

NAPCU 2009 Annual Meeting
The Heathman Hotel
Kirkland, Washington
November 5, 2009

“The Academic Library Collection in the 21st Century”

Introductory Remarks by Program Planner, John Popko (Seattle University)

Good morning, friends and colleagues, and welcome to the neighborhood.

I realize the agenda to our meeting includes an abstract of our theme, but I want to take just a couple minutes to provide a little context for the theme or the focus of our 2009 conference program and then nudge it into action by outlining the format and beginning the introduction of our four guests.

In retrospect I think I kind of steamrolled this idea onto my PSAIL colleagues, tossing off grand plans and hoped-for clever phrases to catch their attention, then adding details and speakers and energy until they finally capitulated.

The theme emerged for me from several experiences at last summer’s annual conference of the American Library Association in Chicago. At some point I had heard enough about numerous book digitization initiatives and their diverse, sometimes competing, business models to make a prediction to myself:

Regardless of what programs or models are on the table today, there will be an inexorable process of democratization of book content, with more and more books being available in digital form to more and more people at lower and lower costs under increasingly generous but still legal terms and conditions.

This thesis had its antithesis in the occasional comments heard around those same rooms from side conversations and from more formal statements in other venues in the vein of, “We just don’t think that title (or collection of titles) will be of interest to our users or would be appropriate to our programs and collection.”

I won’t try to predict the synthesis of these opposing positions, but I do believe the process of change that is underway will challenge in new ways one of the core purposes and values of the library -- the thoughtful and intentional collection of

individual book titles, carefully classified and cataloged, and arranged in logical order awaiting our users' reach.

So let me try to launch the program and stimulate your thinking with some assertions that have become lodged in my consciousness. Of course, one person's epiphany could well be another's conventional wisdom, so I'm hesitant to claim accuracy or special insights. Maybe I'm just playing catch-up. (Some of you also know that I can be less interested in the truth and more interested in a good conversation, so there might be a bit of that spirit at work here.)

To a certain extent, each of these assertions builds on the preceding ones:

1. We are moving or have already moved far from the original reality on which most of our collection development policies, strategies, and decisions are based – from an environment of scarcity to an environment of abundance.
2. In the very near future, book content will migrate from being a commodity to becoming more of a utility.
3. Just as we've seen our users and clients turn their backs on our local online catalogs in favor of the open web, browsers, and online social networks, they will be compelled to turn their backs on our printed book collections in favor of the ubiquitous utility of e-book content, cheaply or even freely available from a variety of suppliers.
4. No matter how hard we try, we will be increasingly unable to predict reliably which knowledge resources will appeal to or support our students' and faculty interests or needs.
5. We cannot continue to put time, energy, and money into the careful selection of individual titles but must find the means to open up vast areas of content in which our patrons might graze and select for themselves.
6. Our collection development policies, if they exist at all, have not been revised, updated, or re-thought in so long that we should just scrap them.
7. While some of our formal collection development policies might still be of some residual value for this transition period, they need to be complemented with, and will eventually be supplanted by, a more important Content Delivery Policy.

8. Libraries will continue to transition their fiscal practices, with an increasing percentage of transactions moving away from paying for content in advance of its use to paying for it after our patrons have found the content and used it.
9. Human resources in libraries now dedicated to selection and collection development will be eliminated or will be re-purposed to provide services that enable our patrons to navigate more effectively this landscape of abundant choices.
10. As a result of the prevalence of consortial “Big Deals” for e-journal packages, e-book collections, and other subject-oriented e-content, academic library collections are increasingly similar and duplicative. Libraries can distinguish themselves and differentiate themselves from their peers and competitors only through the development, creation, and management of rare, unique, and specialized content found in archives, manuscripts, museums, special collections, and institutional repositories.

John’s epiphanies? or conventional wisdom?

And now for our guests:

I cannot guarantee that any or all of our speakers will address any or all of my opening assertions directly. I don’t ask them to and it isn’t necessary. I’ve invited them because I believe they will introduce us to, or confirm for us, several important dimensions of this landscape in which our collections, present and future, have their meaning.

I’ll start with a brief introduction, then provide a more extended introduction to each speaker before his or her presentation. I expect to use the panel respondent period and the open audience Q&A period to tie these many flailing ends together into a form of coherence and I invite, and count on each of you, to help do that.

I put some thought into how to sequence these speakers. At one time I thought I would open with those we might think of as farthest from the traditional academic library environment, in order to stimulate our thinking early, then close with those most familiar with us. But I was concerned that might be too pat and comforting, so I flipped it around. We’ll hear first from a currently practicing librarian from the University of Washington, then from our guests on the commercial side of the spectrum, Microsoft and Amazon, and wrap up hearing from an individual with lots of experience and who brings the perspective of OCLC, a library membership organization that has its corporate fingers in an increasing number of interesting and possibly tasty pies.