

Reference Librarian: Technologist or Scholar?
Columbia University, March 12, 2004
Keynote Address by Dr. Thomas Mann, Library of Congress

Introduction

A dissenting opinion from those normally shared at typical library conferences, this talk was about onsite book collections in research libraries.

Value of the book collection

- According to the 80/20 rule of thumb, most questions can be answered by 20% of the resources; research libraries have the responsibility to answer the 20% of questions that cannot be answered by the core 20% of sources.
- We have a responsibility to convey knowledge and understanding, not just information.
- Preservation of knowledge and information records is also a distinct responsibility of research libraries--one that is not discharged via electronic formats.

Arguments against the book collection

- "A New World of Scholarly Communication." Richard C. Atkinson. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Washington: Nov 7, 2003. Vol. 50, Iss. 11; pg. B.16
 - Book collections are redundant
 - book collections are no longer affordable
- Soon everything will be digitized and there will be no need for print collections

Arguments for the book collection

- The more difficult and scholarly reference questions—those not easily answered by the core collection or the Internet—these are the questions that research libraries are there to answer.
- Some answers are unfindable by any means other than focused browsing.
- Not even retrospective analytic cataloging of the entire collection would yield the desired results as many books don't have a table of content or an index.
- Not only must we have the onsite book collection, it must be in subject classified—not accession or size—order so that it is browsable.

Mann gave three research queries to illustrate why the onsite collection is necessary.

- The ability to browse full texts shelved contiguously in the stacks is sometimes necessary when catalog records are inadequate.
- Browsing, in addition to solving the immediate need can lead, felicitously to answers for others, as well.
- Books are not like auto parts: copyright restrictions do not impede the completeness of parts inventories but they do very much restrict how much information about books can be digitized.
- Offsite storage: books there are not shelved by subject to begin with, and so the books on a subject could not be delivered as a group—only one by one.
- Networked borrowing: With the books scattered at libraries all over a consortium, it is impossible to physically browse all of the relevant titles at once.

Principle of least effort

- People give up if the effort is too great. They will walk away, research question unanswered.

- However, we should give readers credit for willingness to accept sources other than digital--a point confirmed in a major new user study.

E-books: But what about netLibrary?

- Digitization
 - U. Penn has 20K books digitized.
 - netLibrary has 65K.
 - Amazon Search Inside the Book™ has 120K current titles.
 - The Library of Congress's classed print collection is 20 million volumes, with 20 thousand more added each month. Is it realistic to imagine that anyone will catch up?
 - Even with a Curtis Book Scanner, it would take 20 years to scan in LC's *current* holdings.
- Copyright
 - Books can't be digitized without permission and probably a fee until they're in the public domain.
 - Most of the books people want to access are not in the public domain, nor are they digitized.
- Readability
 - Most people will not read lengthy texts online at all--confirmed by Barnes & Noble's cessation of e-book sales, and by survey of the room: only about 10 of 150 present have read an e-book.

Conclusion

It is the job of research libraries to find answers to the 20% of questions that *cannot* be answered by the core 20% of collections. We need large on-site book collections, shelved by subject, for the really difficult inquiries. We also need real books for their readability, without which knowledge and understanding suffer. And we need real books for long-term preservation purposes.

"Defenses" of libraries-as-places that fail to mention books are contributing to the problem, not to the solution. Such defenses mention only things like:

- Spaces for individuals to work alone or collaboratively
- Computer labs
- Electronic classrooms
- Study lounges
- Quiet corners

Audience questions yielded some tidbits

- "A paradigm shift [from print to electronic] is viewed as an inevitability like biological evolution."
- Harvard has sent half of their collection offsite. Faculty say that this is changing the course of their research.
- [Mann] will use resources like JSTOR in choosing material for remote storage; and he would also send duplicate copies. He also made the point, though, that libraries need to lobby for continued construction--this will give those that achieve it a major competitive advantage in attracting the faculty and students desired in the new century.
- Librarians aren't talking about books, but that's what researchers think of.