

Keeping Good Company: A Vindication of Collaboration

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I am delighted to be here, to participate in this discussion today. As a librarian who has spent most of his career working in and administering special collections, I feel that I can bring a unique perspective to our deliberations today.

You know, IMLS is a relatively new agency—although the programs for museums and libraries that we administer have a long history, our agency was created in its present form by the Museum and Library Services Act of 1996. What motivated Congress to radically alter the structure for providing support to museums and libraries seven years ago?

I think that the record is clear that this evolution was the result of a simple recognition on the part of several members of Congress that libraries and museums share a common mission: education. Museums and libraries are both social institutions that provide resources and services that support public education.

Recognition of this relationship is not limited to the United States. In the international context there have been several interesting recent developments that reinforce this point. Last year, in Canada, the National Library and the National Archives were merged, creating a new agency called the Library and Archives of Canada. In Norway, the national agencies for museums, libraries and archives were recently merged into a single national agency, fostering increased collaboration among these three types of cultural institutions.

The educational purpose of libraries in the United States is beyond question. The role of school and academic libraries in supporting education is well-recognized—that is their *raison d'être*. But we sometimes forget that public libraries too have an educational mission.

What we know today as the American Public Library first came into existence in Boston about 150 years ago. There was no doubt in the minds of the founders of the Boston Public Library that its mission was to be primarily educational. In their report to the Boston City Council, the trustees of the Library proposed that the public library in Boston would be “the crowning glory of our system of City schools” and “the utmost importance as the means of completing our system of public education.” Communities that followed the Boston model and founded libraries in the 1850s and 1860s were explicit in citing the library’s purpose to support and extend the agencies of formal education in the community.

The education theme has remained a constant in the discourse of the American Library Profession. In 1955, for example, testimony in support of the first federal legislation to support library development, the Library Services Act, consistently argued the educational importance of the public library, asserting that libraries were second only to schools in the capacity educate citizens. Librarian of Congress L. Q. Mumford testified that “for most people the public library is the chief—and sometimes the only—means of carrying on their education after they leave school.”

In recent years, however, the importance of education has almost disappeared from the rhetoric of librarians, replaced by a focus on information. Libraries and librarians are indeed good at organizing and providing access to information. But

providing information and supporting education are not the same things. There is a difference between information and knowledge. There are many other agencies that also provide access to information, and a number of other professions that claim that expertise. The most important role of the library is supporting, enhancing, and facilitating the transfer of knowledge—in other words, education.

We often hear it said that today we are living in an information age. But in a world drowning in information, we are hungry for knowledge. That is why today, in the 21st century, we must be more than an information society. We must become a learning society. And that is why at IMLS we are dedicated to the purpose of creating and sustaining a nation of learners. Our mission is to strengthen the capacity of museums and libraries to provide the resources and services that create and sustain a nation of learners.

A learning society requires that we do more than develop the hardware, software, telecommunications networks, and other services and systems that supply and organize content. It requires additional structure and context to enable learners around the globe to put knowledge to good use.

I believe that special collections have a unique role to play providing opportunities for learners. But to do that we have to create and demonstrate value.

Creating Public Value

My thinking about libraries, museums and other public cultural agencies has been informed lately by the arguments that Mark Moore makes in his very important book *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*. Moore is a professor at the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard. He has spent a lot of time working with public

sector managers. He has developed a detailed analysis of what public managers should do, and a framework for judging their success.

Moore asserts that just as the aim of the manager in the private sector is to produce private value, in the form of revenue, profit, and capital growth, so too the aim of managerial work in the public sector is to produce *public* value.

In a sense, really, this is a no-brainer: if public enterprises do not create value for the public, then why would they be formed or continue to exist? The problem, of course, is how do you define and measure public value?

A key concept in determining public value is that value is determined not by the providers of services, but the consumers. In other words, we don't decide what is valuable, our users or customers do. If we want to offer services that the public will value and support, it is imperative that we *listen* carefully and systematically to our political leaders and resource allocators to understand fully their agendas, their concerns, and their goals. We must learn to express the value that we create in terms that are consistent with their own notions of value. And I believe that focusing on resources and services that support learning—the creation and dissemination of knowledge—is our best approach to demonstrating value.

Collaboration

One of the best tools for creating value is collaboration. At IMLS we believe that collaboration is emerging as *the* strategy of the 21st century. It is aligned with how we are thinking about our communities as “holistic” environments, as social ecosystems in which we are part of an integrated whole. The kind collaboration we wish to encourage

is not a joined-at-the-hip symbiosis, and it certainly is not a parasitic relationship. Instead it is a mature and reflective recognition of intersecting nodes of interest, activity and mission. It is the potential for creating synergy out of cooperation, building a structure in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Librarians have a consistent history of collaboration. Sharing resources is fundamental to the practice of the profession. Indeed, the concept of sharing underlies the very foundation of the modern library as a social agency. Libraries were established in order to pool scarce resources for the common good. The society libraries of the American Colonial period arose from the simple fact that books were too scarce—and too expensive—for any one individual to be able to acquire access to all they needed, so readers brought their individual collections together to share them in common. The quintessential example of this is found right here in Philadelphia, with the Library Company of Philadelphia, founded by Benjamin Franklin and his friends. This ethic of sharing has remained strong in the practice of American librarianship ever since.

But collaboration is not easy. It requires that we—as individuals and as institutions—behave in ways that are not “normal,” that feel unnatural. One definition of collaboration that I have recently heard offered is that collaboration is “an unnatural act, practiced by non-consenting adults.” The dictionary, in fact, offers the following as one definition: “cooperating treasonably, as with an enemy occupying one’s country.” This notion may be at the heart of some of the difficulties that we encounter in attempting to collaborate. A better definition for our purposes is “working together in a joint effort.”

Differences among institutions, however, can be profound. The assets and personnel, academic preparation of professionals, even the very vocabulary we use to

describe operations, can be dramatically different. The characteristics and proximity to the communities served can vary widely. Values and assumptions of mission and service can be different.

In short, the cultures of organizations can differ dramatically. These differences are significant, they are challenging and they do not go away. It is imperative that these differences be recognized forthrightly. Over time, they can evolve into sources of synergy rather than contention. One goal of successful collaboration is assurance that the integrity of each institution is sustained by the partnership.

IMLS has provided a strong incentive to overcome these barriers and develop the potential of collaborative efforts. As Nancy Allen and LizBishoff observe in a recent publication,

“Through IMLS funding, a growing number of academic libraries are partnering with museums, historical societies, and other scientific and cultural heritage organizations. The IMLS presented these communities with financial incentives to develop joint projects and to work together to create new approaches to meet the common goals and purposes of creating better and more accessible collections that meet the needs of a knowledge society.”

There are numerous examples of such projects, funded directly by IMLS, and indirectly by state library administrative agencies using LSTA funds. They vary enormously in scope and range of these projects, in terms of the size and diversity of the institutions involved, the types of materials included in the projects, and the value-added matrix in which they are embedded. Many of these projects have been funded under our National Leadership Grant program in the Museum-Library Collaboration category,

which requires collaboration between at least one museum and one library. It is interesting to note, however, that many of the collaborative projects funded by IMLS are in other grant categories in which collaboration is not required. It is clear that the library and museum communities have embraced collaboration as the one of the most important tools they have for achieving their goals, for creating value for their communities.

Naturally at IMLS we are interested in fostering collaboration between and among museums and libraries. It is inherent in our structure, and mandated by our governing statute. But we also think it is imperative to reach out beyond the museum and library and to find nodes of intersecting interest, activity and mission among other players in the community.

To give you an idea of essential we think this kind of approach is to success, last year I created a new position on our staff, Director for Strategic Partnerships. The charge to that officer is to identify opportunities for useful collaborations, with other federal agencies, with non-governmental organizations, with other funders like foundations and corporations, and with the relevant service organizations. We have agree to define the long-term success of this approach when these agencies start to come to us for help in involving museums and libraries in their programs because they recognize what museums and libraries can do to help them achieve their goals. That has already begun to happen.

One of the potential partners in which we have the most interest at present is public broadcasting. Robert Coonrod, the President of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting gave the keynote address at our Web Wise conference last year in Washington. He provided a broad overview of the changes that broadcasters are going

though, due in large part to the impact of digital technology. Those changes lead to the inescapable recognition of a pending convergence. Public broadcasters are becoming more and more like libraries and museums—just as libraries and museums are becoming more and more like broadcasters. Coonrod encouraged us to begin to explore what he called “community-based public service media collaboratives.” We already have ready examples of such collaborative projects in the landscape, many of the funded by IMLS. We are now actively exploring collaborative projects between IMLS and CPB.

Recently IMLS and CPB jointly sponsored a conference in Washington, focusing on supporting community-based collaborations that foster learning and civic engagement for the 21st century. This “Partnership for a Nation of Learners”—as we called it—is designed to support and promote collaborations that link active learners to an expanded network of community-based resources, with a special interest in collaborations that respond to specific community needs, produce public benefit, and promote civic engagement through the learning that occurs. The meeting brought together representatives not only of the broadcaster, museum and library professional communities, but also a range of funding organizations and non-governmental organizations with an interest in the topic.

We are still assessing the outcomes of that meeting, but some very interesting issues surfaced in the discussions. And I would like to discuss two of the major elements that I think, combined, lead to an inescapable conclusion of a major transition.

The first of these is the recognition of a pending convergence, of libraries, museums and broadcasters. For some time now I have been writing and speaking about

the blurring boundaries between and among cultural institutions, focusing primarily on the boundaries between museums, libraries and archives.

IMLS sponsors an annual conference called WebWise that focuses on digital library and museum projects, many of them funded by IMLS. A couple of years ago we heard consistent reports indicating that in the digital environment, libraries are beginning to behave more like museums and museums are behaving more like archives. In the traditional non-digital environment, libraries organize their collections and present them for use in response to a users specific need or inquiry. A user comes into the library and asks “what do you have on topic X.” For example, “Show me everything you have on impressionist painting, on Native American ritual objects, on Paleolithic protozoa.”

Conversely, museums traditionally organize selections from their collections in topical or thematic interpretive and didactic exercises we call exhibitions. A user comes into the museum and looks at what the museum staff has selected, presented and interpreted. A museum-goer would not normally come into the museum and say “show me all of your impressionist paintings, show me all your Native American ritual objects, show me all your Paleolithic protozoa.”

In the digital environment, these behaviors are almost precisely reversed. Museums for the first time can present their entire collection, cataloged and surrounded with metadata, retrievable in response to a users specific interest or inquiry. And libraries have begun to organize selected items from their collections in thematic presentations that tell a particular story, and even call these presentations exhibitions.

It is important to note that the users of these digital collections do not care, and may well not even be aware, that the originals of the digital surrogates that they use are in

a museum, a library, an archives, or some other kind of institution. The boundaries indeed are blurring.

Recently, I have learned that, in the digital arena, there has been a transformation that results in public broadcasters behaving more like museums and libraries. Formerly we have been accustomed to thinking about broadcasters as providing access to rich educational resources, but in a strictly synchronous manner. If we wanted to enjoy the educational content that they provide, we were expected to tune in on Thursday evening at 8:00 to see the latest program on the rings of Saturn, on the explorations of Lewis and Clark, or on the plays of Shakespeare. But increasingly now this “broadcast” content is no longer “broadcast” in the conventional sense. It is accessed through cable or satellite connection. And increasingly we can also access and download the entire program from a website.

What’s more, new digital devices like TIVO are transforming the way that audiences interact with television programming, enabling the “viewer” to capture the broadcast, retain it for use at a later time, retrieved and used at the convenience of the receiver.

Traditional synchronous access to broadcast programming is declining and asynchronous use is becoming the norm. “Broadcasting” no longer adequately described what broadcasters do—it instead describes the technology that they formerly used to do what they do. The essence of their business is not “broadcasting;” it is creating and providing access to educational content and opportunities.

There is one other important transformation for broadcasters. In the traditional context, the programming that is made available at 8:00 PM on Thursday evening is

typically fifty minutes of content. This represents really only an executive summary of hours of material that have been captured or created, and edited down to fit the available programming slot. But it is now common to make at least some of that additional material available to the user, via the broadcaster's website. We have all heard the instruction at the end of a show or segment that we can find additional information at a specified URL.

In short, broadcasters are now trying to find ways to organize and present for use the vast quantities of raw material, surround it with metadata, and make it retrievable in response to a specific user inquiry. In short, in the digital environment, broadcasters are behaving more like museums and libraries.

The second element of the major transformation that we are witnessing is a rapid transformation in our approach to structuring education—what some have called the “de-institutionalization of learning.”

We have all heard discussion recently about a crisis in our education system. But really, what we are experiencing is perhaps a crisis in our system of schooling. We must remember that “schooling” is not the same thing as “education,” and that “education” is not the same thing as “learning.” What we at IMLS are interested in is the broadest of these terms and categories, learning.

As our system of schooling continues to struggle, alternative approaches to learning are expanding. In recent years there has been a tremendous growth in home schooling. (The term “home schooling” is in fact a misnomer, since the last thing that the practitioners of this form of learning is interested in doing is recreating a school in the home.)

In fact, in our society we learn in three different sectors. We learn in the school. We learn in the workplace. And we learn in the home and community. The last of these three sectors is now frequently referred to as the free-choice learning sector, underscoring that learners in this environment are motivated by individual needs and interests.

In the past century, we have devoted most of our resources to strengthening our schools. There is reason to believe that in the near future there may be a rapid and dramatic transformation in the way society structures learning – opportunities or and support for learning. There will be an equalization across the three sectors, with less emphasis on schooling and increasing emphasis on the other two sectors. And this presents a major challenge—and a great opportunity—for libraries, museums—and public broadcasters.

So what does this mean for libraries in general, and for special collections in particular? I think it means that we need to review, rethink, perhaps revise, almost certainly re-articulate our missions. We all know that libraries have always been more than places where we store books on shelves and make them available to readers. More broadly, libraries have been mechanisms for creating, organizing and storing resources, and for providing services, that support learners of all ages. I strongly believe that we will still need traditional resources—books, manuscripts, traditional library materials of all kinds. We also still need libraries as places, that serve as centers for social interactions among learners in communities. But clearly we need to devote ourselves to developing new approaches to providing resources for learners.

Here are a few ideas:

- We will need to develop new models for collaboration between broadcasters and publishers—beyond the Ken Burns model.
- We need to collaborate actively with scholars: in collection development, in reference, in education and outreach.
- We will need to use digital technology to unify virtually collections that are split across multiple repositories.
- We will need to engage even more actively in educational programming and outreach—exhibitions, publications, lectures.
- And we will have to engage actively in collaborative work in addressing large-scale preservation and access issues. The Center for Research Libraries’ Preserving America’s Paper Resources conference and the Association of Research Libraries conference on Hidden Collections are two examples of these. Fortunately, Bernard Reilly and Duane Webster will be discussing both of these later in the program today.

Conclusion

We must work towards effective collaboration, not only between and among other libraries, but also with other players in the social and community framework: museums, archives, broadcasters, and a whole host of other potential allies and partners. Such Collaboration is the not easy, but it represents the best opportunity for creating and demonstrating value, embracing the opportunities and challenges in the environment, and developing the resources and services that create and sustain a nation of learners.