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

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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
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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