

**“It Was the Best of Times, It Was the Worst of Times”:
Special Collections at the Crossroads**

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My apologies to all the Dickens scholars and French historians for comparing the current state of special collections with the calamity and upheaval experienced during the French Revolution, but for we special collections professionals, the lopping off of heads, if only figuratively, is a potential that we should contemplate.

Special collections librarianship is quickly approaching a crossroads: if we choose one direction we may be relegated into the museum of curiosities; by taking the other avenue we may be rewarded with endless possibilities and great challenges.

What brought us to this crossroads? For many years special collections enjoyed a privileged existence. We had limited but mostly adequate funding; our offices and reading rooms occupied premium spaces; we came to work clearly knowing our jobs were important. We also knew that most of our colleagues in our parent institutions didn't really know what we did, or how we did it; they just heard from us how difficult and expensive it was to do, but that the expense and time were well worth it, as we were doing this for future generations. With our unique and valuable collections, special collections gave prestige and uniqueness to the whole institution.

Then sometime in the 1980s, I can't remember exactly when, this all began to change. The opportunities of the Web, scanning technologies, and a better understanding of how our collections could be discovered converged. We embraced these technological changes with a vengeance, seeing in them the promise of finally exposing our rich materials to the world. Over the next 20 years we scanned, we developed EAD (Encoded Archival Description) documents, we cooperated with other institutions to create shared finding aids and subject-based collections of images and documents, and we adapted our processing procedures to incorporate various forms of metadata. In all this, we were rewarded with grants and lavished with high praise. Then the newness of what we accomplished wore off, the technology became more mundane, and we were challenged with how to keep moving forward. Our success had become our albatross.

Today we can no longer rely solely on the magic we worked in the dark days before the explosion of electronic resources. We remain confronted with the challenge—the expense—of traditional ways of processing and preserving collections, but we are also faced with more and more digitized materials, better discovery tools, and the need to preserve digital collections and born-digital documents. Bringing the old ways and the new together offers us a road to survival. How we do that will determine the new role for special collections in this ever expanding, rapidly changing, new world we find ourselves inhabiting.

For some, there will be marginalization into the museum model at best, for others, extinction. As budgets are stretched to cover costs of new technologies and access models, some

institution will not be able, or willing, to continue to support traditional special collections functions. Special collections that are not willing or adroit enough to seize the opportunities offered by the changing environments will become marginalized. So what does the future hold for those who don't want to travel down the same road as the Dodo?

The March 2009 report of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Working Group on Special Collections is an interesting blueprint for what this future may look like. Written as a series of recommendations covering issues such as large-scale digitization, models to handle digital materials preservation, and the "problem" of backlogs and hidden collections, the report, written for ARL library directors, is a challenge to special collections professionals to begin to actively address these issues, with the ever so slight overtone that if we don't, someone else might. For example, the issues of minimal processing and discovery of "hidden" collections is over, as indicated by CLIR's (Council on Library and Information Resources) grant initiatives to fund projects to provide access to the "hidden collections" and the National Historic Publication and Records Commission's requirement for grant funding to have no inaccessible backlog of collections.

So how do we rise to the challenge of the future? In the remainder of this essay, I will address six issues that I see shaping our near future. These are by no means the only issues, but those I see as the most important and achievable.

First, we need to learn more about our users and understand how they find and use our materials. As our users become more and more networked, our cyberspace navigators' research strategies, their methods for discovery of materials, and their expectations when they find them may be very different from the content we currently provide them and how we deliver it. By conducting user surveys, forming focus groups, and collaborating with our users, we will begin to better understand their needs and be able to develop the tools that deliver accessibility not just availability.

Second, we must boldly explore new collecting areas and new forms of documentation; whether it's a born-digital document or a database, we cannot ignore materials that, because of our lack of knowledge or lack of technology, were not selected for our collections. This includes working to find solutions for the preservation of digital resources. We must continue to work to document the undocumented, move quickly to capture the fleeting electronic document, and listen to our users when they lament the lack of documentation. The explosion in interdisciplinary research offers us opportunities to collect in areas that once might have been out of our collecting scope, but with new interdisciplinary opportunities, these collections will likely become more relevant.

Third, collaborate, collaborate, collaborate. We must seek out partners, not only within our own professional communities, but also within our campuses and communities. Collaborations with vendors, nonprofit organizations, and governmental agencies may well be the only way we can advance initiatives such as mass digitization projects that get us away from "boutique" digitization and new ways to address the preservation of electronic resources. Particularly important for special collections in an academic setting is our integration of materials and expertise into the classroom and the curriculum. We need to think seriously in a

global context about international collaborations to establish standards and shared collection development. Our users want information; they really don't care where it comes from.

Fourth, we must seek out new opportunities to expand our missions, including management of institutional repositories (IR), electronic publishing including university presses, and expertise in intellectual property issues. The role of an IR is very close to our own and could easily be folded into our portfolio of responsibilities, particularly for the archiving of born-digital institutional records. Understanding and communicating the intellectual property rights for both authors and users of our materials, is growing in importance. Our ability to understand copyright issues and to advise others within our communities will become a very valued skill.

Fifth, money, cash, moola—whatever you want to call it—we need more of it. Special collections have traditionally been very successful in acquiring donations of materials and private monetary donations. These private donations may be our best, or only, way to fund projects and initiatives that the library or parent institution cannot support.

Sixth, we need to look closely at ourselves. Deciding what are the core competencies necessary for special collections professionals is our responsibility. We need to build the training infrastructure to deliver the skills and expertise needed to address the challenges ahead.

Do we have the determination and desire to tackle the future? This truly could be “the best of times” for our special collections.