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Mortgaging Our Future on Ownership, or, the Pleasures of Renting

by **Steven R. Harris** (Director of Collections and Acquisitions Services, University of New Mexico)

I was browsing the shelves of Google Books recently and came across *Libraries in the Medieval and Renaissance Periods*, a lecture given by John Willis Clark at Cambridge University in 1894. The first sentence of that work states that "[a] library may be considered from two very different points of view: as a workshop, or as a Museum." This seems very relevant to our current considerations of what libraries do. Clark's succeeding paragraph continues, appropriately, "…mechanical ingenuity…should be employed in making the acquisition of knowledge less cumbrous and less tedious; that as we travel by steam, so we should also read by steam, and be helped in our studies by the varied resources of modern invention."1 Aside from pleasing the steampunks among the *ATG* readership, this introduction strikes us with the similarities between 19th and 21st century concerns. We might as easily replace the interest in steam power of that age with our own preoccupations with digital information—and make similar assessments of the library's goals and aims: to make learning "less cumbrous and less tedious." Of course, Clark, a historian himself, goes on to make the case that we not forget or abandon the library as museum.

I would like to make the opposite encouragement: that we have spent too much energy, too many resources on the library as museum, especially in large academic libraries. It is time for us to focus on the library as workshop. It is time that we gave priority to the immediate information needs within our communities rather than to some predicted or speculative needs of the future.

It often seems that the fulcrum around which this question of "workshop" versus "museum" turns is the preservation of objects, or more to my point, the ownership of objects. The objects in question here are containers of information. Throughout the early history of libraries, physical containers were the only means of transmitting and preserving information: books, newspapers, DVDs, journal issues and volumes. We have now moved well beyond that point, technologically, but librarians are still obsessed with ownership of containers. Meredith Farkas, for example, expresses concern in the March/April 2011 issue of *American Libraries* about the long-term health of her collections: "I feel the weight of that—especially when I'm making decisions about eBooks."2

Assuredly, ownership of containers makes a whole suite of traditional library practices possible, most especially lending to individuals in the user-community and to other libraries. But as we develop more and more digital collections, one has to question whether the function of ownership has outlived its usefulness. Containers are no longer the immutable and tangible things they once were. When we retrieve an eBook or e-journal article, we are no longer physically transmitting one of a limited number of manifestations of that work. A copy is produced (as it were) instantaneously and transmitted electronically. The owner or vendor of that content does not suddenly have a diminished supply on hand. Digital information is the very definition of "on demand publishing." What is the point of ownership in such a world?

Ownership has been a safe harbor in the physical world; we feel secure in maintaining the materials sitting on our shelves (perhaps a misplaced sense of security), but no such certainty exists in the digital world. Even materials for which we hold perpetual access rights feel contingent and provisional. Those feelings might suggest that we do still need ownership of materials, but I think we need to adopt a completely new set of principles in the mostly digital library world. These are, I'll admit, principles that neither libraries nor publishers are quite ready to embrace. We don't even know, in fact, what those principles should be. Libraries and publishers have taken to eying one another with great suspicion regarding digital materials. Each, at turns, would like to cling to an ownership model that was defined in an era of physical objects, or abandon that model, as it is convenient.

The HarperCollins/OverDrive eBook dust-up is a recent case in point. Both libraries and publishers have eagerly accepted the notion of owning an eBook. HarperCollins, however, got it in their brains that, if a library owned an eBook, then there would be less revenue generated because libraries would never be replacing worn out copies, as eBooks don't wear out in the usual sense. Thus, Harper-Collins decided that any of their titles on the OverDrive platform would only be good for 26 uses before the library would have to license an additional copy. Each copy would only be good for 26 uses. Obviously, print books do not last forever, but it is rather tortured logic to say that eBooks should have such fragility programmed into them. The library community exploded in an outrage that went something like, "That is OUR copy. Who are they to say how many uses we should have per copy? eBooks aren't print books! We are NOT going to pay more for an eBook just because it is heavily used."3 I think the logic of this is also rather backward. We should be less concerned about paying more for heavily-used materials and more concerned about paying as much as we do for those that are completely unused, especially in the digital collection.

In the print world, we were always committed to paying for containers regardless of whether they were used, but we can now readily identify exactly how much use each item is generating. Embracing a real cost-per-use model would be beneficial in this situation. In the digital environment, it makes sense to pay a fair rental fee for every single use, but no fee at all for unused materials. But it also makes sense to give up ownership altogether.

Many eBook patron-driven-acquisition (PDA) models adopt some of this pay-per-use philosophy, but not all of it. Most PDA plans, for example, allow a certain level of use or some kind of short-term loan before a purchase is triggered. I wonder why a purchase is *ever* necessary. Purchasing only makes sense if we think we are getting a great deal in terms of cost-per-use, which will likely only be true if use stays heavy throughout the life of the item. That would probably apply to only a small number of titles in our collections. But what additional value does ownership provide within the eBook platform? Why not continue to rent the materials until the demand is depleted? An owned but no longer used eBook has no greater value than an owned but no longer used print book.

There are other reasons why some of you will argue that we need to continue owning our collections, even in a digital realm. When collections were built of physical containers, one of the functions of the library was to privilege particular items from the world of information, in essence to make some materials more discoverable to the local user population by virtue of close proximity (and the metadata we developed in the local catalog). In our networked environment, and with the myriad of discovery tools available to our users (WorldCat, Google Books, Hathi, etc.), that sort of privileging for discovery's sake is completely unnecessary. In fact, to suggest that local users are best served by a subset of the available information which we have pre-selected for them is manifestly patronizing. Obviously, some user populations (college undergraduates, for example) are only interested in "good enough" information. In a library made of physical objects, they may be best served by a pre-selected and already in place collection of books. In the electronic environment, there is no reason not to give them access to a wider range of materials including things we own and things we don't own. As Rick Lugg describes it, we can curate a discovery environment and deliver to users a platform where they can find for themselves what they need.4 But selecting and purchasing materials beforehand is unnecessary.

Librarians will also say that ownership is necessary to fulfill our preservation mandate (Clark's library as museum). How will we preserve our intellectual history, our scholarly record, if we don't own the objects we want to save? How can we trust publishers and vendors to perform this task when they clearly haven't demonstrated a will or desire to do so?

It has long been clear that libraries can only

hope to perform as archivists of the intellectual record by working together. No single library can save all of human knowledge. It makes more sense for individual libraries to stake out a (very small) segment of the publishing output that they will pledge to save and preserve. The rest is superfluous. Why not rent those segments that are transitory—own and save only those elements that are part of the institutional commitment? This is even more plausible in the digital collection. Digital objects manifest as many if not more preservation problems as physical objects. Ownership does nothing to resolve these. Instead of focusing on ownership of individual collections, libraries should work collectively with Hathi, Google, Portico, LOCKSS, the Internet Archive, and other organizations to identify and save both born-digital materials and scanned representations of physical items.

Libraries will have a hard time adopting a rent-preferred collection philosophy. Many of our most dearly held principles will militate against it. Community members, library boards, faculty, students, and university administrators will also not understand its benefits without a great deal of explanation (nay, pleading). Chaining ourselves and our users to a small, owned collection doesn't make as much sense as it once did. If we want digital collections to really live up to their potential and to break free from the tyranny of principles and procedures developed in a time gone by, then we really need to rethink the necessity of ownership. We also need to divorce ownership from access and preservation and begin to think of libraries as workshops where the work being done is different from one moment to the next. The collection needs to be nimble enough to meet those changing needs. I think renting now meets those needs better than owning. 🔻

Endnotes

1. **John Willis Clark**, Libraries in the Medieval and Renaissance Periods: the Rede Lecture Delivered June 13, 1894 (Cambridge: Macmillan and Bowes, 1894). **Google Books**, retrieved online May 23, 2011: *http://books.google.com/books?id=NVUwAAAAMAAJ*.

2. **Meredith Farkas**, "In Practice. Let's Not Borrow Trouble: E-book collection development requires new considerations," *American Libraries* 42, no. 3/4 (March 2011): 24.

3. **Josh Hadro**, "HarperCollins Puts 26 Loan Cap on Ebook Circulations," Library Journal (February 25, 2011). Retrieved online May 25, 2011: *http://www.library-journal.com/lj/home/889452-264/harpercollins_puts_26_loan_cap.html.csp*.

4. **Rick Lugg**, "Curating a Discovery Environment," Sample & Hold: Rick Lugg's Blog, May 25, 2011. Retrieved online May 25, 2011: *http://sampleandhold-r2.blogspot.com/2011/05/curating-discovery-environment.html*.

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Steven R. Harris

BORN AND LIVED: Born and grew up in Ogden UT. Lived in Salt Lake City, Tucson, College Station, Baton Rouge, Knoxville, Logan UT, and Albuquerque.

EARLY LIFE: Read a lot of books, despite my parents saying, "go outside and get some fresh air!"

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: In school, I've been a Scot, a Wildcat twice, and a Ute. At work I've been a Ute, an Aggie twice, a Tiger, a Volunteer, and a Lobo.

FAMILY: Wife and 2 dogs.

IN MY SPARE TIME: I fiddle with gadgets.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *Infinite Jest*, *Moby-Dick*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, and about 75 others.

PET PEEVES: Pet peeves.

PHILOSOPHY: We only know reality via perception — perception is flawed.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Co-writing a couple of books.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Help library staff and users come to love the online world.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Librarians will give up the notion of owning library collections and settle down to effectively mediate access and facilitate preservation of digital information. Publishers will happily cooperate in these endeavors. 🔻