

## EVERYTHING E AND D: WHAT ABOUT THE BOOKS ?

*It's not often that libraries find themselves on the front page of a major newspaper. On Tuesday March 8, 2011, it was the University of New South Wales Library's turn, right below the masthead. University Librarian Andrew Wells found himself on the frontline – and it got him thinking.*

The first paragraph in the front page story, titled *Books Get the Shove as University Students Prefer to Do Research Online*, stated the University was “throwing away thousands of books and scholarly journals as part of a policy that critics say is turning its library into a Starbucks”. The story had many inaccuracies and it is not my intention in this opinion piece to refute them. If you want to see how I responded to the UNSW community, there is a statement on collection management on the UNSW Library website.

But the story – and reactions to it – have led me to consider wider questions about the role and perceptions of academic libraries. In my pessimistic moments, I often feel we fail in communicating the nature of the changes that are taking place, as well as the opportunities everything ‘e’ and ‘d’ presents. For many people, libraries are about books. Our professional body is the ‘Australian Library and Information Association’ – no mention of books there, even though the enduring perception of the public is that libraries are places for books and printed items.

The reality for academic libraries is quite different. Over a decade ago, university libraries stopped acquiring print versions of serials. UNSW adopted an ‘electronic-preferred’ policy for serials in 2001. Our staff and students have responded enthusiastically to this form of information provision. Thousands of journal issues are available from their home, desk or laboratory around the clock. The usage statistics are astoundingly high. Indeed, they are at levels that could not have been achieved in the print library. We are the beginning of a transition for scholarly monographs to being ‘e’ and ‘d’.

The acquisition of print issues of journals has dramatically reduced. UNSW Library has less than 2000 print subscriptions now and this will reduce further. Until the late 1990s, large research libraries like UNSW Library were confronted with expanding collections and a shortage of space to hold them. In many libraries, this led to a reduction in study space as seminar rooms and study carrels gave way to more shelving. The situation at UNSW Library was particularly grim for students, with benchmarking revealing extremely low provision of study spaces. This was a situation I wanted to change, and fortunately, one that the University wanted to change as well.

***“As all libraries do, we will continue to manage our print collections by adding, deleting and maintaining items. The over-arching goal is to maintain access for our staff and students. Formats will change and some materials will go to storage. Our commitment to information access will endure.”***

In the last five years, the balance between space for collections and facilities for students has been changed. Collection space was reduced by the decreased intake of print serials. UNSW Library also joined CAVAL and sent many low use items to the CARM Store. We have adopted a ‘steady-state’ policy to remind everyone that space is limited. We cannot continue to purchase 10,000 books a year and 20,000 journal issues without taking an active approach to space management. The shared print repository at CARM is an effective and efficient solution for low use materials we wish to retain and preserve.

Even so, these explanations do not convince everybody. There is still the assertion that the Library is now ‘a kind of a Starbucks’. I feel no need to justify or apologise for the changes at UNSW Library. I am proud of our new Main Library. Students have group study rooms, informal areas, media booths, computer lounges, and – yes – quiet spaces with

study carrels in a row, just like when I went to uni in the early 1970s. The number of students using the library has jumped around 30%. The print collection is well organised and easy to access. As all libraries do, we will continue to manage our print collections by adding, deleting and maintaining items. The over-arching goal is to maintain access for our staff and students. Formats will change and some materials will go to storage. Our commitment to information access will endure.

A common reaction to the newspaper story was shock that UNSW Library would discard a book. Now, I know we are not the only library to do this in Australia. Some asked why we did not give them away or sell them. A common suggestion was that we should send them to developing countries. Well, this sounds reasonable until you start working out the cost of doing this. As the items being discarded were duplicate copies of textbooks, we found out no-one really wants a free superseded edition of a text book, let alone buy it. And why should we think outdated materials that our staff and students no longer need are suitable for libraries in developing countries?

I hope this helps you whenever you end up on page one!

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Each month, *OPINION* features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.