

“With a little help from my friends” – a community-based future for print collections

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What is the future for our print collections? Do we concur with the current president of CILIP when he blogs that “the library as a collection of books is a dead end”¹? Or lean towards Michael Gorman’s view that our function is “preserving the human record”²?

Certainly, things cannot continue as they are. Every research library is under tremendous pressure to deliver against a wide variety of agendas, budgets are tight and space is constrained. Print collections continue to grow and, even more importantly, occupy space that we want to use for other purposes. For many titles, digital surrogates are already available, or likely to become so within a short timeframe; and our users find them convenient. “What is not available online doesn’t exist”³. Yet, as libraries serving the needs of the scholarly community, we know this isn’t true. We cannot ignore our print heritage. Even after digitisation, we value access to the original format and we also recognise the importance of the book as artefact for some scholars. Our obligations in this respect extend to future generations for, as Gorman asserts, a core function of libraries is the “preservation and onward transmission of our cultural heritage”.

Equally important in considering the long-term future of our collections is the condition of many of our older print materials, especially those published between 1870 and 1970. Many have such poor quality paper that they are slowly crumbling. Leeds surveyed its collection of early 20th century French literature and found that 60% of titles published before 1970 were in poor or very poor condition, mainly due to acid paper⁴. As things stand, by the time the current batch of Ph.D. students is close to retirement, all that will remain on the shelf will be a dusty pile of confetti. The recent RLUK/BL Preservation Learning Project has highlighted these concerns and challenges us to find new ways of managing our collections in order to ensure ongoing access for our users⁵.

Even back in 1984, the Ratcliffe report⁶ recognised these very same drivers and acknowledged that the long-term needs of the scholarly community could only be met through coordination and collaboration in collection management. This theme reappears frequently across the years in a series of reports and projects, many with RLUK involvement: Follett⁷, Anderson⁸, Cofor, CoCoMaN, Fielden⁹ and CCM to name but a few. RSLP proved very influential in pushing forward an agenda of cooperation between research libraries, changing the nature of the discourse and funding a number of projects in its Collaborative Collection Management strand¹⁰. After all, since it envisioned a National Union Catalogue for the UK and access to those information resources wherever they are held, then it was a logical next step to articulate the idea of a ‘distributed national collection of research resources’¹¹. And Fielden laid the foundations for the UKRR which has achieved a remarkable success in actually implementing this idea within the domain of periodicals.

UKRR has certainly given many of us a breathing space – at least where space pressures are concerned. However, successful as UKRR has undoubtedly been, less certain, perhaps, is the commitment of the individual member libraries to actively safeguard those volumes which they hold for the national research community in the long-term. This open question, as well as the small likelihood now of any short- or medium-term top-down funding for transposing a UKRR-like methodology to monographs, means that any further progress in this area will have to be of a grassroots nature. Is this a viable option, what mechanisms might be used and

would our community be prepared to engage with such an initiative? – these are key questions for RLUK, and ones which the recent Copac Collection Management Tools Project¹² attempted in part to address.

The work of this pilot, which has been widely reported, suggests an affirmative response to all 3 questions. By building a collection management tool which exploits the data already present in the Copac database, the project offers a model for a low-cost solution that leverages existing infrastructure in order to improve decision-making, while making the underlying supporting processes more cost-effective and efficient (one case study reported an 85% saving in staff time for certain procedures). The Copac Tools can be used to avoid disposal of items which are not widely held within the UK, or, more positively, the identification of such titles can be used to underpin programmes of conservation or digitisation, avoiding duplication of effort and providing broader benefit to the research community. Local decisions can be made with awareness of the national context, and those same decisions can be shared with the rest of the community through Copac. The focus and value of local collections can therefore be sharpened by acknowledging that they form part of a larger whole, and a more selective approach to retention becomes possible without detriment to the principle of long-term access for scholars.

A mechanism therefore exists; but would staff buy into it? Remarkably, the consultative workshops organised by the project, and which involved representatives from 25 RLUK libraries, demonstrated a remarkable consensus in favour of the initiative. Because there are such clear advantages for any participating library, the enthusiasm was palpable. There was widespread concern about the potential loss of last copies, recognition that the needs of researchers can only be met in the long term through “deep resource sharing”¹³ between the various libraries serving that community, and strong encouragement for further development of the Copac Tools in order to achieve these goals. Workshop participants strongly supported the explicit development of a UK National Research Collection, distributed across our many institutions but with a national organisational framework to coordinate and provide direction. They also looked to RLUK as an organisation to provide leadership in this initiative, a proposal which became one of the key recommendations in the Project final report.

It is rare that individual and community interests coincide, but in this case, they do indeed seem to. We have over 30 years of reports and projects which provide the intellectual justification and rationale for collaborating far more closely in the management of our collections. We observe similar forces at work in North American research libraries, again underpinned by a number of detailed reports and studies^{14,15,16}. With the Copac Tools, we have, for the first time, a mechanism which makes this viable within the UK. Do we have the wisdom, the foresight and the determination to embark on this radically different path in collection management within our own institutions? And as RLUK, are we willing to provide leadership in developing a national collaborative framework for safeguarding our print heritage for the research community? Are we prepared to create a future for our collections *with a little help from my friends*? Or do we prefer, in 50 years time, to be the custodians of several shelf-miles of dust?

¹Posted on Phil Bradley’s weblog, 12th October 2012
http://philbradley.typepad.com/phil_bradleys_weblog/2012/10/libraries-books-ebooks-and-the-future.html

²Gorman, M. The prince’s dream. *SCONUL Focus*, 54 (2012), p.11-16
<http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/54/4.pdf>

³ I first heard this user attitude described by Clifford Lynch, speaking at a CURL workshop in Manchester in the mid 1990s!

⁴ LIFE_SHARE Project. *Case Study 4 (Leeds): Physical conservation vs. digitisation for preservation* (2011)
http://www.leeds.ac.uk/library/projects/lifeshare/docs/LIFESHARE_Leeds_Case_Study.pdf

⁵ See particularly the papers from the 2010 conference and 2012 workshop organised by the project, available at
<http://www.bl.uk/blpac/dare.html> and <http://www.bl.uk/blpac/safehands.html>

⁶ Ratcliffe, F.W. *Preservation policies and conservation in British libraries*. British Library (1984) p. 61

⁷ Follett, B. *Joint funding councils' libraries review project group: report (the Follett report)* HEFCE (1993)
<http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/papers/follett/report/>

⁸ Anderson, M. *Joint funding council's library review report of the group on a national/regional strategy for library provision for researchers (The Anderson report)* HEFCE (1996)
<http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/elib/papers/other/anderson/>

⁹ CHEMS Consulting. *Optimising storage and access in UK research libraries: a study for CURL and the British Library* CURL (2005) http://www.rluk.ac.uk/files/CURL_BLStorageReportFinal-endSept2005.pdf

¹⁰ <http://www.rslp.ac.uk/projects/collab/>

¹¹ <http://www.rslp.ac.uk/AboutUs/hebl.htm>

¹² <http://copac.ac.uk/innovations/collections-management/>

¹³ A term coined by the 2002 report *Barriers to resource sharing among higher education libraries*
<http://www.rslp.ac.uk/circs/2002/barriers.htm>

¹⁴ Malpas, C. *Shared print policy review report* OCLC (2009)
<http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/library/2009/2009-03.pdf>

¹⁵ Schonfeld, R. *System-level strategic planning for collections management and preservation* (2010)
<http://www.bl.uk/blpac/pdf/dareschonfeld.pdf>

¹⁶ Lavoie, B., Malpas, C. and Shipengrover, J.D. *Print management at "Mega-scale"*. OCLC (2012).
<http://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/library/2012/2012-05.pdf>