Can Research Libraries Learn from Toynbee’s *Study of History*?  
Talk delivered at Cornell University Library, 20 April 2015

Anne Kenney asked me to speak about “what keeps [me] up at night?” and, in this context, I thought it would be useful to talk about a lens or frame that I have for thinking about research libraries and their future, something that consoles me at times and worries me at others.

**Toynbee and the Creative Minority**

The late historian, Arnold Toynbee is most famous for his twelve volume *Study of History*. In his work, Toynbee explores the emergence, growth and decline of cultures. Toynbee argues that both the growth and decline of civilizations can be seen through the lens of creative responses to challenges those civilizations face (rather than, for example, environmental factors). Moreover, the presence of challenges is important to the growth of cultures: too little challenge leads to stagnation and too much challenge can overwhelm.

Assuming a balance in the severity or complexity of challenges (in other words, we’re not wiped out by a comet!), the key element in the success of the civilization is the presence of a “Creative Minority.” In response to those challenges, an effective “Creative Minority” will devise responses that result in the society thriving. And civilizations grow when they meet successive challenges in the same creative way, with the Creative Minority responding effectively to those challenges either by the application of the same response or developing new and appropriate responses. Civilizations will develop differently depending on differences in their environments and differences in approaches to the challenges.

Often, however, the Creative Minority becomes unduly fixated on the sort of response they had to the earlier challenges, pursuing the approaches even in the face of substantive differences in the challenges. “This worked before, and so it must work now.” That the response is not appropriate to subsequent challenges is a key part of the failure of those cultures. A dysfunctional fixation on the old methods leads the Creative Minority to cease to be creative and to degenerate into what Toynbee calls a “Dominant Minority.” That is, Toynbee argues the Creative Minority that becomes pridefully fixated on old methods and thus fails to adequately address the next challenge becomes instead a Dominant Minority.

Toynbee’s ideas were influential for decades in the study of history. As a young (first time) graduate student, I encountered Toynbee’s thoughts in the work of the German scholar Ernst Curtius who wrote a fairly influential work for my study: *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. I suppose I’ve always been a sucker for (susceptible to?) the sort of thinking C. S. Lewis describes in his work *The Discarded Image* (on Medieval and Renaissance literature and culture), striving to articulate or create a sense of order in apparent disparate cultural developments and striving to conceptually harmonize apparent contradictions. I suppose it’s the simple-minded side of me, but I like to have everything fit neatly together and this kind of frame--Toynbee’s sense of how civilizations emerge, thrive and decline--appeals to me in trying to understand industries and institutions. Indeed, there is some organizational literature that brings Toynbee’s analytical frame to bear on the development of institutions.¹ Organizations or institutions (like libraries) also emerge in response to balanced challenges, are often led by a Creative Minority, and can decline as a result of a Dominant Minority. I often wonder how libraries are faring through this lens. I’d like to explore that question a bit with you.

**University press publishing through Toynbee’s lens**

First, though, a digression to explore a related institution through the same lens. For a while, I’ve argued that university presses have fallen prey to the kind of decline Toynbee associates with Dominant

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Minorities. Literature on the emergence of university presses clearly establishes them as having been started primarily as a response to the need for disseminating ideas that have little real economic marketplace. Later, university presses responded to economic demands in the middle part of the century by becoming market-focused: in an environment of plenty, they responded to a rich and hungry marketplace, not only of libraries but of consumers. I believe that, over the last couple of decades they’ve been eloquently and stubbornly insistent on pursuing those same strategies despite the loss of a marketplace. You’ll hear some of our best and brightest argue, for example, that selling academic works is a necessary filter for quality. Think about this problem for a moment. A monograph on Jews in medieval Amsterdam can make important long-term contributions to scholarship, but is not likely to have a big marketplace. We generally recognize that some very focused areas of study have a small and distributed audience: their quality and importance can’t be measured by the number of consumers.

The **reason for being** for university presses was not driven by or responsive to a marketplace, even an older and putatively larger marketplace. Their reason for being was sharing the results of scholarship. In his 1937 work on university presses, Harry Miller Lydenberg notes that it is “unfair to expect the average publisher to market books possessed of so little popular appeal but at the same time of such real importance” and goes on to describe the way that universities (often in partnership with libraries) started “their own presses … with slight equipment, [and] slighter means” just to address this very problem. As markets grew, presses have neglected their reason for being and have focused on the mechanics associated with a marketplace, something undoubtedly developed by the Creative Minority of the middle of the 20th century. I would go further and argue that university press culture (the Dominant Majority) is now in the process of killing the “institution” (that is, university press publishing) by pursuing principles or strategies that do not work in the current environment and which are antithetical to the purpose (and genesis) of the presses. Unlike STM publishing, which preys on a broken marketplace, university press publishing is problematic because of the way that it is out of step with the needs of the institution that spawned it. University press publishing is not currently devoted primarily to the effective flow of scholarly communication. If nothing else, look at the Georgia State lawsuit, where university presses have sued the very institution university publishing is supposed to serve for too freely sharing information.

**But what about libraries?**

Briefly, it strikes me that libraries have been reasonably (though not completely) successful in remaining creative in response to challenges. Librarians feel very committed to the institution of libraries as an important piece of a healthy culture. We see this around the world, and research librarians have engaged thoughtfully in crafting work we believe is related to our mission: we’ve shaped research libraries to focus on needs like data management and have adapted our strategies to take advantage of things like the Internet. (If it nothing else, HathiTrust is an outstanding example of libraries sharing a collective responsibility in a collective fashion, aided by the Internet.) However, we do make mistakes, and we often make those mistakes because we’re fixated on old ways of doing things, as if those old ways have some special inherent value. This matter of whether and how we adapt is for me one of the most worrisome questions. I’ll return to this question later. Now, another digression to help illustrate the challenges and our responses: I’ll focus for a moment on my very real challenge at Illinois.

**Woe is me: The budget crisis in Illinois**

But now for something completely different: I’d like to talk about our budget situation at Illinois. Perhaps this will provide an opportunity for commiseration, and maybe just an opportunity for you to indulge in some schadenfreude.

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In mid-February, Illinois’ new Republican governor, Bruce Rauner outlined a budget proposal to address the pressing needs of Illinois’ state budget. After all, with nine months of the fiscal year passed, the entirety of the state’s money had been spent; years of poor management and planning, along with overly ambitious promises, have left Illinois with inadequate resources to meet future state-funded pension needs. Rauner’s plan would balance the budget and, as he said, stop us from “living beyond our means—spending money that Illinois taxpayers could not afford.” Cuts would need to come from somewhere, and one of those places was funding for higher education. In an exercise in openness, the governor’s spreadsheets were all online, showing the commitments that were preserved, those that were increased, and the reductions.

What did this mean for the University of Illinois? Rauner proposed a reduction of 31.5%--$387m--from higher education, with nearly $209m coming from the University of Illinois. For UIUC, the flagship campus, the actual reduction remains to be determined, but could be anywhere from $86m-$114m. The silver lining in that very dark cloud is that other state funds come to the University, so the total amount is approximately 10% of our state funding, and a total of 4-5% of the campus’ total budget.

Not surprisingly, this coincides with our campus budget process. For their annual budget proposals, deans were instructed to model 5% and 10% reductions in central funding. Now, let me hasten to add that the Library will receive differential treatment, recognizing that schools and colleges have greater flexibility in how they fund their activities, a point that we reiterated in the budget document. Though the impact to the Library should be limited (e.g., flat collection budget) and primarily psychologically discouraging, but we should never lose the opportunity to talk about the implications of a reduction like this. Our budget proposal did this. And of course even with the Library’s budget receiving some protection, reductions in this kind of situation are inevitable.

A few days after Rauner’s budget address (which I’ll remind everyone is a proposal to the legislature), the Library had its annual hearing with the campus budget and oversight committee. We talked to the CBOC about the way that our research libraries need to simultaneously do what people have expected of them for years while at the same time building a new future that accords with the ideals we associate with libraries. So, for example, in ways our campus would appreciate and understand, we’ve excelled: gate counts are up significantly, downloads grew by 75%, reference and instruction are substantial, and even though lending is down, we still loaned .5m volumes last year. These measures indicate success in ways that are apparent to the campus. Have libraries become marginalized in these traditional regards? These measures still represent key measures for important constituencies, and to fail in these regards is utterly problematic.

But, as we said to the CBOC, we must also be the future. The University of Illinois Library has been agile and has committed resources to new ways of acting that are consistent with our historical mission. I didn’t come here to talk about how well we do things in Illinois, but I’ll touch on just one example.

In the last year, we have created a robust Research Data Service. By securing new funds and reallocating others, we have hired a superb, service-oriented director with a biochemistry background, have hired two curatorial staff, and recently hired an additional developer to aid data-related efforts. We have also redirected the work of several of our librarians and professionals to focus primarily on data (e.g., Sarah Williams serves as Life Sciences Data Services Librarian). Our microservices-based digital preservation repository will handle the preservation piece of data management, and we have allocated funding for preservation-related storage so that we can handle 85% of the grant-funded needs on campus without charging researchers. We have partnered with NCSA to provide our researchers large amounts of storage related to data use (and computation). All of this has been crafted in partnership with our Vice Chancellor for Research and is embraced across the Library as part of the regular work of the Library. Our efforts are so successful and so naturally part of the Library that when the College of Engineering decided to hire a
data support professional, they asked the Library to conduct the hiring process and to have the individual report to the Library’s RDS director.

This sort of service is powerfully aligned with the historical roles and mission of our research libraries. When a great library like Cornell or Illinois engages successfully with all facets of the library mission, we are highly valued. As the Gates Foundation noted in a recent letter to us as part of a grant program, “Libraries as engines of development & funded as key community assets.”

Does the threats to our budget keep me up at night? Well, honestly, I sleep like a baby. I wake every two hours crying. But, seriously, libraries have done a considerable amount to demonstrate that we can be trusted to help build the future. We have been responsible stewards. Though there are genuine threats and there is urgency to find ways to make libraries work more effectively, we have time to get this right.

Back to Toynbee

So how can we ensure libraries don’t fall under the sway of the Dominant Minority or lose their Creative Minority mojo? The most effective strategy for remaining relevant, vital and effective is by continually asking ourselves why we’re here. What needs are we trying to meet? What is our reason for being? And then we must give thought to how best to accomplish that work. [slide on collaboration axis]

If asked, we’d all be able to give a pretty good statement of the abiding mission of research libraries, and we’d probably find a fair amount of overlap between our various renditions. My version is essentially this--that we do now and have long engaged with these four areas of work. And, as I said, our relevance and vitality depends on figuring out to best accomplish that work. For me, this local and network matrix is a good framing:

Curation: I’ve used the word “curation” to convey that sense of caring for the cultural record, in as many formats as we can reasonably manage. This is probably the single most important piece of our mission, and other elements are often contingent on our success in this area. It is under this rubric that we speak about permanence, appraisal (including thoughtful retention and disposition decisions), and trust. And of course facilitating access--effective, robust access--is part of our curatorial work: there is no preservation without access and there is no access without preservation. Much of the curatorial function is something we own collectively. Granted, the demand to curate some resources will grow out of and be tied to local needs, but so much of our understanding of the cultural record is something that is situated in our collectivity. With regard to print, how many copies of a given work are there, and are there significant artefactual variations among them? With regard to resources like data, so much of this grows out of work across institutions and organizations, and the data themselves are seen as pieces of our collectivity (e.g., famously the Human Genome Project).

Publishing: I alluded earlier to the role of libraries in the emergence of US university presses, but there are many ways libraries have historically been involved in the transmission of information. I’m not arguing for taking down Elsevier. On the other hand, we have a responsibility to create meaningful publishing alternatives that are aligned with the community that we’re a part of and which we support. The only reasonable way we’ll get important metrics on use, foster re-use in ways that helps advance understanding, and provide trusted, long-term access is by creating and owning the mechanisms to communicate scholarship. I hope the connection to curation is obvious, but in case it’s not, the current model of publishing and preservation as two separate processes with a tenuous connection between them creates costs and raises questions about the trustworthiness of the publications. Whether we call it publishing or scholarly communication, libraries have long played a key role in ensuring the effective (and trusted) flow of scholarly information, and we must play a more significant role going forward.
I don’t really need to address these other two elements, in part because they’re less susceptible to driving down costs by taking advantage of network effects, but they’re also pretty familiar. It’s things like visualization walls and collaboration and maker spaces that make these things exciting today, and very relevant.

So, I’d argue that these things are our reason for being, the things of ABIDING importance. When I look around, I see a lot of success from the Creative Minority. Consider Cornell, for example.

- Your work in digital preservation has been exceptional, has helped the community by shaping practice and being an exemplar of effective curation, particularly with regard to ensuring the permanence of collections. That goes for your work in digitization (Anne’s benchmarking) and for your work on preservation frameworks.
- Your work on cataloging and Linked Open Data are fundamentally about the access and use elements of curation: if we can’t find it and make effective use of it, preserving it doesn’t mean much.
- And your work in scholarly communication abounds, whether we’re talking about Project Euclid or arXiv.

You’re a leading institution, an important part of the Creative Minority, that by example has helped research libraries remain vital.

There have been enough examples to suggest research libraries are pretty damned good at remaining creative in reengineering themselves, but it’s time to step it up. The pie gets smaller and our charge gets greater. The challenge is reframing our core work in a set of changed circumstances. We must build a solid and reliable collective collection, working to take advantage of the network. We must work to ensure the effective flow of scholarly communication in a world where buying and selling publications is failing us right now.

What kind of future do we need to build?

- Managing the print record is our responsibility, but we need to find a way to do that as a shared responsibility so that we can do that work less expensively, better, and so that we can reallocate resources to other challenges. Sadly, some would abandon print because it seems as if it marginalizes us: it only does that if we stubbornly insist that it can only be done one way, as a local asset with great cost to the institution. HathiTrust has been important for a host of reasons, but not least of which because it allows us to better see the print record in the network, in a shared space.

I’d like you to do a thought experiment with me. Imagine a scenario where we exhaustively identified the corpus of US federal government documents and got them all online. Where we worked through all of the nasty serial problems, where we took advantage of the immense LOD possibilities, and where everything was accessible to everyone all of the time. That’s all do-able. And if we did this with these 2 million volumes, what should each of our institutions do with the print and microfilm that corresponds to this online collection? Surely not keep it all locally. If we did that, would we cataloged locally what has heretofore been an unmanageable cataloging challenge? Surely not. We could ask similar questions about rights management and quality review, and the answers would all point to our need to (and likely willingness to) share the work of this challenge across our institutions, and not as a local resource.

- We need to remake the scholarly communication ecosystem, and not as individual and isolated producers and consumers, but rather with the power of collective action. Of course that means, in part, negotiating with publishers vigorously and with aggregate power. More than that, however, it means creating alternatives that recognize both the way that disciplines cross institutional
boundaries and the way that individual institutions bring specific subject and technical strengths to what can only be a collective problem.

- These are of course only two parts of the future we need to build. We must also engage in new and more meaningful ways with research and learning by being part of research teams and by being expert in the delivery of information in learning. We must engage in sense-making with the morass of information for which we’re responsible. We must look to new types of information resources like data and put in place sensible, cross-institutional measures for long-term management and sustainability. It’s these and other challenges that call on institutions like Cornell to be leading members of a Creative Minority shaping the future of research libraries.

I have a great deal of faith that we can and will take on these challenges. The danger, frankly, is not that we continue to look at the old problems (e.g., collection management) as current problems: they are abiding. The danger is that we believe the old ways of dealing with those challenges should continue--that we don’t need to adapt to changed and changing circumstances. We need to keep mission (not method) in mind, and we need to leverage things like the ARL System of Action to create the new world.

**Conclusion**

So what really keeps me up at night? Overly simplistic thinking that results in a kind of reductivist approach. It’s human to simplify: reducing complex problems to simple, unnuanced ones is often necessary to cope with the world. We all do it. The problem comes when that approach is used to cope in such a way that also create problems. Fitzgerald said that “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” We should challenge ourselves to understand the challenges associated with our part of the world with as much richness and nuance as possible, as often as possible to hold in our minds at the same time two opposed ideas, and to try to craft solutions around those challenges. We should always strive to be a happily engaged Creative Minority building the best possible information solutions for our world. We should keep in the forefronts of our minds our reason for being and we must think creatively about ways to support that reason.

I appreciate your patience accompanying me on what must seem like a meandering journey. I hope the frame of Toynbee is helpful to you in considering our challenges and the need for evolution. I hope also the four pillars resonate with you as areas of abiding work that aligns with our mission. And I hope that my suggestions for new areas of work seem sensible to you.

Ten years ago at the Janus Conference, your own Ross Atkinson challenged the community to think differently about the work we must do. In describing challenges, Ross said that “We need now therefore to consider whether such fundamental challenges can be effectively confronted using such fragmentary means--or whether we need finally to begin organizing ourselves more systematically in collection development, to confront such challenges in concert.” This is the question for us today, and applies to much of the work we need to do.

1. Consider something as apparently insignificant as our approach to cataloging. With relatively few exceptions, our collections have large areas of overlap. Our cataloging records document the materials in our collections. We treat those records as if they were local assets, storing them locally, managing change (both authority changes and corrections) locally. Hundreds of libraries pay companies like Backstage on average tens of thousands of dollars or spend that much on their own to make small continuing adjustments to cataloging records AS IF those records lived primarily in a local context. A collective approach like Wikipedia would be far more efficient and could benefit from either the “crowd” or at least the collectivity of librarian experts. Why do we persist in local maintenance of cataloging records and orienting ourselves to records as if they were intellectual assets?
2. Bigger challenges like collection management require more boldness and risk. I don’t think there are continuing questions about whether our print strategies should be coordinated. Even if there were reasonable questions about whether the savings are real or whether we could manage distributed cost, we should agree that the advantages of a shared collection are powerful: we would reap better care, a more coherent picture of what that collection actually includes, and probably access. Getting beyond the current fractured print storage strategies is surely our next big challenge.

Whether we’re talking about institutional repositories, library publishing, data management, cataloging, print management or many of the other things that are core to our identity of libraries, Ross’s challenge to “confront [these] challenges in concert” is just as relevant today. That we find ways to do so rather than insisting on doing things in isolation would, in my mind, make the difference between our constituting ourselves as Toynbee’s Dominant Minority and his Creative Minority, and I believe we’re poised to do the best possible thing.