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Federal Depository Library Program: Services *and* Collections
by James A. Jacobs
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In the age of digital information, libraries and librarians are struggling to define their proper roles. In a time of financial uncertainty and economic crisis, many libraries are facing decisions that will have long-term implications and consequences. At a time like this it is particularly important that we have a clear vision of a sustainable role for libraries.

The issues libraries face can be seen very clearly in a proposal by the Depository Library Council, which advises on matters related to the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). It has recommended that the Government Printing Office (GPO) should “prepare depository libraries for a digital Federal Depository Library system that is not centered on collections.” The Council is suggesting that government depository libraries should focus on services *instead of* collections.

With this recommendation, Council has reached its own implicit conclusions about the roles of librarians and libraries in society. Council is saying that the role of librarians is to provide information services and the role of libraries (collections) should be in the hands of GPO, the National Archives (NARA), and individual government agencies.

There are at least two reasons that this decision is a troubling one in these troubling times. First, it seems counter-intuitive to claim that the best future we can imagine for libraries in the digital age is “libraries without collections.” Second, it is not clear that government agencies have or should have the role that Council wants for them.

The role of librarians

An emphasis on service at the expense of collections comes mostly from a view that users are overwhelmed by an information glut and need information professionals to help them navigate a bewildering array of choices. Although this view is a bit paternalistic, implying that librarians know better than users what they need, it is at least based on an understanding of the complex and difficult job of finding the right information on the web today. In this view, librarianship would be about helping people navigate a complex, networked maze of shifting, changing information. There is nothing wrong with the view that libraries should provide information services and there is in fact much to recommend it, but this service-only model misses a key role for libraries. It is a view of librarians without libraries.

This view assumes an unorganized, undifferentiated web of information controlled by information providers (e.g., government agencies, commercial vendors, information aggregators, publishers), visible only through the information silos and portals created by those providers. It accepts that libraries will not build digital collections to fit the needs of their users but will simply provide services for information over which librarians have no control.

Librarians, in this view, are valuable precisely because they have no control over information.

This view also accepts that information will be tightly controlled by producers and distributors. What is available, who can use it, under what conditions it may be used, and when it becomes unavailable will be controlled by government agencies, commercial vendors and other "content" distributors.

To me, this suggests that librarians will be analogous to travel agents who, because they deal every day with the complex, difficult, disparate, unconnected systems, are better able than the traveler to navigate these systems and find the best flight at the best price. So librarians, in this view, will help casual information users navigate a variety of complex, difficult, disparate, unconnected, public-freely-available and proprietary-and-licensed information systems. Just as travel agents have no control over what flights or trips are available or what they cost or what restrictions are placed on them, so librarians will have no control over what information is available or what it costs or what restrictions are placed on its use.

In this view, librarians will not manage collections but will license the right to read from those who control information. Whether the license comes in the form of designation as an FDLP library, or from a contractual "partnership" with GPO (which GPO is promoting as a substitute for FDLP deposit), or from payment to a commercial vendor for a license to access information, or by the granting by the Google Books legal department of permission (and restrictions) on use, the result is the same. A recent article in *Library Hi Tech* summarized this view succinctly: "In [the] future, librarians will no longer manage media, they will manage rights."ⁱ

This view reshapes the role of librarians from information providers to information gatekeepers; from information curators to business officers who sign contracts and pay bills and police contracts for publishers. It is not clear that such a role is either desirable or that it requires a librarian.

The role of libraries

Those who believe libraries need not have digital collections apparently assume that, because there is information available on the web, there is no need to duplicate it locally. Librarians should be the first to understand that current availability of any given piece of information does not guarantee its availability or usability in the future. Librarians who understand the difficulty of finding information on the web today should look to building digital collections to solve these problems rather than playing a never-ending game of catch-up with shifting information and then hoping that users will recognize them as indispensable service providers.

There are many organizations, institutions, and vendors that have information on the web that they will give or sell to you. But, the word "library" does not mean "I have some information." If it did, bookstores would be libraries and publishers would be librarians. We need libraries in addition to publishers and bookstores and information vendors and government agencies that distribute information as a by-product of their primary mission. Scholars, journalists, economists, historians, lawyers, physicians, engineers, and citizens of all kinds require a continuing, complete record of information, not just a temporary flow of contemporary

information. Who will ensure long-term, free access to the information they need if libraries do not?

The issue that we face is not only about understanding the role of libraries but also about understanding the role of information creators and distributors. For us to assume that producers and distributors will have the same values and ethics and practices as librarians is to confuse the role of producers with the role of curators. In the life-cycle of information, the role of producers ends with users, but the role of libraries begins with users.

It is all about control

Let's be clear. Even in the paper and ink world, libraries and their collections were about wresting control of information from producers and distributors and granting control to local communities and information users. A publisher could take a book out of print, but a library could keep it available. A user could pay for a book or a magazine subscription, but could choose instead to use the information for free at the library. Libraries leveraged economies of scale for the benefit of the community, enabling every community member to have benefits of access to information that no individual could possibly afford.

The need for wresting control away from those who wish to control the access to and the use of information has not changed in the digital world. But the battle lines have changed and we need librarians in the fight to keep free, open, usable access.

"Content providers" want to replace copyright with license agreements. Distributors want to impose DRM technologies that tie content to particular technologies that make the information harder to preserve and difficult or even impossible to reuse or repurpose. Producers want to charge for every single use and dictate who can use information, under what conditions, and in what way. In addition, the proliferation of requirements to register to read or use information portends a world in which people will not have the right of privacy when reading or even when searching or browsing. Governments are not immune to these realities. Governments want to be able to control information they create; they want to be able to alter and even withdraw information after it has been released. Governments increasingly want to view their information as a commodity, which they can use to generate income. And governments are constrained by laws and regulations that prohibit them from "competing" with the private sector, a fact that puts all government information at risk of being constrained by commercial interests.

It is ironic that, given technologies that enable almost unlimited use and re-use of information and that enable information to be distributed and used and re-used almost without cost, we face producers who want to limit access, charge for every use, restrict re-use, and look over our shoulders to see what we're reading. Librarians should be the first to recognize that the interests of readers and user-communities are different from the interests of information producers and that libraries and library collections are a way to bridge the gap between the two.

The optimistic view

Even if one takes an optimistic view and assumes the best intentions on the part of politicians and bureaucrats, it would be irresponsible to assume that government agencies will be able to provide long-term, free public access to information as well as libraries can.

Few government agencies have information access as a primary mission and even those that do face multiple barriers to assuring permanent, free access to usable digital information. The National Archives is a prime example. While NARA has an explicit mission of making records available "in perpetuity," it is constrained by technology, budgets, and recalcitrant agencies. Put simply, it has too much to do and not enough funding to do it. In an honest attempt to deal with these realities, NARA is turning to the private sector to make information more readily available, effectively privatizing the public record. The Government Printing Office likes to claim that there has been "a paradigm shift in preservation of depository materials" but you will look in vain in the GPO Access Act of 1993 (107 Stat.112), on which it bases these claims, for the words "preservation" or "long-term" or "permanent." There are good intentions, but no mandate; there are inadequate budgets and no guarantees. Even GPO recognized this in its early policies to implement this "paradigm shift" when it said it would maintain information online only "as long as usage warrants."

Agencies that have information access as a secondary mission or provide information as a by-product of some other function will not have the inclination, ability, or budget to provide long-term access to their information. And, as the missions of agencies change or are split among new agencies, and as agencies are dissolved or subsumed by other agencies, information will be lost.

But even if one assumes that the government will eventually overcome these problems, there are still other problems. Chief among these is that no one can keep everything forever. Whether it is superseded information, or out of date information, or embarrassing information, or expensive-to-keep information, or low-use information that no longer "warrants" keeping, everyone will weed something sometime. The question we should be asking is, Who will be in charge of weeding?

Society needs different libraries with different collections that respond to the needs of their user-communities (no longer necessarily geographically-based) when making decisions on the value of information. A society without digital libraries will be relying only on federal budget priorities and the market to decide what is worth keeping. Having different collections meeting the needs of different user-communities will better ensure preservation of the information that society as a whole needs. A law library will make different decisions than a medical library and both will make different choices than a library that caters to historians of science. This is a good thing. It builds robustness into preservation and access.

Finally, the e-government movement is reshaping government information policies to be more flexible and interactive. In practice, this means that government will value information transactions more than it values instantiating information in a preservable, re-usable form. Such changes will value current information, but will devalue "out of date" information. In such

an environment, agencies will find it difficult, if not impossible, to justify preserving last year's annual report, much less something from ten years or a hundred years ago.

Conclusions

For those who believe that information should just remain in the possession and control of producers and for those who view the web as a virtual "library," the idea of digital library collections naturally seems unnecessary and even anachronistic. For those who value long-term, free, public access to information, leaving control of information in the hands of those who will control use, limit access, and charge fees is anathema. If libraries choose to have no digital collections, it will almost certainly result in licensing constraints, DRM constraints, loss of information, loss of free access, loss of usability of information, and more.

Society needs institutions that select that information that deserves preserving from the plethora of information that surrounds us; it needs institutions that then acquire, organize, and preserve that information and that provide trusted, free, privacy-respecting, secure access to and service for that information. Society needs institutions that have the complete mix of all of these roles as their primary mission (not a secondary mission or a by-product of publishing, or dissemination, or making money). In the case of government information in a participatory democracy it is particularly important, even essential, that society has such institutions. We call them libraries.

ⁱ Böhner, Dörte. "Digital rights description as part of digital rights management: a challenge for libraries." *Library Hi Tech* 26, no. 4 (2008): 598-605.
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