Special collections and archives have always presented specific challenges to those in charge of them. Those concerns have changed in many ways, but they have not disappeared. And new challenges and initiatives, new technologies, and new ways of configuring the infrastructure of the institutions which house the collections bring special collections librarians and archivists the need to stay current with the world of information management.

In 1957 *Library Trends* devoted an issue to Rare Book Librarianship. Thirty years later Michèle Cloonan edited another issue on the same broad topic. Sidney Berger's opening essay gave an overview of the field (Berger, 1987). This was followed by a section on "Advances in Scientific Investigation and Automation," presenting six pieces on the impact of science on books and manuscripts, scientific equipment, the proton milliprobe and its use in analyzing early printed books, paper analysis, and the need for standards in the burgeoning (though pre-Internet) electronic environment. That environment truly did burgeon, as we shall mention later. The third section of the 1987 issue focused on practices in rare book librarianship, followed by two sections on funding and preservation, respectively.

While most of the issues raised in that volume are still current, the grow-

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ing complexity of the world—and of course the world of libraries and archives—has made it desirable to revisit the whole issue of Rare Book Librarianship with an eye to developments in the profession since that 1987 *Library Trends* issue. Indeed, today we tend to think more broadly of special collections since archival materials are now sometimes even more frequently consulted than their “book brethren.” And, there seems to be an increasing interest in primary materials by a wider audience than the rare book world. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the profession has changed more in the last sixteen years than it did between the 1957 publication and the 1987 one.

One of the areas of recent change in the profession has to do with the clientele who use our collections. With ever-tightening budgets and the constant suspicion of many who do not understand the role of rare books and special collections in libraries, we must “justify our existence” by proving that the collections are being used for scholarly and other purposes. By “other” we mean that collections have often been used for impressing donors and garnering publicity. Witness the many articles we continue to see in the popular press and in our own scholarly publications about the acquisition of or discoveries in our important collections. But increasingly, we are seeing a wider audience for our activities. K–12 teachers, for instance, are bringing their students to our departments and exhibits. New databases and finding aids mounted on the Internet are making our collections “universally accessible,” and are thus bringing increased research inquiries from a worldwide audience. And the nature of our manuscript holdings makes them ideal testing grounds for new applications. The EAD/California Digital Library<sup>1</sup> and similar projects at Cornell<sup>2</sup> and MIT<sup>3</sup> are cases in point. Scholars running those projects are testing the limits of current digital technology, and in so doing are making a vast amount of information—even digitized versions of unique primary materials—available. There are many technological advances that we must know about. Even if we cannot control or manipulate these advancements ourselves, we must know what they are capable of doing and how to direct computer and other information specialists to make them useful to us.

Special collections have thus seen a change in the way money for our field is being allocated. There seems to be a smaller percentage of it for buying books and manuscripts and other media and more for electronic materials. Such a shift has made us try to use our resources with greater care and circumspection. Of course, it has also increased the amount of materials we now have at our disposal (the new digital stuff), increased the use of the collections (as we indicated), and thus required us to seek further education to enable us to handle these new technologies.

The new technologies, further, have demanded that institutions rethink their hierarchies and personnel structures. Systems departments and digital specialists are now more prominent in our institutions, requiring realign-

ments in human resources and reallocations of funds. These changes will affect us physically and even psychologically as we must adapt to new kinds of colleagues and new configurations of our space. All this must be accomplished while trying to carry out “business as usual”: the normal tasks and responsibilities that have been our way of operating for decades.

Inevitably, as our libraries use up their space, several issues have arisen (or reemerged). The first is the old one of finding new space. We must continue to weed collections, but now with a new public awareness that has been engendered by some prominent cases in which libraries have been accused of doing so with careless abandon. We must continue to “fight” for space in libraries and archives that need primarily to serve students and faculty at the general-collection level.

Second, with the construction of new buildings, we must be involved in the architectural planning, with a fresh understanding of the new kinds of space (amount and configurations) that we will need because of the new technologies we are incorporating into our operations. And when off-site storage facilities are constructed, we must continue to fight for secure, environmentally sound spaces.

Third, there is the major issue of rights management for intellectual property, particularly complex with materials that are digitized or born digital and then made available over the Web.

Fourth, institutions are looking seriously to—and adopting—a team-operation style. How the teams are configured, who is on each team, who manages the teams (from within and from above), and whether this conversion will prove to be better than the older configuration are at issue. Related to this, with some library reconfigurations, is the development of information commons in which special collections departments enhance the commons. The concept behind the commons is to provide “a seamless continuum of patron service from planning and research through presentation into final product” (Bailey & Tierney, 2002, p. 284).

Fifth, there is an emerging world of experiential, dynamic, and interactive records that will soon be under the aegis of our libraries and archives. The key issue here is preservation: Is it preservable? Who will be responsible for data storage? data structure? information integrity? object integrity? Who will pay for its preservation? We have yet to adopt reliable strategies for preserving and maintaining any digital materials.

Sixth, and clearly related to the preservation issue, is the area of funding. Our libraries and archives, with their blend of the old and the new, are costing more and more to run. Creating, handling, and preserving electronic materials alone can be tremendously expensive, and this is only one new area of concern. Where will the money come from to allow us to continue to collect and provide access to our collections?

Seventh, as Victoria Steele at UCLA notes, with the new technologies that allow us to scan images and get them out onto the Web, there is an

increasing opportunity to raise funds for our departments. But we have seen donors of visual materials (especially photographs) expect us to digitize their collections' images and collect royalties for *them*. Our special collections want to receive important donations, but they do not want to become businesses for the benefit of our donors.

Though not a central concern, there is also the new awareness of terrorism in the world, and we must therefore have a heightened sense for the security of our collections. Most of us have been particularly concerned about security in general, but for many this has become an even keener concern. There is not only the ongoing threat of theft and mutilation, which have been part of keepers' concerns for centuries. New technologies have engendered a new race of thieves and mutilators, able to pierce our firewalls, steal our images, and deface our electronic databases.

Additionally, there have been advances in preservation theories and conservation materials and techniques, along with the complex issue of preservation of digital materials, which are becoming an increasing part of our holdings. One of our key responsibilities—related to our primary directive of making our materials accessible—is to know as much as we can about the latest developments in conservation and preservation for a very broad range of holdings. Continuing education and attendance at conferences and symposia about digital preservation cost money and take time—neither of which we have in abundance. (We recall getting our first computers at work and being told that they would save us time and make us more efficient. What we were not told was that they would increase administrators' expectations of what we must accomplish, and they would certainly increase our workload.)

As the articles in this volume attest, old issues are joined by new areas of concern: fund-raising; moving image preservation; “displaced book collections”;<sup>4</sup> the Association of Research Libraries' continuing efforts to identify key special collections issues, which include “global resources,” “archiving of electronic resources, defining special collections and their functions, particularly with respect to the missions of their host institutions, costs of serials, “accountability and performance measures in many universities,” and “competing priorities in the digital environment”;<sup>5</sup> new library construction in tight financial times;<sup>6</sup> special collections from an international perspective; collection development; authenticity and the idiosyncratic interpretation of items in a special collections library; and public service and outreach. Most of these are just new twists on old themes. The emphasis for us is that even though the world of special collections has evolved remarkably in this electronic age, the essays selected for this issue of *Library Trends* emphasize the fact that much has stayed the same. We must continue to grapple with problems we have seen for over a century.

However, as we have suggested, there is a new spotlight on special collections created by the Internet, which has brought us new users. The chal-

lenge is to marshal this recent attention into new resources and to anticipate the next stage of our development as a field.

We face increased responsibilities, burgeoning clientele and holdings, and new technologies to master, while acquiring no new permanent funding or staffs. There are increasing needs to raise funds or to seek donations of collections; to protect our holdings; and to come to grips with massive configural changes in our intellectual and physical environments.

In 1987 Cloonan described the changes from 1957 as a tsunami. The present wave—the coming of the electronic age—is still upon us and shows no sign of receding. The aftershock waves bring in new technological advancements that librarians and archivists must embrace. The world of special collections continues to change rapidly. In it there is no “Same ol’, same ol’” or “Business as usual.” The only constant in the field is change, and that’s why we love it so much.

## NOTES

1. See <http://www.cdlib.org/>.
2. See <http://cornell.nsdlib.org/>.
3. See <http://www.w3.org/>. See also <http://web.mit.edu/dspace/www/>; and <http://www.hpworld.com/hpworldnews/hpw006/02stor.html> on the MIT / Hewlett Packard D Space collaboration.
4. The article by Ekaterina Genieva talks about “cultural valuables displaced as a result of wars.”
5. See the essay by Joe A. Hewitt and Judith M. Panitch, who go on to cover a wide range of issues.
6. The article by Donald G. Kelsey discusses the planning, funding, engineering, designing, and construction of a new library at the University of Minnesota.

## REFERENCES

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