Collection development in interesting times: a summary

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This paper was largely derived from my contribution to the Against the Grain volume Scholarly publishing [1]. Therefore, what follows is a summary and not the full paper. The paper began by addressing the question of what constitutes a library collection in the modern world. The definition of a library collection has expanded over the last 125 years to comprise at least four levels

- locally owned physical documents;
- physical documents owned by other libraries but available through ILL;
- purchased or subscribed to electronic documents;
- “free” electronic documents.

It should be noted that each level is less organized and harder to gain access to than its predecessor.

The paper then discussed the nature and origins of the economic crisis for libraries and librarians in the last three or four decades. Catastrophes have a long half-life and libraries that survive economic catastrophes have to deal with the consequences years after their budgets improve. Whether your library has been experiencing a decline, a crisis, or a catastrophe, is a matter of local circumstance and definition. The simple answer to what caused the crisis is that libraries received less money than they had before and/or a smaller share of the total resources allocated by their funding agencies, often dramatically fewer dollars or greatly diminished percentages of the institutional pie. The crisis has many dimensions—social, economic, political, global, technological, and cultural. Some of the things that brought about, or affected, the economic travails of libraries are:

- the energy crisis of the 1970s
- the “tax revolt” that began (as all things—malign and benign—do) in California in the late 1970s
- Reaganomics

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the rise in, and demand for, electronic resources and services that began in the mid to late 1980s and erupted in the early 1990s

the metastatic growth of scholarly journals (particularly in scientific, medical, and technical disciplines) and the steep annual increases in their prices

the belief that books and reading constitute but one means of acquiring knowledge, with no more legitimacy and importance than many others

television and the Internet, both leading to a decline in reading as a preferred leisure activity

the commercialization of education—by which I mean that academia is losing interest in producing educated men and women and concentrating increasingly on producing employable men and women

the decline in municipal institutions and of faith in government

1. Effects

The economic crisis in libraries had many causes but relatively few results and responses. Broadly speaking, libraries spend their financial resources on materials, staff, and operating expenses, and these are the only areas in which major economies can be made. It should be noted that an academic library that sustains a 10% cut has also to deal with

- 5% increases in average book prices,
- 10% increases in average journal prices,
- increases in the cost of subscriptions to electronic resources,
- increases in staff and librarian salaries,
- minimum wage increases for student assistants,
- increases in the price of maintenance contracts
- unfunded increases in student enrollment
- new graduate courses demanding new materials

At the end of the day, the 90% library is, in fact, more like a 75% library when the actual purchasing of materials and services is compared with the actual expenditures of the previous year.

The term “library materials” has always denoted a somewhat diffuse concept. It is psychologically, as well as fiscally, interesting to note that, to this day, many libraries do not purchase access to electronic resources from their materials budget but from some other source. It will be much healthier for us all when we see electronic resources for what they are—library materials that have to be purchased or to which we have to subscribe, each from the materials budget.

1.1. Books

One danger is that of the book budget being the lonely child in a materials budget cutting exercise. The tendency is to have a book budget that is, essentially, what is left over when all the other materials budgets are determined. This is exactly the opposite of the result of a rational approach to this matter. A shift of resources from books to journals carries a financial
poison. Put simply, $100 left in the book budget will demand $105 dollars the next year to ensure a steady state of acquisition; whereas $100 transferred from the book budget into the journal budget will demand at least $110 next year if subscriptions are to be maintained. Add the compounding factor into the process and you will see that the $100 left in the book budget will demand $122 in the 5th year, and the $100 transferred into the journal budget will demand at least $146 in the 5th year. In the worst case, that extra 46% will also be transferred from the book budget. The net result will be that our $100 “left” in the book budget would actually be $60 with the purchasing power of $45, since nothing will have been done to cover book price inflation.

1.2. Journals

Two common practices in making journal cuts have led to malign results. Both are in the interest of a superficial equity of treatment and both make the painful process of cutting journals easier for the librarians administering the process. One is cutting journals by a set percentage (either of expenditures or of numbers of titles) across the board—across all disciplines. The second is basing the cuts on likelihood of future use as predicted by language or other objective criteria or as predicted, in academic libraries, by some faculty in the discipline to which the journal principally applies. The essence of the problem is that a journal collection, indeed any collection, is more than the sum of thousands of individual, unrelated decisions—many taken in the light of a particular time and personality. There is only one way of carrying out journal cancellation projects in such a way that damage to the collection is minimized. That is for faculty recommendations to be just that and for them to be accepted or rejected within a policy and a vision that sees far further than the exigencies of the moment and the cumulation of narrow interests.

1.3. Other materials

Times of financial stress are especially dangerous for collections of non-print materials. Non-print materials have less political clout because they are used and valued by far fewer people than the general collection and, with rare exceptions, lack the deep roots that sustain the book and journal budgets. As with the book and journal budgets, they should be considered in the library’s collection development policy and allotted their place of relative importance to the institution, the library, and the library’s users.

1.4. Electronic resources

Electronic resources should be bought or subscribed to in the context of the library’s materials budget and the policy statements that cover that budget. It is psychologically and practically important that we see electronic documents as the latest manifestation of the long history of human communication and the way in which libraries have incorporated each innovation in communication into their intellectual architecture. That being so, there is no reason why libraries should seek ever-expanding access to electronic resources without reference to the toll that ever-expanding access takes on other parts of the materials budgets.
The time has come for libraries, particularly libraries in purchasing consortia, to reject “bargain” offers of electronic resources that are of less usefulness to the library’s clientele than other materials costing the same price. One interesting aspect of library provision of access to electronic resources is the near universal rise of inter-library lending and borrowing of tangible library materials. Close examination of this phenomenon reveals that libraries that spend a higher proportion of their budgets on electronic materials are also high net borrowers of books and articles from other libraries. Exactly the reverse is true for libraries that devote a smaller proportion of their budgets to electronic resources. What this tells you is that the priorities as between electronic resources and print materials in the first class of library do not match the expectations and needs of those library’s users.

2. The future

It is hard to guess what will happen in the future in any field of human endeavor and predicting the future of library collections and the way in which they are built and maintained is a particularly hazardous exercise. However, it is reasonable to assume that our budgets will continue to be constrained, that the demand for library materials in all formats will increase, that collection developers will continue to need the skills of tightrope walkers and jugglers simultaneously, and that we, as a profession, will be forced to deal with the vital question of the preservation of the human record.

References