

Destroying the Town in Order to Save It:

Access Implications of Migration of Physical Holdings to Repository and Digital Collections

James A. (Jimi) Wilson

University of North Carolina-Greensboro

## Introduction

In the current socio-technological environment, information professionals can expect to be challenged to meet needs that are rapidly changing. These considerations include adapting to library users' changing usage habits and expectations, some of which prove to be quite challenging and most of which will result in some type of tradeoff with respect to meeting the needs of a heterogeneous user population. In considering whether and how to approach space-maximizing projects, it becomes necessary to also consider the implications of removing physical volumes from the brick-and-mortar library facilities, and how such a move might impact users. Remotely-accessed physical or digital assets. This paper, then, will attempt to apply the findings of a theoretical action research study to the problems of equal access to remotely-accessed assets—maintained digitally or held in one or more repositories—and whether such schema are likely to improve or worsen access issues.

With the growth of libraries' physical collections—and in a virtually exponential manner where serials in particular are concerned—adaptive techniques have allowed for management of materials while attempting to maximize users' access. Accordion-like telescoping shelves, for example, allow expansion of the number of shelving units in a given space by reducing the need for passages between all but those shelves a user or employee is accessing at any particular time. Digitization of held assets and access to a growing number of new digital assets including exclusively digital journals and digitized archives means that shelf-occupying physical items may be confined a smaller number of libraries or branches, archived in repositories, or discarded.

In addition to the need or desire to slow the growth of physical collections in finite spaces, there is also an ostensible need to create more space for study areas, patron-accessible computers, labs, and other “community” resources that (further) render library facilities as a “third place” space. This pressure, when paired with the often piecemeal measures meant to reduce the space taken up by physical volumes sometimes leads to more ambitious projects such as repositories in which holdings are removed to remote locations for storage and/or digitization.

One such holdings management solution is Florida Academic Repository (FLARE) at the University of Florida Libraries, which catalogs and maintain low-circulation items for University of Florida and other libraries across the state, thereby reducing space needed by contributing libraries. Low-circulation volumes considered redundant to the entire system may be disposed of by contributing institutions, volumes sent to the repository may be trayed for recall via interlibrary loan, and/or be digitized if digital volumes are not already available of that item. Older materials are still available in interlibrary loans, but are handled separately by FLARE staff, and generally are efficiently sent to libraries or patrons requesting them. Reduction of redundant and low-circulation materials saves space and even money for member-institutions and digitization of materials not already digitized can be streamlined for member-libraries through the concentrated efforts of the host institution. These selling features certainly are appealing. But ethical questions still need to be addressed.

At first glance, the types of space-optimizing repository projects entailed herein may not appear to be explicitly ethical in their orientation. These are largely issues that require a practical solution practical and ethical issues cannot be completely disentangled. Any solution proposed will have consequences—many of which are quite unintended—that raise ethical questions. Repositories that emphasize access to holdings that were previously held in physical format

locally but that now are stored in remote locations—either through provision of volumes through interlibrary loan or similar programs, or through access to digital—potentially deny access to some authorized users even as they attempt to maximize information access options.

### **Literature Review**

Literature reviewed for this study includes discussion of ethical questions addressed—in particular problems related to the so-called “digital divide” as it relates to access to, and usage of, digitized materials that might formerly have been more easily accessible to user in physical format. Also considered are resources related more directly to repository models that presuppose remote storage of digital and physical volumes. Thus, what will be considered is a broader question of access, and then a more specific focus on that issue’s impact on the repository model with a specific focus on its application in the example of FLARE.

As already noted, the ethical elements addressed herein primarily revolve around the question of whether the repository-and-digital resources model puts a burden on users who lose access to physical volumes. In particular, the question of whether the digital divide is relevant in 2015 (especially with respect to academic library users), or whether the digital divide—defined by DiMaggio and Hargittai as “inequality between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ differentiated by dichotomous measures of access to or use of the new technologies” (2001) has been overcome significantly. DiMaggio and Hargittai argued as early as the beginning of the millennium that the initial digital divide had been increasingly supplanted by a “digital inequality,” characterized not merely by “differences in access, but also to inequality among persons with formal access to the Internet” in terms of “equipment, autonomy of use, skill, social support, and the purposes for which the technology is employed” (2001).

In a paper published last year, however, Horrigan opted for abandoning the notion of a digital divide in favor of highlighting users' lack of "digital readiness"—that is "the capacity for people to engage with online resources with full information about service attributes and use of personal and household data" (2014). For his part, Horrigan, who has been a featured speaker on the American Library Association's 2014 "Time to Retire the Digital Divide" panel, argued that past concerns about the digital divide aren't as relevant as the lack of digital skills, with the digital divide diminishing in size but with digital skills remaining a "sizable for some time" (2014). "If history is any guide," he wrote, "two things will happen. First, some people with online access and low digital readiness will graduate to a level of higher digital competence. Second, those without access will come online, but will low levels of digital skills. This will replenish the pool of those with low levels of digital readiness" (2014).

Cahron agreed with the shifts, but still prefers to speak broadly in terms of the digital divide, adding, "Although digital literacy is one of the main points of conversation in the digital divide today, it is important to note how new technologies are changing the dynamic of the conversation where literacy is concerned. While digital literacy is prevalent in digital divide research today, it is also interesting to view the impact of mobile technologies in closing both the access and literacy divides" (2015). In academic environments where users usually have a greater level of digital literacy and are rarely without mobile technologies, it seems reasonable to assume that access issues exist but are much lower than in the population at large. The rub is, of course, academic users' need for access is more acute.

Public sources for research immediately relevant to emplacement of a repository scheme, and FLARE in particular, are scarce, and what little is available for use in this paper has come from websites for organizations such as the Council of State University Libraries, the Digital

services and shared collections at the University of Florida Libraries website, Florida Academic Repository (FLARE) at the University of Florida Libraries, Journal Retention and Needs Listing (JRNL) at the University of Florida Libraries, The Harvard Depository (which is a model for controlled-climate repository storage), and the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries' (ASERL) statements of cooperative journal retention.

Most of the available data focuses on the pragmatics of storage and not the ethical implications of removal of physical volumes from libraries and digitization, but some discussion does exist particularly under the auspices of JRNL. For example, ASERL statement of cooperative journal retention emphasizes the organization's opinion that, far from discarding physical volumes of journals and replacing them with digital resources, their mission is to maximize retention through use of repositories, noting that for retained materials not sent to the repository, "The participating library shall maintain all of the designated journals in their original, artefactual form whenever possible. If necessary because of damage to or loss of the original of any of the materials, a hard copy facsimile may be used to fill in gaps," and only non-circulating or extremely low-circulating materials need be considered for deposit. (Association of Southeastern Research Libraries, 2014)

### **Methodology**

This impact study accepts as its methodology predominantly qualitative measures—with some quantitative elements—used to establish the ethics and efficacy of the shift to a remote access to physical repository and increasing digital holdings. Questions related to the ethical considerations that arise when considering such schema can run the gamut, six questions proposed by Mason et al. (1995), cited by Carbo (2008), provides a good starting point for consideration in ethics-related dialogues—questions which relate not only to information-access

advocacy but which are broad enough to be applied to virtually any issue wherein ethical considerations might be entailed: 1. What are the facts? 2. What ethical principles, standards, or norms should be applied? 3. Who should decide? 4. Who should benefit from the decision? 5. How should the decision be made? 6. What steps should be taken to prevent this issue from occurring again?

As noted, the ethical questions related to academic library repository-and-digitization projects largely revolve around questions of access, and digital access in particular. The decisions have largely been made from a top-down library-and-administration approach with some stakeholder input, with the needs of the user community in mind. Decisions in the case of FLARE were made, again, from a top-down library-and-administration approach with the state legislature providing final approval and funding. The final question seems odd in light of the focus on the pragmatics of the project noted throughout the previous responses, but since the ethical question had been an implication of the project, the ultimate response as an ethical matter is a critical one when altered slightly for the occasion: Have the steps improved the problems of digital access and/or literacy, and if not, what can be done to ameliorate them? This final compound question is of critical importance, and for the academic communities involved, it seems likely that the libraries can help aid access, but ultimately need partners to help ensure that access is not an issue for users, be they students, faculty, or other authorized users.

Additionally, the following more situation-specific questions might be proposed: Are the decisions of what to archive in a proposed repository arbitrary across disciplines? If not, how are decisions made and how might they disadvantage some users based upon the change in access structures? Also relevant are questions more specifically related to usage statistics and polls. In general, if physical holdings are redundant or seldom used, their removal “from the stacks” in

order to digitize them or place them in remote locations for as-needed recall is less likely to impact user access along socio-economic, technological, and/or geographic fault lines. Usage statistics made be collated and examined to reveal patterns of access to already-online assets, then, in order to determine the likely impact on users and, weigh the practical and ethical merits of engaging in such an endeavor. If available, demographics of usage are helpful and may further shed light on which items are best suited for migration. Library staff and faculty might even have their own recommendations for retained or repositied materials.

So, top-down approaches such as analysis of usage data can be helpful, certainly. However, blind spots exist in such usage data—and that is assuming that they exist and have reliably gauged what they were intended to measure. Since such data generally measure only items checked out or accessed online, patrons' in-house usage is likely to be unavailable for unrestricted items. Here, user surveys might also be helpful, especially if they are provided to both online and in-person patrons. This bottom-up approach might mix a combination of open- and closed-answer questions. What do users say they prefer? Which types of materials are accessed but not checked out, for example? Which types of materials are considered indispensable? Are there preferences for digital over print? If so, under what conditions those preferences might change? Are you having problems accessing certain materials?

### **Results Anticipated**

That increased digitization can result in greater access to materials by those with internet access is hardly a controversial claim. No longer do patrons need to step foot in a brick-and-mortar library facility during operating hours to access materials provided that those materials are digitized and those users have internet access. As has been illustrated by previously-conducted impact research, however, such approaches to collection management can deny access

to users on the downside of the digital divide. Furthermore, even for users with internet, repositories reduce access to physical materials that have been moved to remote locations but not digitized—particularly when the user’s need is more immediate—can mean loss of access if an asset is needed more immediately.

It is certainly the case with increased digitization that users with online access may gain instantaneous access to volumes heretofore only available through access to the physical volumes at a library facility or through interlibrary loan. The likelihood that shared-storage regimes can increase overall user access without significantly denying access to most users acceptable in most state university settings is high if the pragmatics of space optimization with optimal access for “typical” users is the primary consideration. Proven success in one case may not translate into others, even if it is a good indicator, however. Rather, these regimes must be considered and possibly employed by considering the needs of their particular users. Continued employment of user surveys and monitoring of asset use will likely indicate the relative success or failure of the digital-and-repository to meet all users’ needs. Continued or increased use of and/or access to low-use materials following removal from stacks may give a better indication not only of the program’s success. Coupled with user surveys, such data might also help confirm whether fears over continued or increased lack of access come to fruition.

Meanwhile, better use of resources made available through the freeing of physical space taken up by low-circulation holdings definitely provides libraries an opportunity to add more technology-based resources, study spaces, and so on. It is possible that the freed spaces may even be devoted to ensuring that users marginalized by a lack of digital readiness are given greater opportunities to adapt through introduction of digital workshop spaces with specialized instruction.

## Conclusion

This paper addresses ethical issues as they relate to programs intended primarily to solve space-use issues, and not programs directed primarily at ameliorating ethical implications of access per se. It may be anticipated, based upon the example of the Florida Academic Repository (FLARE), that similar projects/regimes will provide a cost-effective approach to space-optimization of primarily library facilities improved value for the greatest number of users provided those users have access to internet-capable devices and services, and the knowledge to use them. Digitization of library holdings is necessarily a tradeoff, and one that can negatively impact users depending upon their access to internet technologies devices and services, and their ability to utilize them effectively. In other words, those on the downside of the digital divide or the digital readiness divide may face less, not more, overall access. Since these are academic institutions being addressed, however, it is likely that users are younger and are able to afford, or have been afforded, computers and internet access, and very often are close to campus libraries. These rates are not established in the case of the University of Florida libraries or the larger FLARE-affiliated academic-user community, but if general demographics are to be taken into account, extrapolating from Horrigan's (2014) observations of national demographics, the repository's authorized users as among the most likely to be able to access the digitized materials, so while the various digital access and literacy divides may remain, FLARE's users are probably not nearly as likely to be negatively impacted as the population at large would be if the repository were a public library asset.

Drawbacks remain, though. The lack of eyes-on access to materials not yet digitized will remain a drawback even for users not subjects to lack of digital access or readiness. Loss of eyes-on access to resources for those that are not digitized means that items must be recalled from

repositories, and in cases where users do not know for sure if the material they seeks is the right one. Alas, this has long been an issues with “inter-library loan roulette,” and it does seem an acceptable concession given the increase in other services FLARE-affiliated libraries are able to provide.

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