Research Collections and Digital Information

Sul H. Lee, ed.
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On first glance, Sul Lee's collection of essays on digital research collections does not look promising. The collection is, after all, a series of papers from an Oklahoma conference of the same name, and some of the contributions decidedly sound like they're from a conference. It gets more than a little bothersome to wade through repeated introductory nods to the editor for the opportunity to "talk about" whatever topic is at hand. Then there is the essay title with *two* colons in it, making it hard to ignore the highly specialized nature of the book. On the surface, the collection appears to be of interest primarily to those in the library professions.

Nonetheless, the essays individually and collectively rise above their specialized focus and offer an engaging conversation about the transformation of libraries and library services. Since the pressure and opportunities are the same experienced by those engaged in teaching, administrative systems, and so many other endeavors throughout the academy, the collection proves worthwhile for many others in addition to library professionals.

The value of this collection lies in its ability to combine concrete library issues and concerns with a larger interest in what digital information means historically, philosophically, and even personally. Harold Billings, for example, discusses how the digital delivery of information has, in some ways, brought libraries back around to the "great personal libraries" of the past. After the modern period in which libraries became "public spaces," he suggests, the personalization of information through myLibrary kinds of portals creates a unique global Web space that is at once highly public and highly personal.

Far from being so stuffy or specialized that the collection collapses under its own weight, Lee's contributors frequently touch on nontraditional approaches to library services. Several essays discuss what libraries might make of the Amazon.com model of information dissemination, for example. In addition, some essays pose key questions about how libraries will transform themselves as the current digital decade unfolds. For example, Mary Jackson discusses interlibrary loan services in the era of distance education, and Anthony Ferguson's essay offers worthwhile commentary on the potential impact of netLibrary, e-journals, and scholarly publishing initiatives.

Admittedly, the travails of library materials selectors won't capture the imaginations of nonlibrarians. On the other hand, it's no awkward stretch to see that the challenges faced by library staff to negotiate the resource obstacles and digital opportunities that abound are instructive for faculty and administrators alike. Just as traditional classroom relationships are changing, so are the relationships between libraries and publishers, libraries and users, and libraries and other libraries. At the heart of the matter, as Kit Kennedy highlights, is the crucial question of service. Kennedy stresses that service still matters but that the conditions around the delivery of these services has changed and is changing.

Concern for how best to approach the new complexities and the desire for a clear, viable model for the future is a tension that comes and goes throughout Lee's collection. Ultimately, the most insightful observation on this search for answers might be the Somerset Maugham quotation evoked by Secor and Swords: "There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are." Challenging as the task may be, the struggles of these authors are well worth contemplating.

The collection also explores the demonstrated value and need for partnerships and/or consortial approaches to solving problems in the digital age. These range from sharing resources, pooling purchases for leveraged buying power, or more creative collaborative constructions.

Far from taking the safe path of simply praising all partnerships, the voices in this collection represent some rich opposing viewpoints. If the movement toward consortial agreements continues unabated, Suzan McGinnis asks, "Will we all become the same library?" Fearing the loss of specialization and rich unique collections, she questions the approach as well as the purchase of electronic resources. McGinnis insists that a critical posture is needed to counter the "god, motherhood, and apple pie" view of consortia taken by so many library professionals.

Paul Gherman, on the other hand, convincingly conveys the sense of urgency behind the urge to change. "We must transform ourselves from bricks to clicks and embrace disintermediation," he writes, and "quickly dismantle much of what we have built over many decades." And if that isn't provocative enough, he notes that it might be necessary to find a "new set of core activities and values." Though he admits he is looking many years ahead, his vision is a threatening one to many stakeholders, since he goes so far as to say that his long-term goal is nothing less than closing his campus library and delivering its services through digital means.

Research Collections and Digital Information explores the rich and anxious conversations taking place around the idea of transformation. Now more than ever—when state budget shortfalls amount to an unfunded mandate to transform more services with less funding—the stakes are greater than ever. The greatest strength of this slim collection is that it so effectively captures both the uncertainties and opportunities of the digital age.

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