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Exploring concepts of 'collection' in the digital world

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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of my PhD research "Conceptualising the library collection for the digital world: a case study of social enterprise". The project aims to use a case study of the library collection for social enterprise to develop a conceptual approach to the library collection in the digital world.

Why does conceptualising the library collection matter?

As the resources which libraries deal with become increasingly diverse and complex, aspects of collection development and management become more specialised and potentially more fragmented. I think that, by taking a step back and asking some fundamental questions about what a collection actually is in the digital world, and by trying to develop an overarching framework for thinking about 'collection' in library and information services, it may be possible to develop new approaches to current practical issues relating to collections.

Why social enterprise?

Social enterprise is a relatively new term for a much older idea. In the UK, the origins of social enterprise may be traced to the emergence of cooperatives in eighteenth-century Scotland or to their wider development in nineteenth-century England (Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2011: 26). A range of definitions has been proposed since the late 1970s, of which perhaps the most straightforward – but least nuanced – is "business with a social purpose" (Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2011: 52). One useful summary of current types of social enterprises in the UK has been provided by Spear, Cornforth & Aiken (2009: 265-266) who describe four broad categories:

- Mutuals (such as John Lewis) and co-operatives;
- "Trading charities";
- "New-start social enterprises" – organisations specifically established as social enterprises, such as Divine Chocolate;
- "Public-sector spin-offs" – public sector organisations moving out of the public sector. The Research Information Network is an example of an organisation which has made a transition from being a publicly-funded body to being a social enterprise.

Social enterprise is an interesting subject to study in relation to library collections because of its interdisciplinary nature. These are increasingly significant areas of research activity for a number of reasons:

- Interdisciplinary approaches reflect the reality of how subjects interconnect;
- They facilitate problem centred approaches to social issues, using perspectives from a range of different subjects to gain insight into the problem and to develop possible solutions;
- Interdisciplinary research is encouraged by research funders;
- Interdisciplinary work is facilitated by cross-disciplinary access to information.

Social enterprise also exemplifies some of the issues relating to new types of communities, especially those which are not defined by a specific geographic locality. Social enterprise can be seen as a community of practice; people share their work-related expertise through networks and virtual communities. The social enterprise community also generates a lot of information itself, including on social networking sites or on blogs. This is difficult material for libraries to deal with, but reflects important trends relating to the dramatic increase in informal online publication.

There is a very diverse range of potential stakeholders interested in the field including people running social enterprises, policy makers, and researchers and academics. Relevant materials are also likely to be found in a wide range of libraries, including academic, public and national libraries, as well as health libraries, or libraries in professional associations or government departments. Focusing on this subject area should provide a snapshot of issues affecting library collections across these different organisations.

Research design

There are three strands to my research:

- A case study of the British Library's collections for social enterprise, examining the characteristics of the library collection for social enterprise and how it is used;
- Catalogue searches of other UK library catalogues;
- A series of interviews with a small number of people, followed by a survey of a larger group to see if the ideas which emerged from the interviews are representative of people's views more widely. This part of my research aims to explore aspects of the topic in greater depth, including looking at how people access information relating to social enterprise, librarian and information practitioner perceptions of social enterprise information, and exploring wider issues relating to library collections in the digital age.

This paper focuses on findings from the third strand.

Initial findings - interviews

I interviewed 18 people between June 2011 and June 2012. The interviewees included 5 people involved in social enterprise, 2 academics, 2 policymakers, 6 library and information practitioners, 2 publishers and a research administrator.

In all of the interviews I asked the question "What do you understand the term collection to mean?"

6 interviewees, including half the library and information practitioners, saw the term as an example of library jargon.

However, even people who thought of it first as a jargon term went on to give further sophisticated, nuanced and inclusive interpretations of what 'collection' means. When analysing the interview data, I found these definitions could be clustered in the following way:

- **Collection as process**, which is further subdivided:
 - Collection as selection;
 - Dynamically created collections through searching;
 - Collection as service.

- **Collection as thing**, which is further subdivided:
 - Collection as subject groups;
 - Collection comprised of sub-groupings;
 - Collection and quantity.
- **Collection as access** – the term is not just limited to materials which a library physically owns.

These definitions echoed some ideas from the literature. For example, ideas of **collection as a process** seemed to echo the advice of Horava (2010: 150): “consider what a collection does rather than what a collection is”. A definition offered by an academic interviewee – “a body of work that has been brought together using a particular set of criteria” – seemed to echo a definition proposed by Lagoze and Fielding (1998):

“A collection is *logically* defined as a set of criteria for selecting resources from the broader information space”.

Ideas of **collection as thing** included defining collection as a group of materials on a subject or a theme, or as containing sub-groups of material. These ideas of collection as groupings of material on a subject and collections containing “subcollections” echoed findings from earlier research on this topic (Lee, 2005: 73, 76).

Almost all interviewees also discussed the idea of **collection as access**, including all six library and information practitioners. An academic librarian said: “the term collection can mean anything that we provide access to for both teaching and research to do with the university”, supporting the suggestion by Feather and Sturges (2003: 80-81) that ‘collection’:

“can also be taken to include all the information resources to which a library has access, including those available through physical and virtual networks”.

However, this also represents the greatest difference between the findings from this project and those described by Lee (2005), who found a contrast between customer priorities of access and availability, and librarian priorities of control and management.

Collection and the impact of digital technology

The interviewees discussed a number of dimensions to the impact of digital technology on library collections including:

- Digital has a global reach;
- Digital can be personal and personalized;
- Digital adds complexity;
- Digital overcomes certain types of physical constraint (the size of a printed page, the length of a shelf);
- Digital creates an opportunity for libraries to shift from outside – in to inside –out information provision (Dempsey, 2012: 8), moving from collecting materials from the external information environment to make them available to a local audience, to pushing out unique local content to the wider information universe;
- Digital may alter the order of some traditional collection processes;

- Digital and perceptions of ‘free’ information. Library and information services play a significant role as cost mediators, as well as information mediators. This may be an increasingly important role for libraries in the context of disruptive new cost models, such as author pays open access (Finch Group, 2012); new collaborative approaches to library purchasing such as the Scottish Higher Education Digital Library (Research Information Network, 2010); or innovative attempts to adapt crowd-funding approaches to open up access to scholarly e-books (Knowledge Unlatched, 2012).

A quotation from an interview with a publisher combines some of these ideas, to give what I think is a much more dynamic view of ‘collection’ than might traditionally be the case:

“I suppose a really good collection is... where you take content and you can merge it, you can cross-fertilise it, you can... discover easily”.

Initial findings – surveys

I carried out two surveys between July and October 2012:

- Survey of library and information practitioners (103 completed responses);
- Survey of people involved in social enterprise (46 completed responses).

The relatively small number of responses limits the conclusions which I can draw from the survey results. However, there appeared to be a very similar pattern between the rankings given to eight definitions of ‘collection’ by library and information practitioner and the rankings given to the same eight definitions by people involved in social enterprise.

Overwhelmingly, most respondents from both groups selected “Group of materials on a subject or a theme” as their first, second or third highest ranked definition, followed by “provision of access to resources” and “a set of results created through searching”. This does seem to suggest some support for the idea of **collection as thing** (a subject grouping), **collection as access** (“provision of access”), and potentially **collection as process**: the idea of a collection generated by searching does seem to suggest a more dynamic, process-led approach to defining collection.

Secondly, library and information practitioners more frequently described libraries as very important or essential sources of information about social enterprise than Google. In contrast, among social enterprise respondents, Google was one of two resources most frequently described as very important or essential; only a minority of respondents rated libraries as a very important or essential source of information about social enterprise.

Finally, social enterprise respondents seemed to place greater emphasis on the preservation role of libraries. Generally, preservation activities were rated as a very important or essential role for libraries by a larger proportion of social enterprise respondents. However, there were considerable sectoral differences in the library and information practitioner responses: a higher proportion of national library respondents than public or academic library respondents gave higher levels of priority to preservation activities.

Other findings from the library and information practitioner survey included:

- There were sectoral differences in the preferred terms for library resources. Overall, stock was the most popular term, just ahead of ‘collection’;
- **89%** of library and information practitioners agreed or strongly agreed that they have a good understanding of the community their library or information service serves; however, only **34%** agreed or strongly agreed that community analysis enables them to identify emerging areas such as social enterprise;
- **4** public librarians and **2** academic librarians reported having no policy document;
- **81%** agreed or strongly agreed that collection policy documentation is “A working document setting out how we approach practical problems managing the collection”;
- **74%** agreed or strongly agreed that collection policy documentation is “A statement about the current level of service provided by our collection”;
- However, only **26%** agreed or strongly agreed that collection policy documentation is “A document to promote the collection to our users”;
- Different selection methods are preferred in different sectors. For example, public librarians rely more on customer suggestions and supplier selection, whilst academic librarians reported more use of reading lists or Patron Driven Acquisitions.

Conclusion

One of the most interesting findings, from both the interviews and the surveys, is the extent to which ideas of search and collection seem to overlap. I think this raises questions about role of collection in an age of resource discovery and suggests that these are related, complementary concepts.

My initial findings do seem to suggest that ‘collection’ continues to be a useful term. Library and information practitioners and people involved in social enterprise seem to share complex, nuanced understandings of the term.

I have recently been looking at how these ideas of collection as thing, access and process could potentially be linked to existing collection development and management hierarchies (Corrall and Roberts, 2012). This includes:

- **Collection as thing** suggesting ways of thinking about collection strategy;
- **Collection as access** suggesting ways to think about tactics;
- **Collection as process** offering a way of thinking about the operational level of collection development and management.

I believe that by interpreting the term ‘collection’ in a more dynamic way, it should be possible to maximise its relevance in the digital world. This might provide new ways of approaching emerging practical issues affecting library collections.

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Further information about this project

Open access publications about this project include:

Corrall, S. & Roberts, A. (2012). "Information resource development and 'collection' in the digital age: conceptual frameworks and new definitions for the network world". *Libraries in the Digital Age (LIDA) 2012*, [Online].
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I also blog about my research at: <http://digitalworldcollections.blogspot.com>.

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