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# Value-added collections: the Oxford Libraries Staff Conference, St Catherine's College, Oxford, 15 March 2007

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Eager to take up the challenge to 'think outside the stacks', some 250 Oxford University Library Services (OULS) staff converged on St Catherine's College for a day of stimulating and thought-provoking presentations and workshops on the theme of 'value-added collections'.

## **SETTING THE SCENE**

The vital importance of this 'added value' was established in the opening presentation, by John Cox of John Cox Associates Ltd, on 'the history and future of the scholarly journal'. Academic journal publishing is a niche market which is facing serious challenges – not only from open-access publications but also (and more significantly) from major commercial rivals such as Google Scholar, Google Book Search and Microsoft Academic Searcher. Users now have the option to look for content from many different sources; Cox argued convincingly that scholarly journal publishing's future success depends on building superior functionality around that content, giving users the tools they need to search, analyse and manipulate data with maximum ease, effectiveness and convenience.

With the easy, convenient access to information that the internet supposedly provides, might we call it the 'perfect collection'? This was the question posed to us by Alice Keller, OULS's head of collection management. Imagining the perfect library, we may perhaps dream of a limitless

collection, containing every imaginable book and idea – yet such a phenomenon would in fact be far from Utopian. As Jorge Luis Borges' story of the Library of Babel makes clear, a library that contains everything must include the nonsensical and the idiotic as well as the edifying; it will hold material that is misleading, useless, even dangerous.<sup>1</sup> A good collection, by contrast, is useful and valuable because it has boundaries and purpose, and users can have confidence in the quality of the information it contains. The internet, then, while not quite a Library of Babel, cannot properly be called a collection either; whilst it may have the potential to become the 'perfect library', good management is essential if this ideal is ever to be realised.

## WORKSHOPS

The range of workshops on offer reflected the breadth of the question the conference was addressing: all aspects of collections were covered, from the preservation of past treasures to the exciting possibilities afforded by new technologies. I began with the session led by Chris Fletcher, head of western manuscripts, whose presentation 'Magic and meaning: exploring literary manuscripts in the Bodleian' amply demonstrated the two kinds of value that Philip Larkin believed to inhere in all manuscripts: the meaningful, which contributes to our understanding of the content of the text, and the magical, which affords us a tangible point of contact with the author him- or herself. The delights to which we were introduced included Jane Austen's juvenilia, Percy Bysshe Shelley's guitar (classified as 'Bodleian Relics 1!'), and notes and postcards from Larkin himself reflecting the development of the thoughts on love which were finally encapsulated in his poem 'An Arundel Tomb'. But what of magic and meaning in the electronic age? Far from being lost, Fletcher suggested that they may now be found in new sources, such as authors' e-mail archives or hand-edited printouts of word-processed drafts.

Jonathan McAslan (of OULS collection management) brought us back to the present day by addressing the question 'Electronic journals and databases: are they being used?' The answer was a resounding 'yes'; in fact, in the case of JSTOR, Oxford University is the heaviest user in the world. Recognition of the importance of reliable usage statistics for purchasing and licensing decisions has led to the establishment of an internationally recognised code of practice governing this information: COUNTER (counting online usage of networked electronic resources).<sup>2</sup>

However, statistics cannot tell us everything we may want to know, such as why users will choose one resource over another. Lively discussion was generated by the question of access to electronic resources for walk-in users (whose effect on usage statistics is significant), and where responsibility for restricting their usage and enforcing licensing agreements should lie.

The final workshop I attended looked towards the future, as Michael Fraser of Oxford University computing services introduced us to the potential benefits offered by VREs (virtual research environments). While the technical terminology of the topic was new to many of us, it became clear that many of the librarian's key skills – data curation, user education and, perhaps most importantly, our knowledge of the communities we serve – can be brought to bear on VRE projects. Fraser argued that the key to success is to start not with the VRE service itself, but with its (potential) users: to find out how they work, what research-related tasks and activities they perform on a daily basis and how the proposed VRE might be tailored to fit into and enhance these activities. The VRE is not intended to replace traditional working environments, but it does make possible significant additional benefits, most importantly the enabling of inter-institutional collaborative research, bringing together communities of scholars from all over the world.

## RESHAPING AND POSITIONING

Are librarians an endangered species? Figures are available which appear to suggest not: for example, there are more libraries than branches of McDonalds in the United States. However, Professor Derek Law of the University of Strathclyde insisted that these comforting statistics must not be allowed to distract us from the very real challenges with which we are presented by the new generation of users who are 'digital natives': those to whom Google, wikis and social networking sites are second nature, and whose expectation and desire is for immediately accessible, 'good enough' online information. How do librarians and information professionals – most of whom, still, are 'digital immigrants' – address users who are increasingly 'aliterate' and for whom libraries are at best a secondary resource? Since knowledge is no longer equivalent to the printed word, what can libraries now do to secure the influence that they once derived from their status as storehouses of knowledge? Law's message, like that of earlier speakers, was clear: content alone is no longer enough. It is the services we build around that

content that matter, bringing users and information together by selecting, acquiring and/or providing access to resources, and by training and educating patrons in their use. (Having a coherent philosophy for e-collection development is particularly important.) Rather than letting traditional library activities be surpassed by user-led Web 2.0 initiatives, Law argued, libraries can instead pick up on these and professionalise them.

Dr Sarah Thomas, the new Bodley's Librarian and Director of OULS, provided plentiful examples of ways in which this could be done in her presentation, 'Positioning Oxford's libraries to meet the needs of next-generation scholars and students'. Having acknowledged that librarians may feel in the current situation as if our very foundations are shaking, Thomas went on to suggest that the changes we are now undergoing are not in fact more radical than anything that has happened before – change has always been a constant – and there are many tools and tactics we can apply to help us to adapt. Mobile-device searching, strategic digitisation and a recommendation system such as that used by Amazon (adapted for the library context) are all possible means by which we might increase exploitation of our collections. We must continue to make the most of our existing strengths (in Oxford's case, the unique special collections), and also develop our collections in creative and innovative ways, by spending more on diverse media and increasing access to non-owned material. And, just as importantly, we need to communicate with our users in dynamic and effective ways, such as employing interactive tools to facilitate two-way communication, enabling participation in structured folksonomies and public tagging, and providing engaging customised web pages. In short, Thomas argued, we should know our users; give them what they want; give them what they need.

#### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

By the close of the conference, I realised that truly to 'think outside the stacks' means going much further than I had initially expected. It is not enough simply to broaden one's understanding of 'library resources' to include electronic publications and databases as well as books; we need to go beyond this, to know the people who are using these resources and to understand their continually evolving needs. By adding value to our collections in ways that will meet those needs, we can rise to the challenges of the digital age.

#### **REFERENCES**

- 1 Available at: [http://jubal.westnet.com/hyperdiscordia/library\\_of\\_babel.html](http://jubal.westnet.com/hyperdiscordia/library_of_babel.html) (accessed 23 March 2007)
- 2 See <http://www.projectcounter.org/about.html>