Thoughts on Special Collections and Our Research Communities

Toward the end of August in 2009, a van pulled up to the loading dock of the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan. Book trucks were unloaded and moved into the stacks. Then we began to load those trucks, shelf by shelf, so that the entire contents of the cataloged printed collection of the Bentley would pass through the scanning operation of what we know as the “Google project.” In five weeks, about ninety percent of the cataloged titles would be fully scanned. Those out of copyright would be available online. Those in copyright would be searchable. Problems and complications aside, this was a transformative moment since it had taken seventy-five years to build the collection. Since it was noncirculating, consultation had to be done on site, requiring a visit to the library. Now the collection would be freely available in any location on the planet with a computer and an Internet connection. Clearly this was a special time for special collections. To see this process unfold over such a short period of time was significant. It raised questions about the nature of our collections, the strategies involved in building them, our relationship to our researchers, and the relationship between our holdings and the process of research itself.

To put this project into its professional context, we must first examine a number of basic questions: What are special collections? Why do we have them? Who are our research communities? What is the point of connection between the collections and our researchers? Second, we must consider the challenges of the 21st century to special collections work. And we must consider what I call “the archival divide” and ask if special collections and scholarship are on divergent paths.

Basic Questions

What are special collections? Traditionally, we have considered them to include printed books and manuscripts, as well as collections of archives. The 19th and 20th
centuries introduced a variety of new formats into collections: phonographs, film, audiotapes, and DVDs. Our collections became archives of printed matter and of nonbook matter, or museums of the “knowledge artifact,” with an emphasis on the collective identity of material and an emphasis on meaning and significance, as well as informational content. These materials are often housed in spaces specifically designed for the rarity of the materials.

Why do we have special collections? Traditionally these collections served to administer the rare and valuable among the vast outputs of knowledge artifacts, to distinguish those artifacts that were fundamental to informing research and learning. Also, these collections performed an important democratic function, moving the most important rare and valuable material from private hands into the public domain—to make the rare accessible. Because we were dealing with artifacts, it became important to “have” as well as preserve an item. To “have” a Gutenberg Bible became the hallmark of our most distinguished collections. One collection would “have” this, and another “have” that. Beyond possession, special collections provide rich source materials, in some cases within a single conceptual framework, or in others within many frameworks. In the process, the collections may convey meaning within a particular context that may evolve over time. The collections interact with our research communities: established scholars, new scholars, amateur scholars, and the generally curious.

What is the point of connection between the collection and the scholar? Traditionally, it has been an institution housed in a particular building distinguished by a specific interior architecture that provides a level of security greater than that for the rest of the collection. Beyond the physical space, connection was made through the conceptual framework that governed the particular collection. Scholars and other users would find the Houghton Library, the Beinecke Library, the Social Welfare History Archives Center, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, or the Alabama State Archives because each collection resulted from a framework that might potentially be fruitful for a particular historical question at hand. The specific points of connection were the arrays of catalogs and other finding aids produced over many decades that opened possibilities. Beyond those structured indexes and guides, the work of other scholars suggested additional potential sources. For instance, a scholar could mine the footnotes of others. In any case, all this was connected to the physicality of a collection and the institution that housed it.

The Impact of Digital Surrogates

Special collections have existed historically within formally established institutional repositories that store and provide access to their documentation. Each of these collections is associated not only with a particular specialization but also with a
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particular (and often impressive) physical space. Researchers consequently develop associations with the collections, their buildings as well as their documents. Experiences like hefting the early inventories of the Archives Nationales or the Archivio Segreto Vaticano are also likely to make a distinct impression. There is a distinct physicality in the use of these repositories as well as a broad range of subjective associations that, among other effects, establish bonds for modern researchers with previous generations of scholars, deepening scholarly commitments. Few who sit in grand places like the First Reading Room of the Russian State Library across from the Kremlin in Moscow, the grand rotunda of the Library of Congress, or the reading room of the Vatican Library fail to feel somewhat “in touch” with the experiences, achievements, and struggles of earlier generations of scholars.

Of course, no matter how grand the building or how important the collections, research in special collections has always had its challenges. Still, the importance of these settings to scholarship has seldom been cause for much reflection. The collections have simply seemed to be a permanent part of the scholarly and cultural landscape. Their very architecture, often monumental in design and solid in construction, has served as an implicit testament to the enduring scholarly values they reflect as well as the importance of their resources. Visiting these places itself, the very physical process of entering their space and feeling engaged in the institutional histories and cultures of their collections, has thus strengthened the humanistic foundations of traditional archives and library research. Moreover, the spaces were removed from the more common repositories of other kinds of information—open stacks, bookstores, magazine racks, and the like. This separation lent a gravitas to the research experience.

In the 21st century, entry into a special collection or repository can now be experienced entirely online, away from the physical confines of the collection. The first point of contact with the physicality of special collections can now be with the specific requested artifact. Large, complex, integrated-search databases point individuals to specific places where a physical object is housed. While there are increasing numbers of digitized collections, searches are still by and large focused on finding a physical book, manuscript, document, map, or video. Library access systems essentially remain online services of convenience for all users, including those in remote locations. The databases are designed to make the visit to the special collection more efficient. The physical repository remains the essential research institution.

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3. One notable exception is the Making of America project, where a search points to a particular text online. See http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moagrp/ (Accessed 2 March 2010).
After remote access to physical collection descriptions was well established, we now experience the Google Project, with its widely heralded ability to capture millions of library volumes online and link to them directly from an online search. At the University of Michigan, these virtual texts were already appearing in the catalog as early as 2008. As a result, users can now sit at their laptops in coffee shops, search the online catalog through a wireless Internet connection, find a book of interest, call it up, and read the text of the book between cappuccinos. At the same time, one can pull up all kinds of things—from the mundane to the sordid—all from the same terminal. Gone is the physical separation and consequent gravitas that came from being sequestered in a particular kind of physical space.4

The same changes are also happening with manuscripts and archives. The “Rose” project, for instance, has brought virtual copies of rare French illuminated manuscripts to a distant (and much broader) user community.5 Select medieval manuscripts of the Morgan Library are available online.6 Michigan’s Bentley Library has its archive on the American intervention in North Russia during 1918–19 entirely online.7 In some cases, like the Valley of the Shadow project on the American Civil War, there has been an attempt to recreate the physical experience of visiting an archive. Online users are guided to a virtual floor plan that shows “where” in the “building” the material is housed. Here the artifacts have been transplanted from physical places in real, sometimes centuries-old institutions, to “buildings” that are really Web sites—cyber structures with no three-dimensional characteristics.8 Indeed, the footnotes to this paragraph illustrate the point. Rather than pointing to artifacts that exist physically on the shelf, the authority of the paragraph rests on information in cyberspace and is accessed entirely from a laptop.9

As of now, all these digital innovations may be seen as enhancements to the work of existing institutions and as a broader service to users. Online services are still linked directly to an institutional provider. The online catalog enhances access. Digitization enhances accessibility. All of this is widely and properly acknowledged to be important. For the most part, however, these innovations are still largely tied to specific

7. See http://polarbears.si.umich.edu/ (Accessed 2 March 2010).
institutions and are seen as playing a supporting role to physical access to material items housed in those institutions. The question looming ahead can be discerned from the history of the card catalog. What happens when the institutional links are less clear or even fade away entirely? When the Web presence, in fact, becomes the institution and the physicalities currently associated with the experience of research become virtually imperceptible? What will happen, in other words, when digitally deliverable texts subordinate the perceptions, identities, and physicality of the institutions themselves?10 Think of the transformations of banks, for example: a relationship formerly associated with majestic architecture is now relegated to an ATM. Think, too, of travel agencies, transformed from a point of mediation in a physical space into specific, authoritative information. Banking and travel booking are now primarily cyber experiences, unrelated to any physical space.

Passing the Threshold of Adequacy

The vault of the Vatican Library contains some 70,000 manuscript volumes that represent a significant record of the transmission of textual knowledge from the end of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance. For the better part of a millennium, up to the advent of printing in the West, these volumes represented what in today’s jargon would be called the “infrastructure of a manuscript culture,” a culture that once supported small but vigorous centers of learning all over Europe. This was supplanted over time, of course, by the emergence of print and the availability of texts in multiple copies. Over time, and only over time, this manuscript-based accumulation of textual knowledge receded. The discourses around it passed what I would call a “threshold of adequacy,” where the existence of these print-based resources was alone sufficient to support arguments, foster inquiry, and produce and sustain knowledge. Many of the texts of these manuscripts “joined” the print world, migrating in their published forms from one “knowledge infrastructure” to another. Others have remained well cared for in a few select repositories. Although largely unknown, they are still available for scholars.

The pace by which new knowledge is generated in this digital age is vigorous, to say the least. The growth of digital archives, only in their infancy in the 1990s, has been prodigious. In the United States National Archives, electronic holdings have grown 100 times faster than holdings in paper. One may think that, at some point, scholarship and scholarly discourse may well pass another “threshold of adequacy,” where digital resources will eclipse paper-based resources as an adequate basis of historical

10. See, for example, the discussion of Aaron Swartz’s experiment with a free online book catalog that anyone can update. The goal is a “comprehensive Web page about any book ever published … with links that direct users to the nearest library” (Chronicle of Higher Education, 54 [Feb. 22, 2008]: 24). This is an example of a point where the cyberinfrastructure becomes the institution and the physical remnants of the previous infrastructure of an array of physical objects housed in specific locations in buildings of some presence become subordinate, remote, and even forgotten.
authority. While there may always be concern that a particular print source might contain marginalia of importance that its digital form has not captured, or that a paper watermark in an archival document may be of historical significance, the corpus of digital surrogates will have passed the threshold of adequacy for most research. Like the Vatican manuscripts, the original materials may well be stored for many years in select print repositories, but historical understanding of the current and future centuries will derive primarily from archives that exist purely in digital form.

Is this a good thing? The new epoch has provoked intense scholarly debate about the legacy of print. What will happen to it? Through the Google Books project and others, a great portion of printed work will soon be in digital form. Older works may then be “rediscovered,” as “full-text searching” pulls out citations that might never have been found through traditional catalog searches. Works that remain undigitized may well find themselves almost entirely out of reach. At least a few major print repositories, perhaps still known as “libraries,” will undoubtedly hold stature in the print world, as the Vatican Library holds for the world of manuscripts. While their holdings will survive, in the mindset of the 21st-century user they will not be nearly as accessible as those transferred to digital form.¹¹

### The Archival Divide

Beyond the impact of digital surrogates, there are larger issues about how we are to understand the world that organizes and provides access to the sources of the past. The paths of the curator/librarian/archivist appears to be diverging from the paths of scholarly inquiry. In exploring this observation with my colleague William Rosenberg, I find that, in the 19th century, the space shared by archives and history was defined by historians who saw the archive as a “window to real pasts,” and by the archivists responsible for archival processes. This unified conceptual space represented a shared interest in the importance of institutions, prominent actors, and great events, as well as a shared sense of national boundaries and definitions. Once assembled and developed, the content of the archive in many ways defined the boundaries of a historical scholarship that focused on state formation and national self-perception and definition. Archives themselves became actual, as well as figurative, monuments to national pasts and future purpose.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, and then accelerating rapidly in the last twenty years or so, the conceptualization of authority in history spread from institutions, agents, ideologies, and events to embrace broader social and cultural phenom-

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ena. For a new generation of historians (and we use the term “historians” in the broadest sense of the term—anyone with a serious interest in the perspective of the past), texts themselves became objects of critical study as well as modes of expression. Cultural forms and processes were understood to inform identities as well as locations of power. In some scholarly circles, the “new historicism” in literary studies mirrored the historian’s new interest in discourse. A new understanding emerged about how individual and social subjectivities might also affect how historical experience is processed. The complex problem of “social memory” became a central issue. So did new understandings of power and politics, gender, ethnicity, identity, language, the nature of texts, and what might properly constitute a “historical source.” The various explorations of these issues imply the multiplicity of historical pasts and emphasize their contested nature.

This expansion in the range of historical inquiry posed difficult problems for archivists. To what extent could one maintain that archivists were professionally obliged to incorporate these new fields of inquiry into the processes of document selection, description and retention? Were archivists also obliged to anticipate future areas of inquiry? Was this even possible? And what were the consequences when great state repositories shift focus from clearly defined national narratives to more vaguely bounded cultural and social ones? From a special collections viewpoint, for example, what were the implications for the acquisition and retention of historical materials when the meaning of an event as authoritative to national purpose as the triumph of good over evil in World War II became a subject of historical dispute? How can descriptive systems attend to this complex array of ever-shifting questions and methodologies? While historians continue to beat down archival doors in their dogged and admirable pursuit of all kinds of history, new and traditional, the intellectual and administrative challenges of identifying, selecting, organizing, and conceptualizing collections as historical sources have become too complex, and historical study has become too unstable, to generate the kind of enduring historical authorities that archival processing traditionally required and deployed, especially in an era characterized by the incredible volume of new records and rapidly changing technology.

In the meantime, the special collections communities, especially the archivists, were confronting a host of complicated challenges very different from the questions preoccupying historical discourse. How do we deal with the bulk of records production? By what authority should selection be made? There is continuing discussion about the range of constituencies of special collections. Some distinguish records of “enduring” value from a more narrow construction of “historical value.” How and by what principles should access databases be designed and implemented? To date, these have been based primarily on adaptation of biblio-
graphic data fields. Archivists and librarians have discussed these issues among themselves as they realize the potential of new technologies, a growing universe of potential documentation, and the variety of users seeking to consult their materials. Somewhat lost in this discourse is the scholar. Scholarship has become so broad in its reach, so theoretical in its models, so all-embracing of the range of potential questions that it is impossible for the shifting sands of scholarly inquiry to inform descriptive language and hierarchies in a fundamental and fixed way.

For a time, this growing separation between archivists and historians seemed largely the result of a lack of common interest: a disconnect of professional circles, in which each group was informed by separate associations, separate preparations, separate journals. Career paths simply seemed not to cross. Methodological issues associated with archives processing were rarely a part of the curriculum of history departments; historians were scarcely interested in the type of education archivists were now receiving. As we reflect on the use of authority in historical understanding, however, and the role of authorities in archival systems; on attention to language as a contested historical construction and the importance of rigidity in language as an access tool; and on the evaluation of the research potential of documentation and the relation of documentation and the importance of documentation in organizational information flow, we realize that the divide is more than a case of professional paths that do not intersect. It is instead a deeply conceptual separation between divergent conceptual frameworks for understanding and using contemporary and historical documentation; between the evolving conceptual frameworks for historical understanding and those related to the efficient and practical retention of records; between the ways archivists and historians now and in the future will process the past.

Perhaps to the surprise of historians, archival administration has evolved in the digital age into a complex discipline based on its own set of practices, principles, and assumptions. At the leading edges of historical thinking, the way in which the past is technologically processed by archival professionals, once their disciplinary colleagues, is now virtually incomprehensible. Perhaps to the surprise of archivists and curators of special collections, history has become a fluid and rapidly changing discipline that has moved beyond the categories that conform to standardized descriptive terminologies and needs. The archivist who approaches records in terms of their "essential" characteristics is now rarely trained in history, nor actively engaged in working with historians in understanding the past. At the leading edges of archival thinking, there is little use and even less time for the needs and complexities of innovative ways of looking at history. The categories of knowledge most important to contemporary archival training now derive from organizational theory, functional analysis, complex systems, communications, and computer technology.
Conclusion

Scholars coming to special collections in the 21st century should be prepared for an interdisciplinary experience. The disciplines of finding evidence, voice, experience, identity, process, conventions, structures, and sets of practices form one set of disciplines; librarians, archivists, and curators increasingly focus on the infrastructure of information and how it is understood and implemented. This is the archival divide, and it needs to be bridged. One way is to place more responsibility on the disciplines themselves for description that might be realized through the development of parallel catalog and finding aid structures, or by giving more attention to EAD and cross-collection possibilities—developing the idea of the “subcatalog.” Another is to consider special collections as an academic center where the collections themselves are voices of authority and knowledge on par with the faculty itself in its potential to generate knowledge. Through the joint appointment of visible academic personnel or through the establishment of a specific academic program (courses and programs—teaching with collections), special collections can strengthen its presence on the campus. Special collections librarians should be viewed as “faculty” or knowledge specialists on campus.

In any case, 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; between how knowledge was conceived and how it currently is constructed; between old technologies and new technologies; between textuality/visuality and new forms of delivery; between abandoned authorities and new authorities; 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. Special collections can then become a place of authority more than material, a place of mediation more than service, place of community more than institution, a place of connection more than repository: a bridge over the Archival Divide.

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