

Provocations and Irritations for the Globalized Research Library

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Area and international studies, and the practices and agencies that support them, have always reflected a range of agendas and goals. This diversity and its occasional contradictions are then apparent in the nature and availability of international library resources in our self-proclaimed “global universities.” Changes in the production and dissemination of information, and evolving library priorities, also affect support. This program session focuses on the sometimes untested assumptions, and the entrenched and emergent practices—the “irritations” of the title—that may be at odds with fully effective approaches to global research and learning. Our inquiry is framed around assertions and questions that are at times deliberately polemical.

1. New agendas for area studies and the academy

The priorities and contexts of area studies scholarship are in flux:

Within area studies: Area and international studies encompass the concerns of those who would celebrate the diversity of human experience and expression, and also those whose goals are instrumental. Polarizing value judgments may follow, for instance that disinterested scholarship is merely self-indulgent, or that research driven by practical or ideological objectives is necessarily corrupt. Potentially incompatible approaches and valuations may both limit and fragment campus (and library) support.

Propositions and questions:

Different streams of inquiry within area and international studies have taken their own separate shapes: there is no consensus agenda. The ensuing scramble for support has fostered incomplete, distorted, and marginalized library collections and services, both across institutions and within them.

- a. Does effective library support for area and international studies require scholarly consensus as to priorities and goals?
- b. Is such consensus either possible or desirable?
- c. Would other steps within the field(s) promote greater and more inclusive support for international library collections and services?

Within the academy: The higher education community is under pressure to justify its high and forever increasing costs. Whether and how to demonstrate accountability are matters of both contention and

quest. Tools that measure productivity and results must apply to higher education as a whole, but also to its component parts: academic departments, individual courses, athletic teams, library collections, and so on. Today's crude assessment metrics are broadly unfavorable to area and international studies programs, and also to low-use library collections in foreign languages. Do we lack better tools because we have abstained from this discussion, lack the expertise to construct meaningful metrics, or in fact engage in activities that carry little value?

Propositions and questions:

- a. What are the potential impacts for area and international studies of the productivity tools and metrics that are now taking hold throughout academia? What assessment tools would be more appropriate?

2. Producing and consuming information: diversity, continuity, and change

Research libraries, singly and together, are still adapting to an information environment that combines locally owned content with resources to which they only have access. They fall more dramatically short in tracking and then planning for ongoing changes in how information is created and disseminated. Content in such critical sectors as the news is increasingly controlled by aggregators. The entire realm of data is up for grabs, and foreign content may follow. We need to understand these changes, first by appreciating why this understanding is important. Adequate responses will require conceptual and organizational models for action at the community level, not just within single institutions.

Propositions and questions:

With regard to production and supply: Research libraries remain insistently reactive to changes in the production, packaging, and dissemination of information. Foreign resources, and global information and data, are included in this dynamic.

- a. How can we stay on top of developments and players in today's international information environment?
- b. How can libraries and the academic community identify and respond to new developments as they occur, rather than waiting until more nimble actors have defined the environment?

With regard to patterns of demand: Different segments of the area and international studies community require different kinds of information. Researchers in some fields seek global data that has already been compiled, for example for climate, public health, currency flows, or trade. Others rely on locally-generated information, which may not match the data in higher-level compilations. Some scholars work from

synthesized reports, while others focus on raw data. Some are satisfied with secondary materials in English, while others require local sources in local languages.

- a. Can these divergent information needs in the area and international studies realm resolve into coherent policies for research libraries' collections and content?
- b. In very broad terms, those concerned with public policy often rely upon English-language syntheses and compilations. The corresponding fields—economics, political science, public health, perhaps business—typically command greater resources than traditional area studies disciplines. Can we combine these elements into a case for stronger international collections?

3. Library sustainability and area studies support

Many research libraries are abandoning large-scale collection development, instead relying upon others to provide the materials that they lack. The library community as a whole then applauds Open Access and collections cooperation. Open Access is touted as the panacea that will undo aggregator monopolies and create a sustainable ecosystem for scholarly communication. For its part, cooperative collection development is expected to liberate resources that will both lower costs and enhance our collective coverage of little-used materials, including those that support area and international studies. Careful analysis of net costs and benefits, as well as rigorous provisions for assessment, are in short supply. Contradictory impulses are also in play, for example as scholars and universities compete as well as cooperate, or as libraries pursue exclusive arrangements to market their content.

Propositions and questions:

- a. As fewer and fewer institutions pursue strong local collections to support area and international studies, who should participate in community-wide planning? Does everyone deserve a seat at the table?

With regard to Open Access: Open Access is presented as the antidote for the exorbitant prices, intransigent marketing models, and unsustainable ambitions of for-profit publishers and aggregators, particularly in the Science, Technology, and Medical (STM) realm. Open Access would eliminate subscriptions as a revenue source for publishers, thereby shifting costs away from libraries and other users. Whether production and related costs would simply migrate to different points within the ecosystem of scholarly communication, and whether any cost savings would bolster library support for under-supported fields, remain open questions. Some OA models would shift publication expenses to the producers of scholarship, potentially making our most research-intensive institutions also responsible for the costs of scholarly communication. Some of these same universities then support broad-based inquiry

in area studies: the trade-offs could be problematic. Direct applications of the Open Access model to international scholarship are likewise unclear, particularly as reliance on local or producer-based funding might undermine the flow of research results from less affluent parts of the world.

- a. Will Open Access either reduce the overall costs of scholarly communication or enable more equitable resource allocations across fields? How can we contribute to a more comprehensive cost model for Open Access, including its spillover effects? If “producer-pays” models for scholarly communication come to prevail, will there still be funding for libraries to acquire materials only available through purchase? How will Open Access affect the area studies realm?
- b. Do the energies and resources associated with the Open Access movement pose a risk for other library priorities, including support for area studies?

With regard to cooperative collection development: Research libraries have a long, often uncertain history of cooperative collection development. The combination of tight budgets; improved discovery systems; and expedited, user-initiated document delivery might now spur an enlarged shared collections base, to the particular advantage of the low-demand, foreign-language resources that support area and international studies. However, we have not yet articulated a general strategy for collections cooperation, or created models to identify best practices and to optimize performance.

- a. How can we codify what we know about cooperative collection development? Areas to explore include:
 - Cost models and business plans: When is local ownership more cost-effective than reliance on shared holdings and interlibrary loan? How large can resource-sharing networks become and still remain effective? How do we understand the financial requirements and funding options to sustain cooperative programs, including their administrative costs and overhead expenses? How do we demonstrate cooperative success from a cost/benefit perspective?
 - Organizational structures: What are best practices for governance and decision rights, for individual cooperative projects and also for cooperative collection development as a community strategy? How should libraries go about participating simultaneously in a variety of cross-cutting and complementary cooperative programs? How do we accommodate participants that are both large and small, national and foreign, non-profit and for-profit, and based in libraries and in other types of cultural heritage organizations? What about free riders?
 - The information ecosystem: Unexpected consequences are inevitable when complex systems undergo change. For example, cooperative collection development may shift demand in ways that affect vendors’ profit margins, pricing structures, and service offerings. How can we anticipate and respond quickly to these kinds of changes?

4. Beyond collections: discovery and access, aggregation, and tools

Research libraries seek to identify and provide access to the information needed by their students and scholars. This information universe, once centered on books and serials, has long-since expanded to cover the full range of recorded expression. By now, digital technologies also make it possible to combine content at will, and then to apply all manner of tools to the resulting aggregations. Librarians have been slow to exploit these possibilities to energize our collections and enhance the research and learning that they support.

Propositions and questions:

- a. Under what conditions can area and international studies benefit from the value-added capabilities and tools that are increasingly essential in other fields?

With regard to discovery and access: Research libraries describe their holdings in accordance with well-honed standards and techniques. Users, however, rely on these records less and less. We have also paired our library catalogs with direct physical access to open library stacks that are organized in terms of standardized classification systems, so that browsing can serve as an alternate (albeit imperfect) way to locate information. By now, our broad reliance on remote storage has fragmented this physical coherence. Moreover, non-print materials fit poorly within any shelving arrangement, and digital resources simply aren't in the mix. Physical browsing has thus become less and less effective. Improved search algorithms may fill some of the gaps. New systems for discovery and access need to incorporate information resources in all formats and media, from all types of knowledge organizations and heritage institutions—libraries, archives, museums, and on—, without limitations as to holding institution or script.

- a. Libraries are moving toward new metadata schemes that may allow closer integration of different types of information within the general organizing structures of the Semantic Web. Search algorithms also continue to evolve, and combined approaches may ultimately meet our needs better than ever before. For now, inquiries that entail multiple formats, languages, and scripts pose particular challenges. How can the area and international studies community ensure adequate products and schemes?
- b. Many library users celebrate browsing for the discoveries and connections that it allows. We know little about how to replicate these benefits in a hybrid environment of dispersed physical and digital resources. What features of browsing are particularly important for area studies scholarship?

With regard to aggregation: Libraries generally make their holdings available in the same form that they were acquired, adding only enough markings and embellishments to establish ownership and manage inventories. Individual books are thus presented to users as individual books; journals as journals; packages of books, microfilm, images, or anything else just as they were to begin with. Libraries then add value to these self-contained holdings by combining them into thematic aggregations, brought together through classification systems and shelf locations. Finding aids bring similar coherence to archival holdings. The creation of these library collections has enabled the focused inquiry that an undifferentiated mass of materials could not support.

The library's unique capacity to add value by naming, populating, and displaying collections has diminished. Today's multiplicity of information formats makes it difficult to present even the most carefully curated collection as a meaningful whole. With interdisciplinary scholarship on the rise, any particular item may support scholarship in many different fields and thereby pertain to several distinct "collections." Users can also create their own ad hoc "collections" as they combine items (both physical and electronic) at will. Finally, the marketplace is replete with prepackaged thematic aggregations of primary sources. The library's changing role in building carefully curated collections and providing associated information services carries uncertain consequences for the scholarly community, particularly manifest in familiar trade-offs between flexibility, rigor, and control. On a practical level, too, commercial aggregators are pursuing rights to library holdings in order to create packages that they then sell at a premium—a dynamic similar to the broadly disparaged practice in which publishers acquire exclusive rights to faculty articles and books, and then sell them back to the community.

- a. How is scholarship in area and international studies affected by new models for collections and aggregation? Can the community launch and sustain its own initiatives?

With regard to tools and technology: Aggregations of digital content go hand-in-hand with the platforms and tools that allow new kinds of inquiry based on data- and text-mining, geo-references, visualization, simulation, and other computational manipulations. Scholarship has always seized upon new information sources and capacities, and today's digital developments are having just this effect. As research libraries have been slow to create their own aggregated content, so are they now hesitant in developing tools to apply across these bundles. Initiatives that cut across collections and institutions are especially important.

- a. How can the area and international studies community participate in designing tools and services that will energize the information sources and aggregations most relevant to its concerns?