

Unilateralists and the "Chocolate-making Countries:" Is Collaboration a Strategy for Today?
Notes for a Paper Delivered at the PACSCL Conference
December 2003
Bernard F. Reilly, Jr.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union more than a decade ago a great deal of ink has been spilt on the question of how the United States, the world's last remaining superpower, would behave with respect to the rest of the globe. Whether the US would take a multilateral approach to world politics and seek consensus and concerted action with and through other states and international NGOs to bring peace and stability to the world, or whether American foreign policy would involve unilateral pursuit of US economic and political interests in the world..

The US's dealings with Iraq last year, with the intransigence of the Saddam Hussein regime over monitoring and inspection of its weapons programs and capabilities, was widely viewed as a test case. And the US decision to "go it alone" in removing the Iraq regime instead of through concerted action with international frameworks like the UN or the European Community was seen as an indication of America's commitment to pursuing its own ends.

To add insult to injury Donald Rumsfeld referred to the other dissenting European powers dismissively as "Old Europe" and "the chocolate-making countries." Clearly at issue were two different ways of going about things: collaborative, consensus-based action (and in many instances, inaction) in the interest of the larger community of nations, vs. individual action in self-interest (or, to be fair, on behalf of the perceived best interests of the large community).

Cooperation is rampant in the library world. American libraries, more than museums, universities, learned and historical societies, and other heritage organizations, have always sought out partners, formed consortia and networks, undertaken collaborative programs. Should this end in the post-Soviet world? Has cooperation become obsolete? Are libraries that rely on one another, that seek to coordinate collecting and preservation activities to achieve a greater collective good in fact the knowledge world counterparts of "Old Europe." Should we give way to entrepreneurial individualism and concede the virtues of competition rather than collaboration, and see the free market as the ultimate arbiter of value and success?

Indications are that just the opposite is true. That in the library world self-sufficiency results in attrition, in the loss of important heritage materials, and that the challenges facing libraries as we move into an increasingly electronic environment will require cooperative action on a scale not undertaken previously.

A conference last July on repository libraries and the future of print was revealing in many ways. With funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and other support of the Council on Library and Information Resources the Center for Research Libraries convened the conference, entitled *Preserving America's Printed Resources: the Roles of Repositories, Depositories, and Collections of Record*, a two-part event held in Chicago.

Day One was an open conference that brought together a slate of presenters from the U.S. and abroad who are actively engaged in major repository and "collection of record" programs. Presenters outlined a range of cooperative collection management and print preservation efforts, including regional print repositories in the U.S., national repository and print preservation programs abroad, and national-level "collections of record" efforts in the U.S., notably the Library of Congress's prospective Heritage Copy Preservation Program and the American Antiquarian Society's comprehensive archiving of U.S. pre-1877 imprints. Presenters detailed the successes and innovations of emerging inter-institutional efforts, and proposed measures that might strengthen those efforts to ensure the long-term survival of printed heritage materials. The

papers presented will be published in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Library Collections, Acquisitions, and Technical Services*.

On the following day conference presenters and other invitees participated in an extended discussion on the theme of repositories and collections of record. Discussion focused on the question, "How can libraries work together to optimize management of the nation's knowledge resources in printed form?" Conferees agreed that management of these resources is "optimized" when it provides the scholarly community the greatest possible richness and diversity of knowledge resources, minimizes inadvertent losses, and makes the most efficient use of available human and financial resources.

The planning meeting brought together prominent representatives of the major sectors currently engaged in the stewardship of the nation's print library materials.

- Library of Congress
- Government Printing Office
- Independent research libraries
- Large academic libraries
- Small and mid-sized academic libraries
- Law libraries
- State libraries
- Regional repositories and consortia (ReCAP, CIC, OrbisCascade, Five Colleges of Massachusetts, Washington Research Libraries Consortium)
- Policy-makers (Council on Library and Information Resources, Association of Research Libraries)

What was impressive was the clear consensus of the group that while cooperative collection management and development efforts were considered *desirable and prudent* in the past to address the problems of scarcity of resources, cooperative action had now become *imperative*.

Conferees pointed to attrition in several fields:

- *Newspapers and Books*: On the basis of the Heritage Health Index survey, it is evident that newspapers, especially low-circulation U.S. ethnic newspapers, foreign newspapers, and late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American literature are seriously at risk. It was also noted that several major U.S. academic libraries and independent research libraries have recently been forced to retire or replace with microfilm critical foreign newspaper holdings.
- *Government Documents*: The government is moving aggressively to shift its publications to electronic format and to optimize the number of depository libraries that hold legacy publications in printed form. The federal depository libraries' traditional role of maintaining numerous comprehensive collections of federal government documents is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain, as many of the depositories are under severe economic strains. US Geological Survey maps are particularly at risk.
- *U.S. Legal Publications*: Many law libraries are losing storage space to other law school needs, and the existing collections of primary source U.S. state and federal legal publications produced before 1950 are actively being disposed of although they are neither archived in print form nor comprehensively preserved in electronic versions.

These problems won't go away, and they won't be solved by the commercial sector. Libraries will have to rescue these kinds of materials in paper format. The big guys will take care of preserving the high-use content in digital or other formats like microfilm, at least for as long as there is sufficient demand for it. They are driven by market forces, post Soviet. The costs of digital

conversion and management favor the conversion or digital presentation of high-use materials, rather than low-use ones.

- Most newspaper content – ProQuest, Newsbank doing the top ten
- Government publications and documents – Lexis-Nexis doing only parts
- Many foreign language materials – because some parts of the world do not have the infrastructure to support trade in electronic;
- Ephemera and special collections materials

Increasingly, these materials are disappearing from large academic libraries. Hence greater reliance on independent research libraries is in the cards. Witness AAS.

During a day of intensive discussions representatives of the various sectors of the library world expressed an acute sense of the urgency of acting together to preserve the nation's threatened print heritage materials. Budget crises at the state and national levels, reduced endowment earnings, and the escalating cost of building and managing traditional and electronic resources are compelling even the largest U.S. libraries to rely more heavily than in the past on other libraries to maintain collections of important research materials. Conferees evinced a readiness to work together to ensure the continuing availability to scholars of a rich and diverse corpus of print materials.

Discussions enumerated the ideal characteristics of a national effort to optimize management of print, which would have to reconcile participating libraries' work on behalf of the larger community with their obligations to local constituencies. Conferees, however, lamented the absence of an adequate cooperative framework needed to enable greater inter-reliance among libraries, consortia, and library sectors. Such a framework would foster linkage or "synchronization" of existing and emerging print archiving and "collection of record" efforts undertaken at the regional and national levels, and provide the information, tools and activities to enable individual libraries to calibrate their decisions and actions to benefit from those efforts. An action agenda based on the day's discussions outlines the steps for putting such a framework in place.

The agenda item with the greatest potential bearing on independent research libraries is the first, to synchronize and expand print archiving and "collections of record" efforts. As ever fewer libraries are able to maintain strong print collections, the community will depend more heavily on "collections of record" like the Library of Congress, Federal depository libraries, CRL, independent research libraries such as the American Antiquarian Society and the New York Public Library, and certain large academic libraries. These organizations hold and preserve certain definitive collections, such as pre-1871 US imprints (AAS), newspapers (LC, AAS, NYPL and CRL), "in trust" for the rest of the community. Other libraries throughout the nation tailor their policies and calibrate their decision-making to manage their collections in relation to those collections of record.

Accurate, granular holdings information at the item level for all kinds of publications, particularly newspapers, is often either available only locally (in paper or card form) or is insufficiently complete to support such decision-making. Moreover, since archives are only useful if they can provide access as well, the holding libraries must find ways to deliver materials from their "collections of record" to scholars and students unable to travel to those libraries. Where will the resources come from to provide and strengthen the infrastructure needed to support collections of record? What new incentives can be provided to enable individual independent libraries to continue to shoulder these burdens on behalf of other libraries? The usual incentives: money, access, and prestige.

Money – Libraries of record might be compensated by the rest of the community just as small countries that hold UNESCO World Heritage Sites are provided monetary and other incentives in return for preserving and foregoing commercial exploitation of sites within their borders.

Access - With attrition of library print holdings redundancy will become rarer and demand for hitherto low-use collections of record will increase. Hence access (or rights) to these collections will become a more valuable asset for the holding institutions, and may be useful to holding libraries as a bartering tool for other services and resources.

Prestige – The worth of a library's preserving heritage collections for the larger community must be acknowledged in concrete ways. Metrics for ranking libraries, for instance, must be changed to promote, or at least not to penalize, libraries that avoid redundancy. The Association of Research Libraries and its member libraries are beginning to re-examine the value of volume counts as a factor in ranking libraries.

In the past the federal government has been the chief source of funding for preservation work that supports the nation's libraries, through such initiatives as the Library of Congress Brittle Books program and the National Endowment for the Humanities United States Newspaper Project. Such large-scale public efforts are becoming a harder sell to legislators as the focus shifts to K-12 education and the preservation of born-digital materials. And remember that in this post-Soviet world, we tend to look more toward private sector, and even commercial sector, initiative and investment.

The challenge is daunting. But the community is equal to it. The big question is not "how?" but "who?" For any cooperative effort to succeed and persist, the collective goals of the larger community must be reconciled with the interests and needs of the individual actors. Self-interest must be overcome, or at least harnessed, and incentives for participation provided. We can and should learn much from other sectors about strategic investment and providing incentives.

American experience in Iraq demonstrated the hazards of unilateralism. After the smoke cleared the absence or scarcity of nation- and civil infrastructure-building capabilities proved a serious impediment to achieving stability in that troubled region. Similarly, no single library possesses all of the capabilities needed to navigate the uncharted terrain of the future, to preserve the heritage materials under our stewardship in a rational and methodical way. But together . . . That is another matter.