

Reflections on the direction of Library Collection in the 21st century

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Thanks for the invitation to take part in this session. As a user, rather than a librarian, I may be able to offer a different perspective on the issues facing Asian Studies collections in Australian libraries today. My talk focusses on two phenomena: the thinning out of collection development and the vast expansion of accessibility to collections.

One of the most noticeable features of the past three decades or so has been the retreat of libraries from old-style collection development. Once upon a time, most libraries took pride in having a unique collection – something that gave them a special place in the world of libraries and which might attract specialist researchers from far afield. They held in high regard the scholar-librarian who worked with the mind of a collector, combining idiosyncrasy and a penchant for hunches with a deep knowledge of the field and a dogged determination to fill gaps. To varying degrees, most libraries have abandoned this model. Instead, strategic plans, often fulfilled by outside suppliers, determine the broad outlines of acquisitions policy, and those strategies are more likely to be based on projected user statistics than on the frisson of excitement that once came from being the only library with a serious collection on a particular topic.

Academics are not able to take the place of the old collector-librarians. Academic life itself is now too fast-paced for any but a handful of academics to focus on single-minded source collection. In any case, libraries are seldom able to house specialist collections. Indeed, we might have realized that the authorities would not build us ever-larger buildings to encompass the vast volume of research produced each year, let alone the even vaster mass of print material that we use as sources.

Instead, the centre of gravity of specialist collection development has shifted to online collections curated by commercial, or at least user-pays, ventures such as JStor, ProQuest and Brill, with occasional open access gems like Trove and Legal Tools. Overall, this shift to on-line access has been an immense boon to researchers, reducing or removing travel costs and travel times, thereby giving a far wider range of researchers access to materials that were once only accessible to scholars who lived in the vicinity of the hard-copy collection. This enormous value of this increased access needs to be kept in mind when we also acknowledge and regret the withering of the inter-library loan system as a consequence of e-books and the increasing loss of open stack access to users from the broader public as universities shift books into stores from which they can only be summoned by registered (enrolled) users.

The current situation presents us with four significant challenges:

1. No-one in the university system now has responsibility for the hard work of assembling original collections. A few opportunities exist for funding preservation, such as the British Library Endangered Libraries scheme, but these opportunities are sparse and unsystematic. The preservation of unique collections depends increasingly on the commercial judgment of commercial consolidators. They mean well (mostly), but they respond to demand, meaning that 'big' areas are more likely to be served than small ones.

2. We have seen consolidation of the information industry into half a dozen large players, but this industry is volatile. We don't know what will happen when, through incompetence or misfortune, one of the big suppliers goes belly-up.

3. The retreat from hard copy, whether books, journals, newspapers or other materials, along with the increased effectiveness of optical character recognition has shifted the approach of some researchers from painstaking, systematic reading to a focus on keyword hits, encouraging the use of material that is entirely divorced from its context.

4. In combination with OCR, machine translation is now approaching the point where some forms of serious research using foreign language texts can be done by researchers who are not competent in those languages. The risks of misunderstanding will soon rest more on the nature of the material – lists of export commodities at one end of the spectrum, philosophical reflections and poetry at the other – than on the act of machine translation itself. (And we should remember the prevalence of misreading of texts by native speakers.) Potentially, this opening of cross-language research possibilities offers some of the most exciting prospects for the future.