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Random Ramblings — The Difference between a Great and a Good Research Library: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

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I've pondered many years about what makes the difference between a great and a good research library. I finally hit upon an operational definition that makes sense to me, at least for the past. I'll start with an example. I wrote my dissertation at **Yale University** with access to one of the greatest research libraries in my field, French Literature. After less than a week spent in looking for a topic, I chose a niche subject, Dialogues of the Dead. This minor genre, popular from around 1680-1720 in several European literatures, was based upon one classical text written by the Greek author **Lucian**. I immediately started looking for the key documents to begin my research. I had no worries about the major authors, but I needed the only critical work on the genre, privately published in Paris, and a major text by **Jungerman**, a distinctly minor author. I found both in the stacks ready to be checked out. Along the way, I consulted the best work on **Lucian**, published in French in 1882, and a scholarly article published in Germany while the bombs rained down during World War II. The only document missing from **Yale** was a dissertation edition of **Fontennele's** *Dialogues des morts*, which I was able to borrow on extended interlibrary loan. I chose my subject and then found virtually everything that I needed in one great library.

The process would have been much different in a good library such as the **University of Utah** or **Wayne State University**. I know these collections well from my experiences as French selector. I would have needed to select my topic carefully if I wished to depend mostly on my institution's library resources. While interlibrary loan would be an option, I would need to find some way to make print or, today, digital copies of any missing key texts that I would need to consult frequently. Visiting other libraries on research trips would pose the same issues for such documents. One last option would be for me to go live somewhere near a great library to make use of its resources. I have always suspected that many **Wayne State** faculty and students live in Ann Arbor because they have reciprocal access to the **University of Michigan** collections in another great library. As a doctoral student with a good library, I would have had to choose my subject carefully or find alternate ways to access key research materials.

What I described above for the past was also true for faculty research in many disciplines. In the same way as many STM (science/technology/medicine) researchers needed lab facilities, many Humanities and some Social Science researchers needed access to key monographic research materials. As long as serials were available only in print, the same was true for STM. I remember a case study for my management class about a high-level faculty hire in oceanography who asked for thousands of dollars in new serial subscriptions. During this period, I strongly favored giving new faculty and doctoral students some sort of library allocation to buy materials to support their research.

Today providing resources is easier for those disciplines with comprehensive research databases since, I believe, the expectation that researchers access print items is low in many disciplines. Research libraries still need to provide access to books for Humanities and Social Sciences scholars. Good libraries promise just-in-time availability. Patron-driven acquisitions can acquire most needed materials from the normal vendors in print or as eBooks, from print-on-demand, in the out-of-print market, from a growing number of comprehensive collections such as **Google Scholar**, the **Hathi Trust**, etc., or through ILL. For ILL materials, the library can ask for permission to digitize materials, especially if they are out of print. Great libraries are still building collections for the future, just-in-case, albeit less comprehensively for many of them. **Yale University**, as a great library, had thousands of unused books. The books were there when I needed them, but I doubt that anyone in the intervening forty years has looked at the more esoteric materials. Self-publishing is also complicating matters. According to the report I heard on National Public Radio, of the one million titles published last year in the United States, 750,000 were self-published, mostly as eBooks. I don't know how much interest research libraries should have in these materials. A final trend for some good libraries is to reduce voluntarily print collections by removing unused materials to create space for other library or university functions. Warehousing is dead; access is alive.

What about the future of collection development as many great libraries turn into good libraries? Does it matter? Paradoxically, the current model may result in great libraries being those libraries with enough funding to purchase large collections of electronic resources. With the just-in-time model described above, an English professor in a good library would have almost equal access to needed resources as that of a faculty member in the great library that had already purchased them in digital or print formats. The researcher in the good library will need personal or institutional access to funding and may have to wait a bit for the items to arrive, but the funding in many cases shouldn't be that great nor the wait very long.

On the other hand, has the great library wasted resources on the materials that no one will ever use? The exception for the researcher in a good library may be rare materials, but even here many libraries are turning away from using funds to purchase common materials. Instead, they are channeling resources to make their rare materials digitally accessible.

The issue then becomes whether the just-in-time model won't work in some areas so that great libraries are still needed. Area studies are the first possible exception. If significant numbers of print materials with research significance have a good chance of disappearing forever from the marketplace because of short print runs and the inability of local libraries to collect them, a great library should purchase them right away since they won't be available just-in-time for good libraries. With increasing globalization, I suspect that the number of these areas where great libraries need to collect comprehensively is diminishing.

A second area worth considering is eBooks. I suspect that good libraries won't have to worry about eBooks from commercial publishers, even those that appear only in digital editions, because enough libraries are worried about this problem to solve it. I have greater concern for the vast numbers of privately-published, digital books. **Amazon** is actively seeking digital authors; there are currently 1,475,826 **Kindle** books available for sale at 3:45 pm, July 21, 2012. **Apple** advertises over 700,000 for sale from **iBooks**. I don't know how many of these items are uniquely digital and how many have or will have interest for researchers. The **Kindle** Direct Publishing Terms and Conditions allow authors to withdraw their digital books with five days' notice so that some may disappear, perhaps without a trace. I don't know if any libraries are considering systematic efforts to archive **Kindle** and **iBooks** books of potential research interest.

The third area is grey literature. Great libraries provided comprehensive subject coverage through their extensive collecting of gray literature which includes "patents, technical reports from government agencies or scientific research groups, working papers from research groups or committees, white papers, and preprints." (Wikipedia) Bibliographers spent much effort in tracking down these resources, which often cost very little once they were found. I suspect that many of these resources exist digitally on the Web. Both good and great libraries will be able to find them once researchers or librarians know that they exist. Great libraries, however, may continue to collect them for the reason given next.

Good libraries that build collections based upon patron-driven acquisitions will be able to provide researchers with what they want. Great libraries will be able to provide researchers with useful resources that they didn't know they needed. Perhaps the main function of great libraries will be to scan subject areas where they would have comprehensively collected in the print world at Conspectus Level 5 to acquire in print or digital format materials of research interest that do not appear in standard sources and that even the reasonably-skilled researcher might never discover. In some cases, a record with a link to the digital resource may be all that is needed if continued availability is highly probable. Faculty and students in these great libraries will be able to use the integrated library system or its successor to find useful items that would otherwise be difficult to identify. Researchers in good libraries may need to develop more sophisticated searching skills to include scanning **Amazon** entries, developing precisely targeted searches in Google or the other search engines, or discovering specialized bibliographies. Or, if the great libraries do decide to collect the items or the links as described above, all that the good libraries' researchers may need to do is to access the great libraries' integrated library systems, which I assume would be available on the Internet.

To conclude, to assure the greatest access to scholarly resources, perhaps the great libraries of the world should revive the idea of cooperative collection development where the goal is discovery rather than purchase. The commercial databases will cover some areas, notably STM, because enough great and good libraries have traditionally purchased these resources to make their creation and maintenance profitable. For poorer areas with extensive grey literature or self-publication, I could see informal agreements where, for example, the **Yale University** libraries would collect comprehensively anything on the Incas, while the **UC Berkeley** libraries would do the same for the Mayans. While the Internet has destroyed any hope of systematically collecting all human knowledge, newly-focused cooperative efforts would be a step in the right direction and provide a new definition of a great library.