

TURNING KNOWLEDGE OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS INTO SCHOLARLY ARTICLES

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ABSTRACT

Special collections are the hidden gems of library collections and librarians are often curious about their history and content. Precious and fragile archival material, rare books and ephemera lie dormant in safely restricted stacks, while their creation, acquisition and content bear rich stories and documentary material for scholarly research.

This paper outlines the methods that enable our curiosity and knowledge of our special collections to be transformed into quality research. It also identifies the hurdles that librarians face in turning their knowledge and skills into scholarly research. The main argument is that new graduates have the advantageous combination of sound research skills, coupled with inside knowledge and ready access to special collections that could be used to good advantage in scholarly research.

The discussion illuminates various aspects of the research process and their correlation with information management practice. It identifies the originality of research ideas and the wealth of special collections; discovering existing knowledge and information skills; critical analysis and collection evaluation; communication of new knowledge and training skills; dissemination of new knowledge and scholarly publishing. Supporting evidence is drawn from previous research as well as from the personal experience of the presenter, who has used her research background to reveal in recent scholarly papers two heritage collections held by the State Library of Victoria: "Treasured ephemera: chronicles of the early history of professional chamber music in Melbourne", *La Trobe Journal* 84 (2009) 92-103 and "The Gustav Holst and British Music Society of Victoria collections at the State Library of Victoria", *Fontes Artis Musicae* 55 (2008) 170-179.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is on how librarians can turn their knowledge of special collections into scholarly articles. First, I am going to discuss the research potential of special collections and the benefits of publishing on special collections for both libraries and librarians. Then I will propose and explain a research design which could comprise of various research methodologies that enable scholarly research on special collections.

Before we begin, however, we should identify what special collections are and why they could be an important focus of research in libraries. In terms of format, special collections are archival materials, manuscripts, rare books, artefacts, pictures and other materials. They are unique and rare and, therefore valuable. They require a higher level of security than that of general collections. They may be old and fragile, and need to be kept and preserved in closed storage spaces under special conditions. As a consequence, access to special collections requires in-house viewing in a specific environment. Special collections are being increasingly digitised and made available on open access. There are also hidden special collections, which are not searchable because they have not yet been described and processed. Most importantly, special collections comprise documentary material that is a primary source for research.

Since scholarly research entails originality and innovation, special collections can provide it in different ways. Firstly, from the perspective of scholarly research, special collections are primary sources which contain original evidence with minimal or no mediation.[1] They are contemporary to the events they document and provide the strongest arguments in scholarly research. Secondly, originality of contribution would be already guaranteed by simply uncovering previously unknown sources of knowledge and their content and history. Thirdly, in comparison to users, librarians have the advantage of inside knowledge and better access, especially where hidden collections are concerned.

In addition to the above arguments, let us consider more aspects of why librarians should publish on special collections and why libraries should invest in such research. The benefits of research into special collections for libraries are as follows: Research informs collection management decision-making and impacts on organisational effectiveness. Special collections can be re-defined as primary research collections in library planning and funding bids. Consequently, special collection content evaluation, value and scope documentation support funding bids. Research communication is a form of collection promotion along-side commonly used techniques such as events, exhibitions, and educational outreach. Being unique and/or rare, special collections position a library in a unique way amongst other libraries and results in the promotion of the library itself. Librarians' in-depth knowledge of their special collections creates opportunity for expansion of knowledge, and prompts and enhances use.

The benefit for the librarians, who author scholarly articles on library collections, is that they gain in-depth expertise of their collections and experience of the research process. This builds skills that compliment the information searching process, which librarians are familiar with, and creates greater confidence in dealing with high-end library research services. Research results in knowledge and builds consultancy depth, thus enhancing the core professional expertise of librarians in sourcing relevant information. At a more enduring level, research yields knowledge and wisdom (understanding and experience) which in turn changes practice. In addition to this, a publications track record improves professional opportunities for individual library professionals and improves the position of the librarian amongst client groups and other professionals.

LIBRARIANS AND THE RESEARCH PROCESS

If I have convinced you that research into special collections is important, let us now answer the question “How?” As defined by the Australian Research Council’s *Excellence in Research for Australia Submission Guidelines for 2010* documentation, scholarly research is “... the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts methodologies and understandings.”[2]

How then can librarians, who wish to publish on special collections, guarantee that they are making an original contribution to knowledge in a scholarly manner? By publishing on new sources of knowledge that users do not know about, librarians are making a discovery and therefore filling a knowledge gap. Moreover, in doing so, librarians can also describe and evaluate previously unknown knowledge sources and document their history.

Library professionals have significant potential to conduct scholarly research on their special collections. They have the crucial information advantage firstly, in knowing about the existence of significant special or hidden collections, and secondly, in possessing sound information discovery skills. They may also have research experience as part of professional development courses and/or subject expertise. Most importantly, librarians have passion for their collections that prompts them to share their knowledge with users and colleagues.

This leads us to the question, “What are librarians generally proficient in within the research process?” Librarians are up-skilled in all information processes within the research process, which includes obtaining, evaluation and management of information and scholarly publishing. Librarians are able to analyse a topic and formulate search strategies, which is only a few steps away from formulating and focusing a research question. Librarians can process content and think critically, especially about their collections. Librarians know the pathways of scholarly communication. The only weakness that we could detect in this comparison is in the area of research methodology. Librarians may not be familiar with existing research methodologies. Indeed methodologies for specific studies of library collections

may not even exist and there may be a need for them to be developed and tested for analytical robustness.

The prevalent methodologies in monographs on research methods in information comprise of different research designs such as: user studies; surveys; case studies; qualitative methods, including observation and interviews, focus groups and the Delphi method; action research; experimental research; quantitative methods, comprising of descriptive statistics and bibliometrics; and, finally, historical and bibliographic research [3] There are no designated research methodologies for research into special collections. In fact, special collections are not the primary focus of library research. For instance, Lawal (2009, p.41) gives a proposed list of suggested areas and sub-areas of library research. In this list research on special collections features only under *Rare book digitization and finding aids*. Under *Collections* we find topics that pertain mostly to general print and electronic collections. This phenomenon in the research methods literature in information is influenced perhaps by the fact that not all libraries have special collections or if they do, they may not be of great magnitude. On the other hand, this tendency may be an indicator that libraries and librarians are more concerned with storage, access, operations and services practices and could be neglecting the processing and promotion of their precious special collections.

METHODOLOGY

In researching our special collections, we could use the following research questions:

- Why are particular collections new and significant?
- What are the provenance, content, scope, strengths, value and potential use of these collections?

There is no methodology of research into special collections. This was my experience when I looked at the evaluation of special collections while working on a paper concerned with two heritage music collections held at the State Library of Victoria published in the International Music Library Association's scholarly journal *Fontes Artis Musicae*. [4] I adopted several approaches to design my project, and since then have also conducted a bibliographical study [5] and a content analysis-based study [6].

Through my research into methodologies on discovering and evaluating special collections, I would like to discuss several possible methodologies which could be used separately or in combination with the above research questions. They are: historical research, concerned with the provenance of the collection; descriptive research to define content, including descriptive statistics which measure scope and collection strengths; evaluation of cultural heritage significance of collections using the Burra Charter; identifying value and research significance using the Delphi method; content analysis to

identify the substance of the documents in the collection; user statistics and/or studies as indicators of collection strengths; and combined methodologies to provide a comprehensive view of a collection.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Historical research aims to identify events, processes and patterns back in time and is based on primary records data. Koda (2008) states that “To support historical scholarly inquiry, it is necessary to have the best most comprehensive documents and collections, in formats that are as close to historical events and creative moments as is possible.”[7] This highlights the importance of primary sources collections in libraries, our awareness of them and knowledge about their history and provenance. Research on special collections with a focus on their history, provenance and the sources thereof is something that librarians are in the best position to contribute to knowledge. Librarians have access advantages to such documentation and know people who could tell them about how a collection came into the library. While working on the Louise Hanson-Dyer collections at the State Library of Victoria, I found a wealth of information about the acquisition history of the collections in simply talking to my colleagues, who had been working in the library for much longer than me. Historical research into special collections explores collection history by using primary sources/records, including oral history, images, drawing, etc.; establishes provenance and acquisition history as well as collection aims within the particular historical context. Historical research into special collections could also entail gathering of access documentation of the collection over time.

DESCRIPTIVE RESEARCH

The next methodology that could be applied to special collections research is descriptive research. Such an approach is based on observation and description and allows researchers to provide a general overview of collection content. Descriptive research identifies collection scope and depth, and collection strengths. It generates qualitative and quantitative data of the collection (see Lawal 2009, p. 71).

BURRA CHARTER METHOD FOR EVALUATION OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

Very often special collections have significant heritage value. Librarians can use the Burra Charter[8] approach for movable heritage for the purpose of identifying and managing objects of heritage value. The Burra Charter sets out the process and criteria that includes the following: historical importance over time; research potential; rarity; aesthetic significance; social impact and association with a person or group. See Quinlisk (2009) for a discussion of how this methodology could be used in libraries.[9]

ADOPTED DELPHI METHOD

The Delphi method is a systematic forecasting method that aims to answer a research question on which experts cannot agree. The process involves several experts who, through interaction with the collection and mediation rounds, come to consensus on a particular issue. Questionnaires based on the experts' interaction with the collection are mediated through a number of rounds until consensus is

reached. When such an issue does not need to be resolved, the adopted Delphi method could be used in special collections research to engage users/experts with the content of a collection. The method could include a questionnaire on collection content, value and research potential and/or an open discussion with a panel of experts without having to go through mediation rounds for them to agree on an issue regarding the collection. This method can produce a variety of expert opinions of the collection.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis could be also applied to special collections research. Text-based and qualitative content analysis can enable the identification of substance and meaning of texts within the documents of a collection to reveal trends and themes. This is an approach I followed to work through the ephemeral concert program collection of the British Music Society of Victoria held at the State Library of Victoria. I analysed the information in the programs and established the main themes and approaches to concert programming the famous music publisher and patron Louise Hanson-Dyer used in the 1920s in Melbourne, (see Kaleva 2009).

USER STATISTICS AND OTHER USER STUDIES

User statistics and user studies could be another method of identifying collection strengths, scope and depth. These statistics comprise of usage reports (viewing/borrowing statistics) and comparison of use data with collection strengths. In addition, user studies with different cohorts of clients illuminate induced and emerging uses of the collection. I used this method in a paper on the Gustav Holst and British Music Society Collections at the State Library of Victoria. In this comparison, user statistics confirmed collection strengths (see Kaleva 2008).

COMBINED METHODOLOGY

Finally, all of these methods could be combined in special collections studies. Historical research can trace acquisition history and provenance. Descriptive research can assist in measuring collection content, scope and strengths. The Burra Charter for movable heritage can aid collection evaluation by identifying cultural heritage significance. The adopted Delphi method can engage user experts in assessing content, value and research potential, while content analysis may enhance content evaluation. User statistics or studies could be used as indicators of collection strengths and potential use.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to bring your attention to special collections as research collections and highlighted the benefits of conducting research on such collections. Since methodology is a weakness in this type of library research, I have also suggested a research design, which includes research questions and various methodological approaches that will assist you in getting over the most difficult hurdles of scholarly research.

Now it is up to you to discover a unique collection in your library and to decide on research questions and the methodology. Apply your information skills! Use your contacts within and outside your library to learn more about the collection! Write everything down, no matter how terrible it sounds - you can always revise it before anyone else sees it! Present a conference paper! Turn the essence of everything you've gathered into an article!

Thus empowered, have fun with it and be creative! You are in charge! The in-depth understanding of your collection will give you satisfaction that you have discovered and shared what you know. In turn, this will boost your professional confidence.

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