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

- 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

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 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

- 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

- 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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