

An Open Reply to
Thomas Mann's report
'What is Distinctive about the Library of Congress
In Both its Collections and its Means of Access to Them ...'

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This essay concerns Thomas Mann's "*What is Distinctive about the Library of Congress,*" available at:
<http://www.guild2910.org/Future%20of%20Cataloging/LCdistinctive.pdf>

NOTE:

I have not been able to locate or read the memorandum of Deanna Marcum that Mr. Mann refers to on page 2. Secondly, I am not dealing here with the primary topic of his essay about the distinctiveness of the collection of the Library of Congress, which I consider to be an internal discussion.

Preliminary Remarks

Before I get into a concrete discussion of the report, I would like to point out that Mr. Mann's opinions are especially valuable because they display a deep regard for and understanding of the values of traditional librarianship. These values are based on the professional task of helping people utilize to the fullest extent possible the materials held in a library's collection (in this case, the materials held at the magnificent Library of Congress), and when appropriate, to point people toward other useful libraries where they will find other librarians who are experts in the local materials and whose task it is to help people use that collection. Therefore, there is library curation at every level, plus help from experts every step of the way.

Because of changes in technology and information use, I feel that these traditional tasks of helping people use "the collection" are no longer enough. This is because the very definition of "the collection" has changed to include the highly useful digital materials that are just as easily, if not more easily, accessible, than the materials held within the bounds of the traditional "collection." As a result, traditional library methods, as well as traditional library assumptions, have broken down in many ways.

In traditional library terms, the Internet itself should be considered as another "library," another "collection," and there should be librarians who are in charge of that "Internet Library" just as librarians are in charge of any other library, and to whom the local librarian can then steer their users toward. This happens now when a librarian at Columbia University can send someone to New York Public Library and vice versa, where people can ask for help

in each library as they need it. The problem with this scenario is that an "Internet Librarian" exists only as a theoretical construct. In reality, there is no such librarian and probably there will never be one because there are no controls over the Internet that are in any way similar to the controls regular librarians have over their own collections. As a result of this (and many other reasons), the "Internet Library" is left as no one's particular responsibility and the user is left pretty much on his or her own. I believe this illustrates a conflict between two fundamental views of what librarianship is and where it is heading. Because of the economic crisis, this conflict may be coming to a head soon. Mr. Mann's report is an excellent example of the traditional viewpoint of what librarianship should be.

In contrast, the other focus of librarianship should be on helping the user find relevant information no matter where that information exists. It was noted above that this concept has always existed in traditional librarianship, but this took the form of pointing the user to other collections as appropriate. At this point, the patron went to the other collection and the user's needs became another librarian's responsibility. A librarian at Columbia was not expected to be an expert on the LC collection or that at Harvard. That was simply beyond both their responsibilities and their abilities.

This leaves the problem of the lack of any "Internet Librarian" however, since there is no comparable librarian to send the user to; consequently in many cases when it comes to materials on the Internet, the patron is left with the imminently unhelpful and unsatisfying, "Sorry. Here are a couple of links but my expertise is with my own collection. You can also try some search engines. The Internet is really not my department."

In defense of the traditional librarians, the Internet is a truly bizarre and unregulated place that works in completely different and unexpected ways than the collections we have built so carefully with our traditional materials and tools. The tools for searching the web are unreliable, selection is minimal at best, and everything can change in a moment. Librarians are overworked now and "getting control" of the Internet in traditional library terms is simply impossible. Nevertheless, since there is no "Internet Librarian," and most probably never will be, the responsibility for the user's needs remains with the local librarian. This is a frightening realization, indeed, but as I will try to show in the rest of the paper, it is simply facing facts and with a change in focus, it also holds a wealth of opportunities. Once libraries consider that the Internet is an integral part of their collections that is just as important and useful as the physical resources on the shelves, but one where genuine sharing with other entities is now possible, matters begin to change.

Concrete Discussion of Mr. Mann's Report

There is a prevailing attitude throughout Mr Mann's report where he raises legitimate criticisms but does not follow up to offer solutions except occasionally to maintain that everyone should continue to do things in the ways they have always been done. For example, he insists on the importance of browsing physical shelves to find the books that are on similar subjects. While I agree this is valid in part, it is mostly beside the point since anyone at any library knows that reliance on physically browsing the shelves, by definition, misses a huge number of materials that may be elsewhere: materials in special locations such as rare books or reference, journal articles, individual papers in conferences, microforms, something may be checked out or misplaced, and on and on. This has been the situation from time immemorial but today this scenario must include those resources available only online, some of which are exceptionally valuable. Additionally, the continuation of the title of his report, "A Way to Deal Effectively with the Problem of 'Books on the Floor'" speaks volumes as well. Books on the floor will necessarily be out of any classified arrangement, at least for a time, and his own suggestion of "a systematic, professional weeding of our Capitol Hill collections to determine which volumes will next go to remote storage in Module 5 at Fort Meade" (p. 30) also diminishes possibilities of

comprehensive browsing.

Browsing has never worked all that well anyway since it has been so unreliable; perhaps it worked best in monastery libraries during medieval times, when a few dozen books were piled together and browsing was the only real way to find out what was there, but browsing fell apart completely in almost all libraries during the 20th century as solutions had to be found to accommodate the overwhelming number of new books being acquired, and now the 21st century has created many highly worthwhile virtual resources that simply cannot be browsed at all. [I have discussed other theoretical problems with browsing in another open reply to Mr. Mann in my "An Open Reply to Thomas Mann's report 'On the Record' but Off the Track, available at: <http://eprints.rclis.org/13059/1/OntheRecordOpenReply.pdf>] While people are often very happy with the results of browsing books on a shelf, this is mostly erroneous because people do not see the materials they are necessarily missing when they do so. I consider it similar to being "happy" with the result of a search on Google, where people may be satisfied with what they see, but only because they are unaware of what they are not seeing. The only conclusion to all of this is to admit that relying on browsing to find related materials has reached a dead end. It is a very pleasant diversion to be sure, and information of value can indeed be found, but browsing must be considered "icing on the cake" only after the primary, serious searches using modern tools for information discovery.

Unfortunately, some scholars do not want to accept these simple facts and prefer to believe that when they are browsing the shelves of their libraries, they really are browsing the information available to them on a specific topic but this hasn't been the case for a long, long time, just as when the catalogers at the Library of Alexandria had to deal with the same problems that we have: what to do with a single physical item that contained a work of Ovid on love, a work of Seneca on stoicism, and a work of Xenophon on horses, and they could only put it in one place. This is a problem related to all physical materials, no matter the format: from papyrus scrolls to printed books to microfilm. Only with virtual materials can this problem be alleviated to some extent.

Now on the Internet there are all kinds of new materials that can be vitally important. For example, there are often videos of public lectures of the authors themselves discussing their books, and in many of these public lectures, the authors are faced with highly pointed questions from other experts. Of course, in one sense this is nothing new since authors have discussed and debated their books for millennia, but formerly, these invaluable debates were lost forever except in the memories of the lucky few who attended the lectures. Now, these same lectures and debates can be recorded so that others around the world can continue to learn from them in the distant future.

To put this in real terms, for someone interested in this book: Ferguson, Niall. *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*. New York: Penguin Press, 2008. (<http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/191929255>) there is a video of the author at Gresham College in London, where he discusses his book and develops his argument further. See it at: http://fora.tv/2009/06/02/Niall_Ferguson-Evolutionary_Approach_to_Financial_History. Also, the entire PBS Series on his book is available online at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ascentofmoney/>. There is no doubt that people certainly want to know about these sorts of related resources and they should know about them; no one will ever be able to find them by browsing shelves, but how do libraries deal with all of this in ways that are at the same time comprehensive, reliable, and above all, efficient? I do not know if creating full-level, traditional bibliographic records for each of these items and placing them into the library's catalog is the best solution or whether it is a solution at all; this needs testing. Perhaps the Wikipedia page offers some enlightenment http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ascent_of_Money In any case, people want and need these resources right now, today.

Who knows what other kinds of resources will be available in the future?

This does not mean at all that traditional cataloging and classification should be ceased. (I personally believe instead that these tasks should be enhanced so that we could retain at least some of the pleasure and additional value from physical browsing) Mr. Mann gives us some very convincing examples of questions that could never have been answered by using only keyword in Google Books as it is implemented now, and I will probably refer to his examples myself in future discussions. And yet, although all this is correct, we should not forget that the opposite is just as true: there are many materials that could never be found except by using full-text keyword searching. For every example that Mr. Mann can cite for the necessity of professional-cataloger-made metadata (and I agree with the need for this metadata) there can be 100 counter-examples where it can be shown that it is not adequate.

Access

This brings me to another point: the vagueness of the use of the word "access." One person can correctly say that it is easier than ever to *access* many resources, and another can just as correctly reply that it is more difficult than ever before. The problem is: what do people mean when they say "access"? It can mean essentially two things: 1) finding resources, and 2) after finding a specific resource, getting that resource so that it can be used. In FRBR terms, this is: *Find-Identify-Select*, as distinguished from *Obtain*. [For an excellent short overview of FRBR, see: *FRBR* by Jenn Riley at <http://techessence.info/frbr>]

Because of digitization and the Internet, it is in the second meaning of the word "access" that the information contained within many resources is far easier to get than ever before. For example, while I can now see the full-text of the delightful *Aberdeen Bestiary*, plus commentary and examine the page images at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/>, it would still be just as difficult as ever for me to examine the physical item itself, since I doubt very seriously if they would send it as an interlibrary loan. So, I would have to travel to Aberdeen, convince the librarians that I needed to consult the physical item and so on. Yet, it turns out that finding links to bestiaries and seeing related resources is much less simple than it would appear. If I search for "*bestiary*" in Google, the Aberdeen version comes up close to the top, but only because it is in Wikipedia. Besides, there are many other bestiaries and materials on bestiaries available on the web. The page for "Bestiary" in Wikipedia has links to some of these other bestiaries, plus links to a digitized book and an exhibition on bestiaries. In WorldCat, there is a record for the online Aberdeen bestiary but relatively few people use WorldCat, and placing it in context with related materials is still problematic. This entire mechanism is very spotty, and it is "access" in the first sense of the word (*Find-Identify-Select*) where the jury is still out. This is one place where major improvements would be highly appreciated by everyone concerned.

It is true that many materials can now be found through the use of full-text searches that otherwise would have been lost, but as Mr. Mann's examples clearly demonstrate, while this may be good enough for general education or entertainment, full-text searches are not nearly enough for serious purposes, at least not in the foreseeable future. It seems to me that a merging of the two methods in some way is the best solution.

Shrinking Budgets

Ultimately however, we are all facing the same crisis: the economic meltdown means that there is much less money for growth and consequently, new ways of doing our work must be found. The U.S. government is facing a huge deficit, record numbers of people are losing their jobs and in many cases, also losing their homes and even going hungry. Almost all institutions are going through similar problems of shrinking budgets. The focus will probably

be first of all on alleviating the suffering among the people and only then will we be able to look toward ourselves. What this translates into is truly unfortunate: less money and fewer resources for libraries, and that includes the Library of Congress.

Until this situation improves--and improvement could take quite a long time--it will be imperative for librarians to find ways to save money, because if librarians don't find ways to do it themselves, then the administrators will do it for them, and this is what could result in disaster. Fortunately, librarians are currently living in a time when more is possible than ever before through digitizing and sharing.

I confess that I do not enjoy reading an entire book online, but then I never liked reading microfilm either. In fact, I believe I like microfilm even less than I like reading the digitized books in Google, mainly because of the greater inconveniences of microfilm: the need to go to the microfilms room, thread the machine, find the precise item out of many on the film, etc. Microfiche I dislike less, but only slightly less. Throughout all of this however, it is important to note that although I dislike microfilm and microfiche intensely, I am still expected to use a book on microfilm whether I like it or not. A library will not spend money on an interlibrary loan for an item already in the collection, including those on microfilm, that is, unless the patron can come up with some very convincing reasons why he or she needs to examine a physical copy of a particular book, which they can almost never do. Getting the item on interlibrary loan defeats the whole reason why the library bought the microfilm in the first place.

Of late, I have seen reference in several articles and blogs to an entertaining anecdote that illustrates that some scholars, for various reasons, need to "sniff the vinegar" in certain materials. Apparently, vinegar was used as a disinfectant against cholera in earlier times, so a scholar can determine if an item was really present during an epidemic. (See: *The social life of information* / John Seeley Brown and Paul Duguid. 2002 Harvard Bus. School Press. p. 173-174. This particular section of the book happens to be available for free at: http://books.google.com/books?id=D-WjL_HRbNQC&lpg=PP1&pg=PA173#v=onepage&q=&f=false)

While I enjoyed the story, I suspect that the actual number of scholars who really need to "sniff the vinegar," or its equivalent, must be microscopically small. I can only add to this anecdote that I hope throughout the years, no one was guilty of eating a salad and dripping something while reading any of those materials, or that they had not been parked close to any disintegrating microforms suffering from the "vinegar syndrome." All of this also assumes, of course, that these scholars are not really sniffing for other, more interesting, items such as hallucinogens. [For "vinegar syndrome," see the Wikipedia article on "*Cellulose acetate film*" at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cellulose_acetate_film. For the possible hallucinogenic properties of library materials, see: R. J. Hay, *Sick library syndrome*, *The Lancet*, Volume 346, Issue 8990, 16 December 1995, Pages 1573-1574].

Perhaps while Google Books still costs nothing, libraries may feel a bit more receptive to interlibrary loans for materials found in their entirety there, but once an agreement is implemented to make everything in Google Books fully available (as will happen sooner or later) and libraries find themselves spending their shrinking budgets for complete access to Google Books (and there will be incredible pressure on libraries to do so because libraries will immediately gain access to millions of full-text books), the number of justifications for interlibrary loans for items found there must go down tremendously. After all, that will be the reason for subscribing to Google Books in the first place. Reasons for refusals will not be because libraries are unfriendly to scholars or "anti-book," as we will most probably hear; it will simply be because there are not enough resources to pay for everything. I am sure that alternatives will arise, e.g. allowing the patrons themselves to pay the costs for the

interlibrary loan, but I am sure that many will balk at such a high cost for merely borrowing a book for a couple of weeks (\$30 - \$60) and will look for other solutions.

For a real-world example, how could a library now justify the expense of an ILL for the following book (chosen at random): Botta, Carlo, and George Alexander Otis. *History of the War of Independence of the United States of America*. New Haven: Nathan Whiting, 1834. vol. 1 (<http://books.google.com/books?id=Mq0NAQAAIAAJ>) This volume is available in the LC collection, along with several other collections, but more importantly, it is available *for free* and downloadable on the web now to anyone with a computer and an Internet hookup. This should not be ignored but utilized to the greatest degree possible, so what about the majority of libraries that do not have a physical copy? Would it be wise for one of these libraries to spend its scarce resources and budget on an ILL for this book just so that someone can hold it in their hands for a couple of weeks? Would it be better to spend those same resources on acquiring new materials, cataloging some of those old items in the backlog or something else? How about adding to the staff?

If it turns out that some of the pages are unreadable, or that the maps were poorly done, the resources should not go into interlibrary loans which avoids the solution, but toward improving the scans so that all can benefit.

Doing New Things

Mr. Mann quotes Deanna Marcum: "Doing new things inevitably means cutting back on existing activities." and he replies:

"We need to step back a moment and really examine that last sentence. When any group of people, from a family to a large corporation, is faced with the need for belt-tightening, what should determine its priorities? Is it at all normal, or prudent, to cut back on the essentials of their operations in order to 'do new things'?"

he goes on to say:

"I submit that LC's mission is to promote scholarship of unusual scope and of unusual depth. We cannot continue that "existing activity" if we abandon either the system of LCSH cataloging in our OPAC or the system of LCC classified shelving in our bookstacks."

This is one of my major problems with Mr. Mann's arguments. His conclusion is (or seems to be): we cannot do new things because we are too busy doing old things. This reflects a basic divergence in the worldview of the universe of information: that what we are living through right now is but a small "bump in the road" and after the bump, the road will go on pretty much as it always has. Others think that what we are experiencing now represents a fundamental change in the very nature of how people find and relate to information and knowledge. For those who believe in the "bump in the road," no changes or rethinking, or at most very little, are needed. For those others who believe something deeper is happening, they must conclude that many of the old things no longer make a lot of sense today and perhaps will make even less sense in the future.

It should not be a surprise that I consider myself a member of the latter group. In addition, I think that it is highly important that non-librarians do **not** view the library community in terms of the "custodians of the printed materials," since first, this is not true, and second, this is a sure path to eventual oblivion. Unfortunately, studies show that this is how many people, if not most, see libraries and librarians: as associated with books and physical objects. (See the OCLC reports: *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* (2005) Section 3. "The Library Brand" http://www.oclc.org/reports/pdfs/Percept_pt3.pdf and *College Students' Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* (2006) Section 3. "The Library Brand" http://www.oclc.org/reports/pdfs/studentperceptions_part3.pdf)

Therefore, I believe that the "good old days" of librarianship are never coming back, even when the funding is eventually restored. The world of information has changed too much, with new, influential and very powerful players in the game that we must work with, and they are named Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, along with many others. We must accept that they are the major players who will be creating the information environment of the future, not us, and it is the task of libraries to adapt to whatever new environment they create, or else we risk extremely serious harm. This is one of the main reasons why I have initiated the *Cooperative Cataloging Rules* as a type of "open" development for bibliographical metadata standards. [See them at <http://sites.google.com/site/opencatalogingrules/>]

I think libraries should all take a lesson in the courage and ingenuity of the people in the Carteret Islands, who are now watching their island homeland slowly disappear into the Pacific Ocean as climate change leads to rising water levels. (See Shears, Richard. *The world's first climate change refugees to leave island due to rising sea levels*. MailOnline. 18 December 2007. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-503228/The-worlds-climate-change-refugees-leave-island-rising-sea-levels.html>) The people on this island and the government of Papua New Guinea have made a truly wise and courageous decision by admitting that their homes are going away forever and they are trying to relocate the islanders in a planned, timely manner before it is too late. It is still too soon to know if they will succeed, but at least they are making a genuine effort. While they have accepted that their old "homes and haunts" are doomed, it is hoped that these people can continue as a culture and contribute to the general good. People on nearby islands are watching anxiously and looking for solutions as well.

If libraries cooperate and work together, not only among themselves but with the new players in the information world, by using today's tools whose powers were undreamed of only 20 years ago, I believe we can all help to create a new and better world of knowledge and understanding for everyone. We can do this by helping to build systems that ensure all can search for information more reliably and more easily than ever before, while at the same time, everyone can have greater access to information in all the various meanings of that word.

But it is time to move on.