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Libraries as Doppelgängers: A Meditation on Collection Development

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Collection development may be the most important responsibility of the librarian. Every other task presupposes that new materials have been carefully chosen and added to the library's holdings. When expanded to include managing existing materials, collection development—while perhaps lacking some of the glamour of other services like reference and classroom teaching—poses some of the central dilemmas of today's librarianship.

Arguably the most heated of the current debates concerns the relationship of electronic materials to traditional paper. In a time when many librarians are unembarrassed to dream of a future “paperless” library, even moderate members of our profession increasingly share the conviction that digital copies, in at least some instances, can serve as well as paper. A consensus is most likely to emerge concerning law reviews, those proliferating, shelf-eating serials that some hope have been supplanted by HeinOnline. If AALL annual meeting programs and hallway conversations are any indication, law librarians would love nothing more than to pitch their hardcopy collections in exchange for access to copies they often only lease, beginning with the law reviews.

Many, frankly, have no problem with this solution in part because they rarely use these materials themselves. How many law librarians can recall the last time they read a law review issue cover to cover for either research or curiosity? They thus approach the question about how *others* should be able to use these materials from a detached perspective that would do any Kantian proud. One wonders whether the bland economic reasoning so determinative in these discussions would be as persuasive were the problem posed closer to home, concerning materials in which the librarian had a more personal stake.

By chance, I faced this choice in what pro-digital librarians might consider the easy case. Space in my personal library could be freed by discarding my run of *SOLGAN*, the newsletter published by the Society for Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists, now available through AnthroSource, the American Anthropology Association's journal database.

Making this decision unique was that the paper on my shelves served as the source material for AAA's database. Because my private collection is one of the most complete for this title, AnthroSource relied upon my holdings to create its files. Should I choose, I could literally print out from the database exact replacements for the issues now on my shelf. If ever there is a good excuse to discard the paper, here it was. Paper and digital were not merely versions of the same content, they were exactly the same content. Yet still I hesitated.

The question I had to ask myself was whether this reticence was rooted in old-fashioned conservatism (in which case the paper should go, albeit with much regret and not little ceremony), or whether it arose from an intuition that down this path—perhaps not with this step,

but with this rationale—lay the unraveling of my library, and by extension, many others. Even I wasn't sure.

For many librarians there would be no question: discard the paper based upon access to any copy, much less the same copy. Members of our profession have grown bold in their disaffection with the traditional format of our calling. Few librarians can contradict at least one argument from Nicholas Baker's controversial *Double Fold*: that given the promise of access in an alternative format we are eager, often over-eager to discard our paper volumes to free up limited shelving. Some have become so enamored of the benefits of digital technology that they grow impatient for the arrival of the all-electronic library, and in some instances, as with the Durham Statement, they even seem determined to hurry it along.

We feel justified in taking such actions because the advantages of digitals are obvious and recognized even by skeptics, while their drawbacks tend to be hypothetical, vague, and poorly articulated. In short, so what if the library becomes all electronic? If every book, pamphlet, and whatnot were available only and exclusively electronically, what, *exactly*, would be lost?

Contrarian arguments tend to focus on either of two objections to the quest for universal digitization of libraries. The first fear is that rare or one-of-a-kind items will be lost. How many additional Gutenberg Bibles are likely to be scanned after the first is made available? But this is a consideration with which few of us must deal, and which can be resolved on a case-by-case basis without heavily influencing the broader principles that librarians should adopt on the problem. The second worry concerns the inevitable loss of content during the transition as some items are judged of insufficient interest to warrant the cost of digitization. A similar data loss occurred during the change from manuscript to codex.

Those are valid concerns, but as objections they imply that the pro-digital argument is somehow erroneous, misleading, or at least overinflated. If we knew the true costs and ramifications, runs the retort, fewer librarians would be rushing to compost the collections entrusted to them by previous generations. But we can ask a different question, one that grants everything claimed in the case for digitals and then wonders whether, even in that most favorable context, there might not still be some reason to remain wary of the all-electronic future.

Arguably the confusing feature of the e-advocate defense is not that it is wrong in its claims about the advantages it champions, but that it errs in the unit of primary interest. The argument prioritizes books and their informational contents as the relevant units, with little explanation as to how these relate to the library that contains them.

In the minds of some, perhaps, the two are equivalent, libraries being nothing more than aggregates of books. Digital defenders then move from this premise to another involving the benefits that accrue with a change of formats, to reach conclusions about improvements in the libraries that contain them. Electronic libraries will do everything traditional libraries can do, only more. But the two claims supporting that tempting result are incompatible.

If we begin with a belief that libraries are reducible to the books they contain ($B=L_b$), and add to that the above concession that the universe of digital information will be the equivalent of its

paper original ($D=B$), then advocates are indeed justified in their assurances that libraries suffer no loss through the substitution ($D=L_d$; therefore $L_d=L_b$). But note that under this reasoning they also accrue no benefits, which is what advocates really want to be able to claim (i.e., that $L_d>L_b$). Some part of the digital argument must be flawed.

So long as we entertain the strong claim that the transition to digitals will be costless in terms of the total universe of information—a needed premise to avoid the objections of the negative and practical type mentioned earlier—to hold out the promise that the change will render improvements to libraries, these advocates cannot assert a belief that libraries are reducible to their information units. That is, $B=D$, but because $B\neq L_b$ and $D\neq L_d$ it becomes reasonable to posit that $L_d>L_b$. Whether the result is true or not is another matter, but at least the argument is no longer self-contradictory.

Perhaps some digital proponents would have conceded this premise. But once the reductive equation of libraries with books is discarded, as it must be, the door is open to inquire about the details of any sui generis characteristics of libraries, and to ask further whether the digital revolution supports or undermines that core nature of the library (qua library, and not as information aggregate).

Uncovering at least one of the library's essential properties begins with the obvious but undertheorized fact that libraries are not interchangeable. Each seems uniquely suited to its users, its mission, its intellectual niche within the local information economy. Yesterday's decisions influence today's options. Patterns emerge, traditions evolve, long-term paths followed until, in the end, each library becomes the expression of the institution's history and self-understanding.

Alberto Manguel offers a startling image for this process in *A Reading Diary*. While unpacking his library in the surroundings of his refitted fifteenth century French barn Manguel muses that he can "trace all my memories through these piling-up volumes. Then suddenly everything seems redundant, all this accumulation of printed paper." He makes a note to write a future essay, "The Library as Doppelgänger," a theme he takes up in revised form and vocabulary in *The Library at Night*. The "identity of a society, or a national identity, can be mirrored by a library, by an assembly of titles that, practically and symbolically, serves as our collective definition." The fruitfulness of this idea of library as identity and other-self inspired *Logos: Journal of the World Book Community* to initiate a series under the title, "The Personal Library as Doppelgänger," in which contributors such as Nicholas Basbanes describe how their private collections serve as a "counterpart to the person," as an expression of their own "personality, work, and life." From this perspective a library is not merely a collection of information, but rather a material manifestation of the library owner's self-identity, be that owner personal, national, or institutional. How else to explain the Library of Congress' interest in reassembling the 6,487 volumes Thomas Jefferson sold to reestablish its collection in 1815, if not to see what it will tell us about Jefferson himself?

This view can be counterpoised against that which appears to dominate the digital perspective. Digital projects treat books as generic objects, any one interchangeable with every other copy. In libraries there are no books in the abstract, but only that library's particular books, each with an explanation of how it came to be in this collection, reasons why it belongs there while others do

not, traces of use by its readers, all stories that collectively bring a reflective understanding to the library's mission over time.

The idealized intention of the digital revolution (in tandem with the push for open access) is to make all information available to anyone, anywhere, anytime. In the cyber world information will be loosed from the bonds of the author's intentions and freed from the confining shackles of the bound volume, "miscellaneous" bits (to use David Weinberger's term) free to coalesce in infinitely different sets tailored to the immediate queries of each user. This will be an exciting and powerful tool, but it will not be a library. Universal access entails informational homogeneity, the antithesis of the value of particularity embodied in the library. For this reason, while the exact relationship between these two domains has yet to be determined, supersession is not on the table. If libraries disappear, it will not be because they have been "replaced" by digital analogues, but because we no longer deem important the intrinsic, nonreducible values represented by the library, and are thus willing to make do with something less.

At this point an analogy may be helpful. It has been said that a perfectly detailed map of the world will be indistinguishable from the world itself, and therefore useless as far as serving the conventional purpose of a "map." Maps become helpful only to the extent that they ignore some information, reduce scale, and synthesize large data chunks into a comprehensible format. Similarly libraries become "libraries" only when from the universe of information they select some parts, exclude others, and through their ordered interrelationship transform the information into a cohesive view of the world (i.e., "knowledge"). Such a process has no predetermined outcome; the resulting view of the world represented by the library is specific, perhaps even parochial, but by its nature reflective of and in dialogue with the needs of the community served. The community is the library; the library is the community. Archimboldo's *The Librarian*.

So I will be returning my issues of *SOLGAN* to the shelves. It is good to know that their digital descendants are out there in case the need arises for the words on those pages. But my copies serve an additional, altogether different purpose. Together with the other items in the bookcases, they form the kind of library that the person that I am (or would like to be) should have. It is my doppelgänger.

The same is true of the collections we build for our institutions, be they law schools, courthouses, or law firms. To ask whether your patrons have access to the Harvard Law Review is only part of the equation when deciding whether to discard paper journals; an additional one, and perhaps the more important one, is to ask whether the institution served by your library understands itself as the kind that will preserve and control its own copy of the Harvard Law Review, or whether it will be content to look over the shoulder of someone else (like Hein) to read their copy.