

Hidden Collections and our Research Communities

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A special moment for special collections

The prospects for Google

Rethinking of the research library

The importance of the unique and rare

What are Special Collections?

- Archives
- Collections of archives
- Books
- Archives of printed matter
- Archives of non-book matter
- Museum of the printed artifact
- Emphasis on collective identity of material
- Meaning and significance over information

Why do we have Special Collections?

- Identify the rare and valuable
- To move the rare and valuable from private hands into the public domain
- To “have”
- To tell a story
 - Within a conceptual framework
 - Or many frameworks
 - To convey meaning and significance

Who are our research communities?

- Established scholars
- New scholars
- Amateur scholars
- The generally curious

What is the point of connection? (Infrastructure)

- A building
- An institution
- Interior architecture
- The conceptual framework
- Catalogs and finding aids
- The work of other scholars
 - Tracing footnotes

Reading Room

Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana



The Challenges

- Dealing with the research community especially scholars seasoned and new

1. The impact of digital surrogates
2. The conceptual divide between those who curate and those who use

Challenge of the Digital to the infrastructure

- Architectural associations
- Associations with physicality
- The need for the physical object

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- The threshold of adequacy
 - From manuscript to print
 - From print to digital

Challenge of the Digital to the traditional spec. coll. experience

- The emergence of online services
- Catalogs and finding aids
 - Hierarchical
 - Non hierarchical
- Textual and visuals delivery
- The associations in an on line transaction

Challenge of the Digital

- Digital as supplemental
- The Institution as supplemental
- Banks and Travel agents!

Challenge of the Digital

- Relative value of unique manuscripts to rare books
- The digital nature of University and other modern archives—problem of ingest
- Importance of conceptual frameworks over simply “having.”
- Maintaining an institutional connection for Special Collections
- Connecting to scholarship

Challenge of Hidden Collections

- Why have they been hidden?
 - Truly hidden
 - Resource question (backlog)
 - New ideas on what is a collection
 - Matters of policy

The truly hidden

- The collections of the Jepson Herbaria at UC Berkeley
- Consortial project to find collections in the Philadelphia area (U-Penn)
- The fieldbooks and journals at the Smithsonian

Resource constraints

- NYU communist party records
- Yale and Stanford recorded sound material
- University of Michigan Islamic mss.

New Ideas on what is a collection

- Environmental collections (CA Digital Library)
- LC multi sheet map collections

Archival policy

- The Archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Vatican
 - First established in 1570s
 - Post reformation inquisition
 - Index of forbidden books
 - Opened for consultation 1998

Procedures for hidden collections

- Appropriate level of arrangement and description.
- The challenge of decoding the archive
- Understanding relevance

Decoding the archive

- Seeing broader implications from specific processes
- Understanding the selectivity of the archive
- Understanding the documentary structures
- Understanding the language specific nature of discourse embedded in the documentation

The Archival Divide

Are Special Collections and Scholarship on
Divergent Paths ?

Scientific History

- Convergence of authorities in institutional archives and institutional history
- The authority of archives in historical interpretation
- The footnote
- Convergence of scholarship and curatorship in the formation of collections

The turn away from archival authority in history

- History from below
- Broader questions of process
- Emergence of identity, experience, and memory as a historical source
- Focus on language in mediating historical understanding
- The idea of multiple pasts
- The expanding boundaries of historical understanding

The turn away from historical authority in the archives

- The problem of bulk
- The need for authorities in the appraisal process
- The return to essential description of records
- The problem of diverse constituencies
- The technical challenges of database and system design
- Specific preparation in info Sciences

The Archival Divide

- The incapacity of historiography to provide enduring authorities in the conceptualization and appraisal of material—what to select. Also collections have multiple meanings.
- Precision language in database construction vs. deconstruction of language in historical analysis
- The idea of the grain of the archive vs. a fixed descriptive format
 - In institutional archives
 - In collecting institutions

The Archival Divide

- Designating a source historical adds layers of meaning not necessarily intrinsic to the book or document.
- How an item is represented in our descriptive structures can bear no resemblance to how it is read and understood.
- Decouples historical understanding from our constructions of descriptive systems
- An interdisciplinary experience

The Archival Divide

- Finding evidence, voice, experience, identity, process, conventions, structures, sets of practices vs. notions of information.
- ACLS report on cyberinfrastructure: is it the scholars or the librarian/archivists who will shape this knowledge environment-contention over who shapes the knowledge environment
- Conceptions of description vs. technical standards

CONCLUSION

- Increasing responsibility on the disciplines themselves for description
 - Parallel catalog and finding aid structures
 - The Case of the Vatican Archives
 - More attention to EAD and cross collection possibilities—the “sub catalog.”

CONCLUSION

- Special Collections as an academic center
 - Special Collections as an intellectual center
 - Visible academic personnel (joint appointments)
 - Visible academic program (courses and programs—teaching with collections)
 - Special collections as a “faculty” or knowledge specialization on the campus

Conclusion

- Rather than thinking about collections I prefer to think of our work as a point of mediation between:

Where knowledge has come from and where knowledge is going.

How knowledge was conceived and how it currently is constructed

Between old technologies and new technologies

Between textuality/visuality and new forms of delivery.

Conclusion (cont.)

- Between abandoned authorities and new authorities
- Between fixed sources and imagined authority
- Between the old and the young
- Between old forms of description and new conceptions of significance
- Between fixity of our catalogs and materials and the dynamism of humanistic inquiry

CONCLUSION

Special Collections then become:

- A place of authority more than material
- A place of mediation more than service
- A place of community more than institution
- A place of connection more than repository

A Bridge over the Archival Divide....

THANK YOU

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