

# **Ownership and access: A new idea of "collection"**

By Michael Gorman

---

## *Integrating electronic resources into the collection*

---

**A**ccess not ownership" always had more of the bumper sticker than of insight about it. This slogan, so popular at the high-water point of digital hype, derived from a business practice known as "in time, not in case." The idea was that the actual physical presence of spare parts and the like in expensive on-site warehouse space was immaterial and the only thing that mattered was their availability when needed. (It is worth noting that strategic strikes paralyzed large parts of the auto industry when the "in time, not in case" philosophy was put into practice.) In any event, the equation of library materials with widgets and libraries with warehouses should have been enough to set the alarm bells ringing. As in most such cases, the analogy with business was faulty and shallow and the importance to library users of accessible physical collections remained unexplored.

There is an arrogant elitism in the whole "virtual library" idea: an elitism that says, irrespective of the desires of library users, electronic storage, transmission, and access will be their only available resource. As anyone with the slightest feel for library service will tell us, ownership more often than not equals availability equals unqualified access. The time has come to look upon library materials as divided into the classes of available and not avail-

able; to cherish physical collections because they meet real needs and make possible a variety of services; and to integrate electronic resources into our idea of "collection."

The card catalog had many defects. Perhaps the greatest of these was its division of materials into two irrelevant (to the user) classes. The card catalog, in effect, said, "This library owns (or believes it owns) this item"—a response that did not address the user's implicit question, which was, of course, "Can I have this item?" Online systems, in marrying circulation and cataloging records, are a great improvement, not because of their form (electronic) but because of their responsiveness to real user needs. The time has come, it seems to me, to redefine the idea of "collection" and to rethink the ways in which users gain access to documents in the redefined "collection."

### **The modern library collection**

Looked at from the point of view of availability, a modern library collection has four main components:

- 1) Tangible objects (books, sound recordings, videos, etc.) owned by the library and housed in the library.
- 2) Intangible electronic documents (on CD-ROMs, mounted on the library's computers, etc.) owned by the library and available without a fee at terminals connected to the library's systems.
- 3) Tangible objects owned by other libraries and available through interlibrary loan and other resource-sharing systems.

**As anyone with the slightest feel for library service will tell us, ownership more often than not equals availability equals unqualified access.**

## The equation of library materials with widgets and libraries with warehouses should have been enough to set the alarm bells ringing.

4) Intangible electronic documents owned and maintained by other agencies and available electronically for a fee or without payment.

It is evident that the first two categories are the likely first choice of most library users—they have the merit of being instantly available (in most cases) and free. They are also listed in the online catalog or, in the case of the second class, somewhere else in the library's integrated system. Increasingly, information about classes 3 and 4 is available in online systems through connections to databases as diverse as the OCLC online union catalog, Melvyl, CARL, ERIC, etc. Many systems are also giving their patrons easy access to the Web. Given the ready accessibility of these four concentric circles of library materials, the discussion of what constitutes a "collection" becomes somewhat metaphysical. From an accountant's point of view, a "collection" consists of items bought and paid for; from

the librarian's and, most important, the library user's point of view, the "collection" is that universe of materials that is readily and freely available.

The keys to availability and the factors that make this new definition of collection possible are bibliographic control and preservation. Librarians have mastered the art of bibliographic control for the tangible objects they own and have built complex systems to make the whereabouts of those objects known. We have also made great strides in the preservation of fragile materials and, by virtue of our stewardship, have ensured that the recorded knowledge and information of the past and present will be available to future generations. Are we up to the challenge of extending that bibliographic control and preservation to electronic documents? I believe so, if we have the necessary determination, organization, and confidence. ■

(*Midas cont.* from page 469)

### **Comment: A place called cyberia**

New nations express themselves first by writing a constitution, and then by founding a national library to define a national culture and literature. By 2030 new forms of community and modes of education will evolve, reflecting the increasing cultural diversity of civil society and new economic conditions. How will these new communal forms reinvent the library to manage their knowledge currencies—as a function or as a place, or both?

*Cyberia*, that is, the new social forms and communities which are taking shape within computer mediated communication,<sup>4</sup> may provide a home for a new kind of public place which might deserve to be called a library in this sociological sense. Even today there are promising experiments in network-based communities, including: the collaboratory experiments sponsored by the National Science Foundation; game spaces, such as Lambda Moo; Web pages, lists, and e-mail used as social glue by social movements such as Greenpeace.

New media might serve as a medium of public education as 18th-century art once did,

art historian Barbara Stafford argues, but only if they are linked to "common rituals and public concerns."<sup>5</sup> This is precisely what libraries have done for print in creating public spaces, and by shaping collections that reflect community interests and concerns. This has yet to be done for digital information and cannot be accomplished by markets alone.

### **Notes**

1. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 84.

2. Walter Wriston, *The Twilight of Sovereignty* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), xii.

3. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

4. Arturo Escobar, "Welcome to Cyberia," *Current Anthropology* 35 (June 1994), 211–31.

5. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment, Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), 311. ■