Collections Were Us: Vignettes from a postmodernist library?

The question

The fundamental question for all research libraries is '*How does the library sustain and increase its value to its institution?*' To answer this we need to ensure that our evidence is aligned to the institution's value metric system e.g. fewer cases of plagiarism cited, increased scores in national surveys etc. In short what does a 21st century research library do (by way of collections, services, support, space, expertise etc) which makes a difference to the core mission of the institution?

For most research libraries the collection, in all of its manifestations, is a significant expenditure. So we need to make evident its value to our paymasters. As we all know size and depth have been metrics which mattered to libraries, and indeed their institutions for some time. However is this something which had more value and resonance when libraries were the exclusive custodians and providers of content?

The context

Imperial College London is a leading research institution but its library does not have the breadth and depth of collections of other research libraries. There is an established collection policy (Information Resources Management and Access Policy, [1]IRMAP) in place, there are no library committees, our relatively small book collections are primarily teaching collections and there is a well funded subscriptions budget. So what are our collection dilemmas, I hear colleagues say – then read on gentle reader.

As with all research libraries it is no longer just about '*our (i.e. the library/institutions) collection'* - whether it be print, born digital or digitised content; we are now operating in '*my (i.e. the users) collection'* space - which comprises all of the above plus preprints, post prints, electronic reading lists, course content, digital objects etc, to name but a few.

The landscape

Whatever the internal challenges we must also look outwards to the expertise and work in the sector. Some examples are the innovative Lemon Tree[2] work at Huddersfield, to Oakleaf's[3] 'Value of Academic Libraries' work to the JISC funded work on activity data[4]. These and many other examples begin to address the 'meaningful metric' conundrum which will have resonance at institutional level by looking at engagement measures such as impact on student learning as contrasted to gate count. This will hopefully breaks us free from the libraryland gazing measures which have haunted many a statistical return e.g. how many items borrowed.

Interpreting our management data more creatively will allow us to review and interpret the findings to shape collections to meet our users' needs and demonstrate value to the institution's mission. Whilst this trend addresses one aspect of collection planning it also exacerbates tensions between an agile collection for current users to one that is built and planned for future scholarship.

Any thoughts about collections cannot be done in a vacuum but within the context of the Open Access (OA) maelstrom ranging around us. Other changes in the scholarly communication world e.g.

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[1] http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/library/aboutus/irmap
[2] http://www.hud.ac.uk/tali/projects/tl_projects_11/lemon_tree/
[3] http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issues/value/val_report.pdf
[4] http://www.activitydata.org/

data rich publications, alt-metrics, text mining, network wide shared services etc. also have consequences for the notion of collections.

What is keeping us awake?

For over a decade the sector has been familiar with, and for many, operating in an environment where connection management, in a thousand different ways, is an integral part of any research library's collection strategy. The monograph and e-book market is now following the well worn path which ejournals took 15 years ago.

However whilst we continue to manage and plan collections in a world of discretely owned or licensed objects we are in danger of becoming divorced from our users' and suppliers' worlds. We need to consider how we will build and manage collections in a climate of the 'tiny deal'[5] following other content industries.

Like many libraries one of our challenges is around our 'collection sphere'. We are expanding beyond the '*Collection – Connection'* paradigm into the '*Collection – Connection – Channel'* triad.

The content landscape is flexing as new players and indeed different species of player are entering the content block. We need only look at companies such as Cengage[6], VitalSource[7] , DeepDyve[8] , and Mendeley plus the offerings from established content suppliers to see the changes afoot.

Who the actual players may be is an interesting debate e.g. Google with its Apps for education, Apple with an iContent model ported to the iPad /Kindle/shiny device of choice market. Regardless of who they are we need to consider how best to position the research library in the discussions.

The 'tiny deal' is not only something aimed to support our students but there are also drivers coming from the research world. The rise of alt-metrics and the debates around journal impact factors and article based measures is another example of how the information nugget is becoming smaller.

The growth of personalisation in the digital world means that vanilla e-content delivery is not enough. Our users routinely not only search, find and select content but also choose how it is delivered and mashed. The growth of the 'personal cloud'[9] will doubtless impact on our users' expectations of a collection.

One of the things we are doing

As are many colleagues we are moving from the theoretical to the practical to explore and work through some of these issues. One example is that we are about to start a project looking at e-textbook delivery to a particular cohort of students by providing core content enabled for iPads and our VLEs.

There are many issues to explore - from negotiating with new players, to cost modelling, to changing user requirements, to purchasing models, to collection building implications, to fundamental questions on the library's role in content procurement – to name but a few.

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[5] http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2012/05/30/the-big-deal-the-medium-deal-and-the-tiny-deal/
[6] http://www.cengage.co.uk/
[7] http://www.vitalsource.com/Pages/home.aspx
[8] http://www.deepdyve.com/
[9] http://www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=1947315

We shall be looking at these new delivery channels and how they impact on content delivery and user behaviour. So are we in effect in a world of the fab four, '*Content – Connection –Channel – Contribution'*?

And so..

The procurement and seamless delivery of scholarly output may no longer be enough for a research library's collection strategy. We need to factor in the delivery channel facet which will doubtless have implications for budgets, structures and services.

In this fluffy stream of consciousness there are lots of questions (to which I offer no answers) but the big ticket ones are around the underlying implications of how we do stuff, who we do it with, should we do it all and how do we evidence our value.

In this heady post finch world we need to ensure that the return on our considerable investment in content supports our institution's key objectives whether they are to enhance the student experience or improve the research outputs. So what are the universal truths for collections? Do libraries sideline collections just as ephemeral procurement exercises or is it that our collections have never had to work harder in all their guises (as resources, as services etc) to be integral part of our institutions value bubble?

Frances Boyle
Imperial College London Library
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