

# Print vs. Digital Collections in Special Libraries

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## INTRODUCTION

The world of libraries and information centers has never been more complex. Information professionals are kept busy providing services to library users who increasingly expect instant access to information on multiple technology platforms and librarians continue to find ways to offer users these services, despite shrinking budgets and fewer employees. One of the biggest challenges faced by today's libraries is the rapid pace of change taking place in collection management. As more and more information becomes available electronically, libraries are acquiring and maintaining either hybrid collections of print and electronic resources or are moving towards electronic-only collections. This transition began in the 1990's with the movement to electronic journal (e-journal) content (Duranceau, 1999) and continues today as libraries move towards providing access to electronic books (e-books).

In this article the authors examine literature related to the changes happening in special libraries with regards to maintaining hybrid or electronic-only collections. Because published research in this area largely focuses on academic and public libraries, the authors have used their own libraries; the Saskatchewan Health Information Resources Partnership (SHIRP), a completely electronic library and the Canadian Grain Commission Library (CGC), a hybrid library, as case studies in order to augment the existing published research with the perspective of special libraries.

The objective of the article is to present a brief general history of collection development and management in research libraries focusing primarily on changes that have occurred in electronic publishing over the past twenty years and provide insight into how these changes affect small, specialized research libraries.

## BACKGROUND

### The Evolution of Collection Management in Research Libraries

Library collection development started to mature and change in the 1950's in response to a dramatic increase in scientific research post World War II. Prior to World War II managing research library collections had been about gathering and organizing information with a focus on print collections and, where necessary, microfilm and microfiche (Branin, Groen & Thorin, 2000). The term "collection development;" has been defined as "planning for collection growth, implementing collection development plans through the selection of appropriate documents, and implementing selection by actually acquiring specific materials" (Hazen, 1982). In response to an increased focus in scientific research post WW II, librarians recognized a need to do more than just acquire materials. This led librarians such as Charles B. Osburn to conclude in 1979 that a more "service-oriented approach focused on currency, responsiveness and user need" was required. In 1981 Paul Mosher, head of development at Stanford gave a seminal speech at the inaugural Collection Development Institute that "challenged" the library community to move beyond traditional activities of collection development towards a "new vision" of managing collections within a framework of "policy, planning and analysis" (Branin, Groen & Thorin, 2000). Collectively, these forward-thinking librarians and others like them started the movement towards collection management as a new field within librarianship.

Near the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century there was another dramatic change in the collection landscape for research libraries. This second change was based both

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on increased access to higher education and the rapid pace of technological advancement brought about first by increased access to computer-based technology in the 1970' and 1980's and second by the explosion of information related to the development and uptake of the Internet in the 1990's. These two advances which led first to online catalogues and more recently to fully digital collections, set in motion an avalanche of change to collection management that continues to this day (Branin, Groen, & Thorin, 2000). Ready access to information from the home or work computer led library users to expect seamless, immediate access to information resources and thus increased the demand not only for the electronic resources, but also for the ability to search for any item through one interface. However, due to continued economic restraints over the past several decades, collection managers have had to balance user demand with diminishing collection budgets and fewer library employees. These constraints and others mean that most 21<sup>st</sup> century research libraries continue to manage hybrid collections of print and digital information.

## LITERATURE SEARCH

Literature searches were conducted in Library and Information Science and Technology Abstracts (LISTA), Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA) and Google Scholar for papers that discussed libraries or information centers that have undergone or are undergoing a transition from a print to an electronic collection, have completed the transition or are maintaining a hybrid collection. A more general search for articles related to the benefits and challenges of e-journal and e-book collections was also conducted since these are the two main types of items in the collections of the libraries explored in the case study. Multimedia management was not covered here because these materials are complex enough to warrant separate consideration. The search was mostly limited to articles published between 2007 and 2012.

The majority of the papers reviewed were published by academic and public librarians or institutions. But, other than the medical library profession, very little research has been done in the special library sector. Because the subject matter of the case study libraries most closely resemble academic libraries, the article

uses results found from research done by or about academic and special libraries.

The benefits of moving to electronic or digital collections are well documented and include; 24/7 access for library users from any location, the ability to search the content full text, the ability to share resources in a virtual reference environment, and, less print titles can often translate into additional floor space for communal areas or workstations (McClamroch, 2011; Polanka, 2011; Spiro & Henry, 2010). But the transition from print to hybrid or electronic collections is not without its challenges. The literature review revealed articles that confirm that while some issues with e-journals have been resolved, others, such as long term preservation and pricing continue to be problematic (Anderson, 2009; Lewis, 2007; Spiro & Henry, 2010).

The literature acknowledges that the advent of the portable e-book reader and the boom in e-book adoption over the past five years has added new challenges for collection management. In their extensive review of literature published from 2005-present, Blummer and Kenton (2012) discovered that the main issues affecting academic use of e-books includes; usability issues and a lack resources required to properly manage e-books. Anderson (2009) identifies problems with the unsustainable cost of e-journals and its effect on monograph budgets. Breeding (2012a) comments that the “increasingly complicated set of processes” for acquiring electronic materials places additional pressure on the “technical infrastructure” of libraries attempting to provide integrated access to their electronic collections.

Special librarians are similar to their academic and public library colleagues in that they are responsible for managing a multitude of diverse electronic resources with limited budgets and personnel, with little or no dedicated technical support. Spiro and Henry (2010) point out those libraries which specialize in law, medicine and geology have been “quietly transitioning to primarily digital environments.” This may be true for journal content but Polanka (2011) quotes an unpublished study from the *Library Journal* on e-book adoption by special libraries which found that 44% of special libraries were not yet offering e-books, and another 11% of libraries had 25 or less e-books in their collections. This is not surprising considering the diversity of special libraries. Each special library must provide information based on the mission of its

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