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Op Ed: Random Ramblings - How Special Are Special Collections?

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How Special Are Special Collections?

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Should libraries shift their attention to special collections and pay less attention to commercially published books? **Rick Anderson** at the **University of Utah** has suggested doing so in his piece, “Can’t Buy Us Love: The Declining Importance of Library Books and the Rising Importance of Special Collections.” (The document is available as a free download at: <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/blog-individual/cant-buy-us-love-rick-anderson-kicks-new-ithaka-sr-issue-briefs-series>.) I discovered this provocative document through a column by **Joseph Esposito**, “For Libraries the Future Is a Foreign Country,” in **The Scholarly Kitchen**. <http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2013/08/07/for-libraries-the-future-is-a-foreign-country/>. I presented a counterview for some institutions that led to an exchange of comments between **Anderson** and me that I would like to expand here. To give the conclusion first, **Anderson** and I agreed that this new collection development model depends upon the larger institution’s goals and should not undermine the academic mission of the university. I see, however, internal funding issues and outside political forces that may pose obstacles to any such shift. I also wish that he would have defined special collections more precisely.

To give a bit of history first, I made heavy use of special collections in my early academic career as a doctoral student in French Language and Literature at **Yale University** (1967-1971). The course I took on the 18th century French novel required visiting **Yale’s Beinecke Library** to read a particularly rare text. My best term paper was an analysis of how **Montaigne** cited **Lucretius** that required access to the very early edition that **Montaigne** quoted. Similarly, my dissertation on French dialogues des morts required tracking down obscure resources at **Yale** and elsewhere. I appreciate the value of special collections in advancing scholarship.

Rick Anderson’s thesis is that libraries should shift resources from collecting and providing access to commodity documents (traditionally published books) to the non-commodity materials found in special collections. He proposes acquiring these materials, digitizing them, and making them findable not only by traditional cataloging but through metadata accessible “to popular search engines.” By doing so, scholars will have access to additional scholarly resources beyond those that can be easily acquired com-

mercially. I wish to make it clear that he is not advocating abandoning collecting commodity documents though he recognizes that any shift will result in the purchase of fewer traditional materials. I also recognize that this short summary does not do justice to his reasoning and suggest reading the full document.

My first concern is the definition of special collections. After reading the document multiple times, I’m not sure whether he includes archival materials or not. While many examples are printed materials, his closing illustration deals with “handwritten diaries produced by 19th-century pioneers who came west on the Overland Trail.” I would consider these to be archival materials since they were never published in multiple copies. On the other side, I would consider some materials currently held in research library special collections to be as much commodity documents as currently published works since they are readily available though expensive enough to require special protection. They can be as easily replaced as a current best seller; it just takes a lot more money to do so. Some materials in special collections are also museum pieces to be acquired for their beauty and special features such as ornate bindings without much value for scholarship. I am going to base my discussion here on a definition of special collections as follows: unique or inaccessible materials of potential scholarly interest including archival materials.

My interpretation of **Anderson’s** document is that he proposes moving funds from the monograph acquisitions budget. I question whether this is possible in some research libraries. Databases, serial subscriptions, and big deals have taken an increasing percentage of many research library budgets to the point that not much is left for book purchases. What is purchased is now often through patron driven acquisitions with very little material bought that won’t see immediate use. In my own institution, **Wayne State University**, I have had very little funding after meeting faculty direct needs and covering eBook purchases through PDA. Any diversion of these funds to special collections would penalize meeting current needs.

The other possibility would be to reduce the purchase of non-monograph digital resources. If costs continue to rise, this may happen anyway. Doing so would most likely lead to canceling some databases and packages that faculty and students would miss much more

than the non-purchase of monographs. These cuts would most likely lead to the reduction in access for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Medicine) researchers, who in some ways have been unaffected by the cuts in monographs since many STEM disciplines depend more on journals.

I would greatly fear the political consequences in any publicly funded research institution from the diversion of funding from STEM research resources to special collections. My governor wants public higher education to provide jobs for students and to produce research that will benefit the Michigan economy. I believe that many university presidents want to continue to support their STEM research initiatives during a period of danger from cuts in the federal budget. In addition, the advantage of making non-commodity scholarly materials available to outside researchers can turn into an internal political disadvantage if doing so means not meeting recognized local needs in areas that bring research funding to the university.

To quote my comments in **The Scholarly Kitchen** exchange: “My situation would then be the need to cut resources in STEM areas since not much is left to cut in the Humanities and the Social Sciences. I would hate to defend the library if a well-funded researcher with multiple grants complained to the state legislature that an important resource in his/her area was cut to protect funding for transcribing Overland Trail narratives. Furthermore, this researcher quotes the Dean of Libraries who said that he/she should write to colleagues to get copies of the needed articles rather than finding them in a few seconds in the resource that was just cut. The Dean of Libraries also said that funding scholarship was more important than meeting local needs for commodity publications. (This is a misquote, but I would make it if I were the researcher.)” To explain part of the quote above, **Anderson** suggests that researchers could request copies of articles directly from the authors by email for items not found in the local collection.

Among many possibilities, I will comment on three additional issues. The first is that the **Anderson** initiative sounds very much like what happened in the 1960s and 1970s with major microform sets and is currently underway in creating the digital version of **Early English Books**. (<http://eebo.chadwyck.com/marketing/about.htm>) These

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commercial and cooperative initiatives made available vast quantities of non-commodity materials. Various grant-funded cataloging initiatives produced digital records that greatly increased their availability. While microform is not as easily accessible as digital text, serious scholars have had access to these treasure troves of non-commodity source documents for decades. Before committing local institutional funds to significant local projects, I would suggest looking into possible commercial and consortial projects to create systematic and thus more valuable collections of non-commodity research materials. Perhaps research on the use of major microform sets would also provide evidence one way or the other about the importance of non-commodity materials to the scholarly community.

Second, I see another class of non-commodity documents vying for the attention of research libraries, that is, self-published books. In my introduction to the special segment on this topic in *Against The Grain*, I commented on the lack of any discussion of self-published books from the perspective of a research library whose goal is to collect everything on a subject at conspectus level five. I don't have any proof, but I suspect that some self-published materials will be important primary sources for some fields. For example, narratives from veterans of the various recent conflicts or autobiographies of growing up in certain localities are potentially valuable for scholars. I have no idea if any institutions are searching for these materials and preserving them as part of their stated objective of collecting resources as comprehensively as possible, but I think that moving in this direction is another possible step in collecting non-commodity source materials for the future while they are still accessible today.

Finally, **Rich Anderson** has been a strong proponent of patron driven acquisitions for commodity materials including the observation that librarians have often been poor stewards in judging what their communities need. I would suggest applying these same principles to non-commodity materials before committing resources to their acquisition, digitization, and discoverability. Identifying materials of interest to local scholars might be the first step and would counter some of the possible negative publicity as I have described above since the library could point to the use of these materials by its primary constituency.

To conclude, let me give a bit of history to explain how I arrived at these views. I was Assistant Director for Technical Services at the **University of Utah** from 1980-1988. I believe that this was a former iteration of the position that **Rick Anderson** now holds and included responsibilities as chief collection development officer. The special collections unit that included archives was a key component of the library's mission and received about 20% of the funding for both collections and staff. In 1988, I become Associate Dean of University Libraries at **Wayne State University** where I

also had responsibilities for overall collection development. I was immediately surprised to discover that special collections had a much lower priority and received virtually no funding. While the **WSU** library possessed some treasures, they were mostly gifts. To this day, no special reading room exists for their use. Instead, **Wayne State University** is a nitty-gritty, urban institution with a strong desire to build excellence through increased research funding, mostly in STEM disciplines. The goal was and perhaps still is to make available the best possible collection of commodity materials to support faculty and students at the highest levels without diverting resources to non-commodity resources. As **Rick Anderson** and I agreed, both views have their validity and depend upon the host institution's mission. He raises important questions that this short column has assuredly not answered. I have rather attempted to ask additional questions worthy of further discussion and research. 🌿