

Last Copy Depository:
Cooperative Collection Management Centers
in the Electronic Age

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INTRODUCTION

As we move from paper to pixels, we are witnessing an important transition in the creation, ownership, dissemination, and archiving of information. One aspect of this transition has been a changing role for library consortia. Traditionally, consortia have facilitated cooperative

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acquisition of print material, but the electronic library is having a significant impact on this role. With space problems, weeding, and a greater reliance on electronic resources, archiving strategies for print and electronic resources require an expanded role for consortia. The purpose of this paper is to explore this expanded role using last copy depositories.

CURRENT POLICIES

Based on information available from exploratory survey by the authors, ARL, RLG, SAA and recent articles, it appears that the impact of electronic resources has created certain trends which should be of concern to the profession:

- *A dependence on others to "archive" electronic publications.* According to a 1994 ARL survey on electronic journal policies and procedures (SPEC Flyer 201), 54% of their libraries depend on an outside source (the publisher or a consortium) for "archival" copies of electronic journals. Another 26% maintain an electronic "archive" copy, and the remaining 20% have no arrangement for "archival" copies. Results of the authors' informal survey among southeastern academic libraries tend to agree with the ARL findings. This situation will only escalate when licensing agreements provide for access to the material rather than ownership.
- *An acceptance of inappropriate standards for archiving electronic publications.* An electronic copy of an electronic publication is not an acceptable archival format and is an impractical method (because of the constant migrating that would be required).
- *A superficial checking of regional holdings before weeding research collections.* In addition, weeding print material is often justified because the material is available in microform or electronically. However, electronic material may not be maintained at the library, except perhaps as an electronic copy stored in a Systems Office computer, and even this may not be done as libraries move toward a policy of "access rather than ownership."
- *A lack of last copy policies.* Even if a title is available in microform or electronically, there should be improved safeguards

against disposing of the last best copy of a title in order to preserve the cultural artifact as well as its content. No one expects this to happen, but without appropriate care, even the most common titles will eventually dwindle down to a few copies.

DEFINING THE CONCEPT

A last copy depository is considered here to be a regional cooperative depository for the last copy of English language titles held at the region's academic/research libraries. Because these titles would be the last copies within the region, the depository would also serve an archival function. Journals would be an initial concern, but monographs and other publications would be included. Titles available in both print and electronically would continue to be held in their paper format and/or as microfilm copies. Titles available only electronically would be held in paper or as microfilm copies. Current titles available only in print would still be retained at the libraries unless the libraries choose to transfer the last copy of these titles to the depository. The depository facility would be a separate storage and archival facility in order to be more cost and space effective for the library system it supports.

Organizationally, each last copy depository would be part of a national system of regional centers. CRL began in a similar fashion for its region, but has since emphasized unique materials, particularly foreign titles. This has been an appropriate policy for its first fifty years, since there was a need for foreign materials and there was not a concern over the loss of English language materials in their original condition. When looking toward its next fifty years, it would benefit the library community if CRL, in cooperation with regional academic/research library consortia, would lead a coordination effort to establish regional centers to preserve and archive English language print materials, as well as to properly archive electronic materials. The reasons for such an effort are provided more fully in the following discussion of the issues.

ISSUES

Commercialization of electronic resources. Allowing publishers

and vendors to maintain and “archive” journals (as well as other publications) presents a number of risk factors:

- Will they maintain their electronic “archives” over time, or will the profit motive adversely affect the commitment to maintain the “archive”?
- What will become of the “archives” when another publisher acquires their titles?
- How will libraries know titles exist electronically, find URLs, and access these titles (particularly for non-journal publications such as reports)?
- If libraries do not have copies of the titles, will there be cost controls on the prices charged by the publisher/vendor for document delivery?
- Is it in society’s best interest to have libraries, the traditional repository for the preservation of scholarship, relinquish this function to commercial publishers and vendors? Will this role be abdicated in the electronic age because of a format change?

When negotiating contracts for full text electronic resources, libraries should require the publisher/vendor to provide a paper or microfilm copy of all titles as an archival copy. In order to avoid excessive duplication at the libraries (as is now the case with titles available in both formats), this archival copy could be sent to the depository that would serve the region’s libraries. Not even sources such as JSTOR, which maintains paper copies of everything they have in electronic form, should be trusted as the sole repository of archival copies. Having one such facility is inadequate and at some future date it is quite possible that a commercial publisher or vendor will acquire JSTOR, as was (CARL) UnCover. Regional last copy depositories, on the other hand, would be library operated archival centers and would be a deterrent to any monopolistic control over the access to titles when these documents are only available electronically, and only from the publishers/vendors.

Access vs. ownership. An important aspect of this possible monopolistic control by the publishers/vendors is the issue of access vs. ownership. It appears that librarians consider access to documents, rather than owning the documents, a blessing. However, this increases the potential for monopolistic control over these documents. If libraries do not own the documents, which is counter to our traditional role, we cannot manage,

organize, or archive the documents. Collection management will be compromised and librarians will have less control over information sources relevant for local patrons. If publishers/vendors have the sole copy of documents, they can escalate and manipulate prices for subscriptions and document delivery. However, if libraries insist on having a paper/microfilm copy of titles, these archival copies will deter uncontrolled price escalation. Considering recent experience with the costs of journals, electronic packages, and licensing agreements, it should be apparent that this issue is a matter for serious concern.

Archiving electronic resources. Another issue that needs serious review is the concept of electronically archiving electronic documents. One of the major problems with electronic copy is the perpetual need to migrate the copy to newer technologies. The effort and costs of doing so are enormous, and will depend on long-term commitments on the part of the libraries (or the owners of the original electronic document). Based on practical experience, long-term commitments cannot be relied upon. Libraries have too many budget difficulties and commercial operations base their decisions on the bottom line. Providing a one-time production of a paper or microfilm copy (a true archival copy) of these titles for the last copy depositories will ultimately be cost effective and far less labor intensive.

Loss of our literary cultural heritage. Space problems and subsequent weeding are causing a gradual, but increasing loss of print material. Having monographs or journal issues available on microfilm or electronically in a last copy depository ameliorates the angst of deselecting.

Eventually (and probably before anyone notices) this will result in the loss of titles in their original formats. This is a matter of saving not just the information content, but the items themselves as cultural artifacts. Preserving this body of publications cannot continue to be done at the libraries where space is needed for newer titles, special collections, computers (to access a growing number of electronic resources), study space for the students, and other space needs.

CONCLUSION

A regional system of last copy depositories is needed for the twenty-first century in order to:

- retain and archive our English language print publications,
- properly archive our English language electronic publications,
- utilize our academic library space in a more effective manner,
- permit libraries to concentrate on newer publications and special collections,
- to, perhaps, provide for cooperative acquisition,
- provide back-up access for commercial document delivery as a deterrent to monopolistic control by the publishers/vendors,
- to maintain the traditional role of libraries as repositories and organizers of our literary cultural heritage.

For the foreseeable future libraries will be responsible for the management of at least two collections: one print and one electronic. Last copy depositories would be effective adjuncts to libraries as they attempt to manage the still growing body of printed materials. The depositories would also provide a coordinated way of maintaining and archiving the tremendous growth in electronic resources. By preserving our print heritage and by owning and properly archiving the electronic heritage, libraries—with the support of last copy depositories—will continue to fulfill the role as repositories for our accumulated body of knowledge.