Are we all Global Librarians now?

By Alice Prochaska, Yale University Librarian

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Introduction

In the digital environment, the potent opportunities of partnerships both national and international place the great international research libraries within several overlapping communities. Our institutional boundaries have exploded, and our assumptions are challenged. The concept of national and international library collections demands to be re-examined at a time when the internet is facilitating not only local access to global collections but its corollary, global access to local collections.

This paper will focus on some international dimensions of digital access to library materials, but it is rooted in and mainly derived from my own experience in two different national arenas: those of the United Kingdom and the United States.

In the various forums I frequent, a consensus seems to me to be developing, that focuses on content at least as much as on the vehicles and standards for giving access to content. This is not to say that the library and information communities have cracked the thorny issues of providing reliable access to digitized materials: on the contrary, new opportunities in the open archiving environment raise at least as many questions as they solve. (Top of the list for many, perhaps most of us, is the problem of long-term digital preservation.) But a myriad of opportunities is calling forth a galaxy of responses. The riches of digitized resources pile up, challenging our budgets and our cataloging capabilities, and at the same time vastly expanding the appetite of library users for more and more ready access to more and more enticing material. The new forms of library support that we are providing, and the increasingly high quality of that support, lead our readers in endlessly extensible explorations toward new questions, new answers and new ways of combining information to create new knowledge.

The communities we serve

One way to begin on a reflection about the role of digitized library content is to think about the changing character of the communities we serve. Libraries do serve communities, and increasingly they are virtual communities of unseen users, downloading material from the internet at will, for use in ways that we, the content providers, cannot foresee or know. A subsidiary question is: whether we should really be talking about 'communities' at all, or should we imagine individuals working in cell-like isolation? Students increasingly can work alone in their rooms if they want to, borrowing fewer books, asking fewer questions face-to-face at reference desks, defining their reference needs by what they can find on their computer screens. Library statistics suggest that these trends are not necessarily developing as we might have predicted. Still, the more content we provide in digitized form, the more likely we are to become instrumental in changing the former communities of learning and reading that are familiar to us. We need to understand that transformation and our many possible roles in shaping it.

The question of communities begs many questions about the definition of a community of library users in the twenty-first century. It brings us back to the physical community, the town, the university, the learned society, the nation, that supports any particular library. And it expands the horizon toward a vision of the greater community of potential readers that libraries can now reach.

I propose to devote most of this talk to the expanding horizon, but before launching on that trajectory, a few words are in order about our existing communities. I am reminded every day, in my work as Yale University Librarian, that the university regards its library as its own. A vital part of my job is to foster and develop the relationship between the library, represented by its staff and its collections, and the faculty, students and staff at Yale. I contemplate the intractable problems of overflowing stacks and catalog backlogs, complex issues to do with the management and preservation of a vast circulating collection, and a collection development budget on which exploding electronic opportunities and the still growing output of publications in traditional format place huge demands. I look at the enormous challenges of renovating the library's physical spaces to keep them up to modern standards. These problems are common to

just about every research library in the nation, and unless we overcome them, whatever we achieve in the digital arena will be seen by our home communities as of secondary importance at best. Our recently formulated strategic plan at Yale states the blindingly obvious: 'Access to collections is our driving force'. If the definition of collections in that formulation is protean, including everything from licensed scientific databases to ancient papyri, 'access' means first and foremost access, in every medium, for the Yale community. Similar remarks, allowing for different descriptions of their local and institutional setting, apply to just about any type of library you care to name.

James Billington, giving the Ditchley Foundation lecture to an invited audience in England in the summer of 2000, addressed the question of communities in a way that should give pause to all western librarians, and especially those from English-speaking cultures.[1] He lamented the cultural imperialism of the internet, and sharply criticized what he called the 'troubadours of the new culture' for rejoicing 'in the prospect of a streamlined basic English becoming not just a lingua-franca but a vehicle for genuine human brotherhood.' What these 'troubadours' fail to realize according to Dr Billington, is that if the 'Pidgin-English monolinguism of the air traffic controller and the computer programmer' is permitted to dominate the internet, it will cut us off 'not just from the billions who speak other languages, but also from any real understanding of the English literary and historical heritage'. He went on to refer to Gene Rochlin's vision, in his influential book *Trapped in the Net*, of the internet spreading authority everywhere, but locating responsibility nowhere. I do not agree that the internet is turning out to be monolingual at all, but Dr Billington's admonition is well taken.

He was referring to access to publications both current and from the past, and in the widest possible sense. If we turn our attention to one small but burgeoning sector of the digital universe, the digitization of unique historic originals, some difficult issues about community in the digital library world come sharply into focus.

For instance, it is now possible to provide high-quality surrogates for the world's great treasures of art and text. This capability changes the nature of the debate about 'cultural restitution' or repatriation of unique manuscript items from other cultures that are held in our collections. Some examples from my own experience illustrate a phenomenon that is increasingly familiar to museums

[1] James H. Billington, 'The Human Consequences of the Information Revolution', Ditchley Foundation lecture XXXVII, in Supplement to the *Ditchley Conference Reports 2000/01*, Chipping Norton, UK: The Ditchley Foundaiton, 2001.

and libraries all over the world. Innumerable items held within the British Library's special collections are potentially subject to claims from other parts of the world. The subjects of current claims include sacred Ethiopian manuscripts seized from the emperor Tewodoros at the Battle of Magdala in 1868, the Codex Sinaiticus, virtually the earliest written version of the gospels, which is claimed by St Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, a 12th-century missal from Benevento in Italy, which migrated from there to Britain in mysterious circumstances after the second world war, and the Lindisfarne Gospels, the greatest surviving example of Anglo-Saxon graphic art.

The case of the Lindisfarne Gospels contains within it many of the questions about communities and ownership that perplex politicians and the custodians of unique historic materials alike. This intricately illuminated volume, a work of art from the turn of the eighth to ninth centuries AD, is the subject of an energetic campaign not in another country, but by people representing the north-east of England. Fueled by the strong trend toward regionalism in current British politics, local politicians and media have led at least one expedition to London to hold a vigil in the British Library's exhibition galleries on March 20, the feast of St Cuthbert in whose honor the manuscript was created some 1200 years ago, almost certainly by monks on the Island of Lindisfarne. The north-east English regional press is adamant that ownership of this treasure belongs in the north-east, and that is where it should reside. Three different sites contest exactly where the treasure should be kept; but they are unanimous that it is wrong for the 'arrogant metropolitan' people at the British Library to hang on to it.

The British Library's position is that this sacred treasure also has iconic significance for the thousands of international visitors who come to London every year to see the many original works of early Christian art and text displayed together in the Library's gallery. As a resource for scholars, it is housed with kindred materials from other regions, which scholars benefit from seeing together, not to mention its proximity to all the published material they need to use in conjunction with it. Moreover, the curatorial and technical resources of the Library itself are brought to bear, giving the manuscript the best possible care, in conditions that are hugely expensive to create, and only economic for organizations where a critical mass of materials can be housed in one place. Recently, the curator of medieval manuscripts, Dr Michelle Brown, carried out research using high resolution digital imaging to reveal the artist's marks of drafting on the reverse of the vellum pages, and traced evidence that led her to ascribe the manuscript to a slightly later date, bringing it within the active lifetime of the great Anglo- Saxon scholar Bede. Raman spectroscopy, another electronic technique

which makes it possible to test the pigment of works of art without having to remove microscopic samples, has demonstrated that some of the blue pigment used by the Lindisfarne artist was lapis lazuli, which is thought to have been available at that time only in the area of modern Afghanistan. Taken together with the clear Byzantine influences on the art work, this raises important questions about the transfer of goods and techniques across the world in the early medieval period.

While robustly justifying its retention of this manuscript, the British Library also uses digitization in an effort to meet the demand for widespread access, and the Lindisfarne Gospels was the first item to be mounted on its pioneering 'Turning the Pages' technology, with CD-rom access following. Digitization itself is a double-edged weapon in the argument, however, as it leads the campaigners to propose that the British Library and its visitors no longer need to keep the original.

All great research libraries deploy huge resources to preserve their holdings both for research and for the wider public. There are good scholarly arguments for holding a critical mass of material in one place where unique items can be compared and studied together. And yet, we must remain sensitive to the fact that even the most wonderful electronic version is not the original. The manuscript itself, like so many other survivals from the past, has its own unique value. It contains information that cannot be reproduced; and it is iconic, symbolic, irreplaceable. As far as the arguments about cultural restitution go, we have to take our stand on the nature and role of international collections, the cost effective application of rare expertise and expensive provision for preservation, and the value an international audience places on seeing these treasures together. Even digitization cannot perform the magic of locating the original in two places at once. So the issue of whose community the manuscript belongs to remains a matter of dispute. Our job, it seems to me, is to create the widest possible community of people who appreciate and benefit from these treasures. The library of the 21st century faces the challenge to do this job better than libraries have ever done before.

Creating communities

Building a community of users, and connecting with that community, is among the most rewarding work open to a librarian. Archivists, bibliographers, catalogers, reference librarians and subject specialists are all in different ways involved in this work, and so too are the IT specialists and systems librarians. I suspect we all share the professional ideal of supporting and developing the librarian's role as an active curator or mediator. In the model I have in mind, the librarian or curator seeks out new opportunities to bring library collections to a wider audience, and enters into dialog

with an intelligent public about the ways the material might be used. Thanks to the internet we are able, at a cost, to share collections internationally and not only among scholars and seasoned afficionados, but also with members of the wider public, "lifelong learners", schools, family historians, and many others. Most libraries that hold rare collections are building new skill-sets in order to present parts of their collections in electronic form, suitably selected, interpreted and in context.

The British Library again provides a useful example of this form of outreach. Its *In Place* web site[2] describes a project funded by National Lottery money, which will digitize parts of the British Library collection for free use by the public as part of a broader UK project costing a total of more than $75 million. Two from a total of eighteen collection descriptions give a flavor of the principles underlying the British Library part of this project. Of its selection of illuminated medieval manuscripts, it says: ' Too fragile to be made physically available to many, 'In Place' makes these treasures electronically accessible to the communities that once produced or owned them'. Another collection, entitled 'Svidesh Vadesh' (a phrase meaning 'Home away from Home') draws on the holdings of the former India Office Library and Records: 'This remarkable resource presents the cultural heritage of one of the country's largest ethnic groups and also meets the needs of a wider academic community in Britain and beyond.' The purpose behind the 'In Place' project is one shared by hundreds, perhaps thousands, of libraries world wide.

Meanwhile, to give just one instance of a mature and much admired project closer to home (one in which I can claim no part), the University of North Carolina's *Documenting the American South* web site provides a superb example of what can be achieved through the marriage of academic and popular objectives. To quote from the introductory page, this site ' provides access to digitized primary materials that offer Southern perspectives on American history and culture. It supplies teachers, students, and researchers at every educational level with a wide array of titles they can use for reference, studying, teaching, and research. Currently, *DAS* includes six digitization

[2] http://www.bl.uk/about/inplaceintro.html

projects: slave narratives, first-person narratives, Southern literature, Confederate imprints, materials related to the church in the black community, and North Caroliniana.'

An aspect of *Documenting the American South* that impresses me particularly is the inclusion of a feedback mechanism, and examples of comments from users.[3] Some of you may have visited it, and I know it is used on the Yale campus among others for teaching history of the American South. A compilation of some of the feedback, mounted on the web site, contains moving testimony to the importance of this material for members of the general public, schools, and others in addition to academic users. There is a whole section of comments from overseas, including this from a student in Poland writing an MA thesis on Alice Walker: 'Thanks to your collection I finally was able to go through several texts which gave me sort of overall view…And I am really grateful because my university library lacks American sources, and generally it's really hard to find anything concerning Black Americans…'

An international research library gains immeasurably from dialog not only with its most regular users but with visitors from further afield. Expertise has become international; and now all the more so in the digital era. Not only that, but the parent universities of many of the leading research libraries are pursuing an increasingly aggressive international agenda. Yale has announced its intention to make its fourth century the one in which the university becomes truly international. The Yale Center for International and Area Studies and its offspring the Center for the Study of Globalization (headed by a former President of Mexico, Ernesto Zedillo) are only two high-profile manifestations of this international agenda. Last week the university launched its new web site, Yale and the World[4], accompanied by a substantial paper handout on Reference Materials.

The introduction to the library's section of this publication illustrates how we have tried to position ourselves within Yale's international community:

[3] http://docsouth.unc.edu/aboutdas.html
[4] http://world.yale.edu/

" The Yale University Library, rated among the ten largest libraries in the world, has been international in its scope since the university was founded. Today, more than 50% of additions to the general collections come from outside the United States, and the Library's area studies and special collections are notably rich in primary sources for the study of foreign languages, cultures and civilizations. Electronic databases add enormously to the international material available for the Yale community to use.

"All parts of the University Library system support international study actively: librarians travel overseas to collect material, and work closely with the relevant faculty departments to provide bibliographic and instructional support, and to ensure that the collections are as wide-ranging and current as possible. A growing number of fellowships bring world scholars to Yale specifically to use Library collections. Librarian interns also come from different parts of the world; and Yale librarians in turn participate in international organizations such as the International Federation of Library Associations, numerous subject-based library organizations, and as members of world-wide academic communities. Some specific partnerships (e.g. one established in 2002 with the World Health Organization's HINARI scheme to support access to networked public health information in developing countries) spread the benefits of the university's expertise. The library maintains close links with international publishers and other information providers.

" Much of the work of individual Yale librarians, in these and other forums, is directed towards international activities such as monitoring access to government documents, participating in the education of research librarians, establishing international standards for the preservation and care of rare books and manuscripts, contributing to exhibitions and publications overseas, sharing in programs of digitization, and taking part in conferences that promote free access to information."

The library's contribution to the university's international agenda thus suffuses the work of the university; and it needs to be seen to do that. In turn, the presence of representatives of an international research community is a vital resource for the librarian to use, to test and develop the services that reach out to people beyond the physical precincts of the library itself.

It is one way, but perhaps not the most critical. The library of the future will reach out to its local community, to its state, regional and national communities, in new ways, as well as expanding its horizons around the globe. Libraries have now, and the great research libraries above all others, the chance and the challenge to build up collections for world-wide audiences *and* at the same time, to bring world-wide collections and international usages into the local community in which they are rooted. Above all, library communities are created by mutual comprehension, and by a whole range of working partnerships founded on that comprehension. And that comes from librarians and the users of libraries coming together, in both physical and virtual space, to discuss their use of the collections, and so to understand better the potential of those irreplaceable assets, the collections themselves.

Practicalities

To aspire to international access in the digital environment is good. To be conscious of our professional and ethical reasons for doing so is vital. How, in reality, do we achieve the connections and community building that we can all agree are so desirable? I will not venture on to territory where other speakers are so much more expert than I, but a few general observations about good practice may be in order.

First, it is crucially important not only to adhere to technical and descriptive standards, but also to make those standards explicit. Both the *Documenting the American South* and *In Place* projects do that. The *DAS* web site includes a digitizing narrative arranged under the following headings: Standards, Methodology, Remote Access, Scanning Images, Copyright, Preservation, Archiving, OCR scanning, and Encoding guidelines. Rigorous attention to all those aspects of any large-scale digitizing project is fundamental, not only to achieving the initial usable collection of digitized materials, but also to creating a collection that will endure and that can be used by multiple individuals and constituencies, for multiple purposes. If there is one basic reason for undertaking such projects, it surely must be their capacity to enhance access for a plurality of users.

Second, a common feature of most good web sites now is the provision of a mechanism for feedback. If we are seriously aiming to provide an environment of learning and discovery in which new communities will arise, we can only succeed by learning about those communities and learning from them. Given the extraordinary costs and often the still speculative nature of the projects we are undertaking, it seems to me

that measures of customer satisfaction are mandatory. Creating such measures is no easy matter, especially when you consider that all of us are building these great projects for universal access on the basis of local cultural norms. International standards like Dublin Core and its successors provide a common platform of accessibility, but the content itself will remain gloriously and intractably, itself. The explanation of vocabulary in an international environment, the use of historic language, or of imperfectly understood foreign languages, description of images that could be interpreted in many different ways: these are just some of the problems that challenge us as intermediaries between the contents of our digitized collections, and a remote and unseen audience.

A third challenge in the web universe, is that of navigation. Here again, others have spent careers grappling with this challenge. All I wish to say here is that the newest generation of linking and harvesting technologies do give us an opportunity to navigate intelligently amongst the galaxies of available material. These are vital tools for content providers and content users alike. We need to pay close attention to all the other material that is out there, overlapping with what we plan to provide, answering the questions we thought we wanted to answer, offering materials for the same users we wish to address. As citizens of this particular community of content providers, we should also be conscious of our obligation to post information about what we do in places where others can find it. Registries of digital standards, and registries of digital projects and existing collections, are surprisingly difficult to create, and we could all do with a manual on how to create and share this sort of information. Reinventing the wheel is a common enough problem, but reinventing the space shuttle is infinitely more costly.

That leads to the fourth and last aspect of practical support for far-reaching digitization programs that I would like to mention here: partnerships. Everyone present at this conference must be involved in several partnerships of one sort or another: sharing between different organizations on campus, sharing between universities, between university libraries and other research libraries, between museums, archives and libraries, and sharing across international divisions, sometimes across linguistic ones.

Partnerships between organizations can be difficult to set up and hard to sustain. Often motivated by institutional agendas that prove not to be compatible, sometimes forced by the requirements of foundations and other grant-giving bodies, rather than

springing from the organic relationships between collections, curators or librarians and users that still forms the paradigm most of us grew up with: these are some of the forms of partnership most of us will have struggled to set up at one time or another, and often we will have fallen short of our objectives, or failed outright. It is no coincidence that the two projects I have used as leading examples of successful digitization for a mass audience, are both founded firmly within a single library. In the case of the British Library's *In Place* project, the prehistory includes a partnership of multiple organizations, most of which fell by the wayside or are now only loosely federated, if at all, with the lead one.

Nevertheless, for all sorts of good reasons, partnerships remain a desirable model in this environment. It is here that organizations like the Digital Library Federation, OCLC, the Research Libraries Group, and perhaps above all the looser grouping of the Association of Research Libraries, can and do make a huge difference. Like other speakers here, I am involved with the Global Resources program of the ARL, and with the strategic planning effort that is currently under way at the DLF. My library is also one of those that are committed to contribute digital content to RLG's Cultural Materials Alliance, but has not yet done so. All of these programs confront their own problems, some different and some common to all three. It would take another paper, perhaps another conference, to analyze the obstacles to progress that all of us could describe. But the point I wish to make here, and this is where I want to end, is that collectively we, the custodians of the world's memory, have found it necessary to group together and pool our resources. We do need to draw on each other's experience as well as each other's collections, and the underlying objective of enhancing access to those collections motivates us to keep working on the partnerships. Whatever the practical barriers to high quality access, there is, I believe, a consensus that we can solve those problems together, and that I suppose, is why we are all here.