Future, or Memory: Japanese Studies Librarianship in the 21st Century

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FUTURE, OR MEMORY:  
JAPANESE STUDIES LIBRARIANSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Introduction

I hope my title does not sound too alarmist. But there is no question that "change" is here and happening fast in the world of Information, in which academic libraries hold a vital stake. An article entitled 'Deserted Library' appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education in late 2001.² I was struck by its report of the decline of physical library usage and the emerging cases of students graduating without entering libraries. I was left wondering, where are we now and where are we heading? I share here my thoughts about our profession, in hopes that these might give rise to some tools that can help us navigate through, and make a useful difference in, this ever-changing universe.

Factors

There is abundant literature on major changes underway in academic libraries,³ and ARL statistics⁴ show steady declines in reference transactions and circulation. These trends are slower to be seen in East Asian libraries, perhaps because we handle materials originating in East Asia, where academic publishing remains mostly print based. But they are coming. We see them in four areas, three of them common to all academic libraries (scholarly communication, library users, library services) and one specific to our area (Japanese studies resources). We work within institutions dedicated to learning and research, and we need to fully understand the larger context no less than we understand our own Japanese resources.

I would like to further investigate these four overlapping landscapes.

Scholarly communication

Scholarly communication is in the midst of a profound transformation in most of the world. Practices like print-on-demand and e-books are becoming the norm in U.S. academic publishers. The Open Access movement was highly energized by the National Institute of Health’s announcement in February 2005 that the institution will make NIH-funded research publicly accessible. The Institutional Repository has become a must-have project in major research institutions. Social publishing like wikipedia and blogs are mushrooming. All of these are impacting scholarly communication and how libraries disseminate scholarly output. Some predict the result may be the end of commercial academic publishing as we know it.⁵ Cornell University’s Internet-First University Press, which will allow scholars to download a book or article

¹ This paper was originally presented at the annual session of the CEAL Committee on Japanese materials held on 31 March 2005 in Chicago, Illinois.
for free while charging a fee for printing and binding, could be one model. Libraries need to adapt to these changes and even actively participate in projects like Institutional Repository to be true to our mission of enhancing research and learning.

The Japanese publishing world remains print-dominant, but this does not justify business as usual for us. Things are changing in Japan, albeit slowly. Perhaps more importantly, our users—who work and produce in North American academia—expect our library service to operate at a level and by standards that are familiar to them elsewhere in academic libraries. If not, they’ll find their own workarounds. Now that information can flow regardless of time and location at a lesser cost, we Japanese studies librarians should make best use of these advantages in our services.

Users

Let me try to profile the individuals who are emerging as the central patrons of our library services. These are Net Generation students who are comfortable with the virtual environment and travel freely from one device to another, or use them simultaneously. While reading Genji monogatari in print or on screen, she checks images of Genji monogatari-emaki scrolls, and an English translation, on the web. She uses her iPod not only for music, but for language instruction, or to listen to a prime minister’s speech for a History assignment or audiobooks available through a program like NetLibrary. And this new user is nocturnal—most e-mails I receive from students are written between 1 and 4 a.m. Next September Harvard’s Lamont undergraduate library will be open 24 hours daily with a café, in response to student demand.

My 14-year-old son in a public high school is learning how to cite web resources in his papers; the Internet is his first and primary source of information for the papers he writes. Is current information literacy instruction still relevant to these teenagers soon to be college students? How about our mind-set for library services?

Net Gen students are, in the words of Joan Lippincott, “accustomed to multimedia environments: figuring things out for themselves without consulting manuals; working in groups; and multitasking.” She emphasizes that “These qualities differ from those found in traditional library environments, which, by and large, are text-based, require learning the system from experts (Librarians), were constructed for individual use, and assume that work progresses in a logical, linear fashion.”

Emerging users are format agnostic content consumers who expect to access information 24/7 wherever there is an Internet-accessible device. Libraries, on the other hand, still make a clear distinction between formats and apply rules accordingly in delivering content. Our emerging users tend to skip library web pages and go straight to Google or similar search engines when they start their research. Amazon’s “search inside the book” feature helps savvy content consumers determine relevancy and fits well with Net Gen users’ information-seeking behavior. And we see that behavior every day among our patrons—at least those who come in. Instead of lamenting that quality information in and through libraries is untapped, we need to find ways to connect our users to that quality information.

Library vs. cyberspace

The library and cyberspace differ in many ways. The library is about order, the World Wide Web is chaotic. The library holds semantically dense data, organized in a highly structured system through which librarians

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help guide and orient patrons to needed information. The web distributes every kind of information, with little order; search engines will turn up anything a search term lights on. It’s all up to the user; there are no expert guides. True, search engines yield pretty good results even for the average user, but the results are unpredictable. Haphazard, you might say; or serendipitous. As a virtue, unpredictability is something a formal library search method can’t really offer. It has doubtless contributed to the interdisciplinary and comparative nature of academic research.

Now add search tools like Google Scholar and Open WorldCat, which fully integrate a library information infrastructures system behind the scene, without sacrificing ease-of-use. What incentive is there for Net Gen users to learn how to use library systems? What will it be like once Google digitizes the entirety of the University of Michigan library? The organization system of the conventional library is entirely inadequate to help navigate through these millions of pages. We may need to adopt a totally new approach. Librarians need to embrace fruits of both library science and information science.

Network environment

Libraries have been providing new services to meet new needs and address changes in the information environment. The library portal is an essential infrastructure used not only to house a library management system such as an OPAC and cataloging utilities but also to provide access to digital contents, although less frequently to audiovisual content. The library portal is increasingly interconnected with other campus network systems such as digital object management system, metasearch system, linker, and ILL. Interconnectivity of these systems is an essential basis of emerging new library services. Common services like authentication and authorization are shared throughout campus network for various purposes including library database access and financial transactions.

Collaboration in network environment

Under the interconnected and distributed campus network, various projects to support learning and research are being developed.

Institutional Repository, first started in late 2000 in UK, is quickly gaining popularity in U.S. research institutions. For example, MIT’s DSpace is a general-purpose repository to capture the intellectual output of that research institute. Now many academic libraries are using this program with goals like self-archiving of institutional research, management of digital collections, preservation of digital materials, housing of teaching materials, and electronic publishing. In the development of an Institutional Repository, librarians need to work as part of a collaborative team with information technologists, archivists, faculty, and university administrators, and in some cases with local government officials and community members. Working as a team with cultural differences brought by participants is not an easy challenge to overcome. Institutional Repositories face complex questions about organizational resources and strategies, and about roles and responsibilities, and their effectiveness and success still remain to be seen. Clifford Lynch, IT visionary and a head of Coalition for Networked Information, warns that preservation is a major built-in challenge for Institutional Repository.7

The concept of “open access” --with its aim to reduce the economic barrier to scholarly output— is somewhat connected to Institutional Repository discussion of establishing standards and protocols.

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Harvard's Open Collection Programs and ARL initiated SPARC (Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition) are examples based on this concept. Whereas Institutional Repository covers all formats in all disciplines, open access enables public access to discipline-based archives. But like Institutional Repository, open access also requires collaboration among specialists and librarians.

E-learning or course management systems are also being swiftly adopted in classrooms in order to manage a course's electronic elements. L-commons, Class Web, Blackboard, and WebCT are popular e-learning software and widely used in the US classrooms. Academic computing staff and library staff do not routinely collaborate in course web sites, yet collaboration in this area would afford librarians a critical opportunity to learn about users' needs first-hand, and we must seek to be involved. Learning objects used in course web sites are archived in Institutional Repository for repurposing in other courses. We can find a fine example of East Asian studies course web sites created through the ExEAS (Expanding East Asian Studies) Program in Columbia University.

Emerging Library services

Inter Library Loan is the only area of growth among academic library services, according to ARL statistics. It is undergoing rapid transformation. User-initiated ILL like "Borrow Direct" among East Coast libraries has proven itself to library administrators and to users alike, in terms of reduced cost, time and miscommunication. For the user, ILL is a means of accessing desired content not held locally, quickly and accurately.

Digital document delivery (DDD) is a logical expansion of ILL that is now gaining momentum. Just this month, the University of Tokyo library launched e-DDS, its electronic document delivery service, to registered users. The British Library's famous document supply service now offers two-hour delivery for articles. Japan's National Diet Library is seeking a way to accomplish DDD while complying with the copyright law. In an ideal world, the majority of ILL requests would be initiated by users and delivered through DDD without involving an intermediary.

I mentioned earlier that few Library Portals deliver digital audio-visual content of the sort we're becoming used to with Netflix, for example. Yet Yale, Duke and two other universities are now pilot testing a similar service called Cflix. For our users--format agnostic information consumers--this would be only a natural extension of library service like NetLibrary.

Guided access to content is a decreasing part of library service, according to OCLC's Environmental Scan 2003. Libraries should make every effort to implement DDD in ILL. If we fail to realize this, format-agnostic information consumers will turn to wherever possible including commercial vendors. The National Diet Library accepts credit cards for payment; this is a great improvement, but symbolizes too a sea change toward user-oriented service. Can we follow their lead?

Format-agnostic information transactions through the library are growing, while library circulation and reference activity is in decline. Need this be the case? When we see an article or web site that might be useful for a certain patron we could send it as an attachment, or URL link via e-mail. A table of contents alert service was just launched at Harvard: this is an example of a new kind of reference support. While not well reflected in current statistics, surely the importance of these new types of services is increasing.

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8 Expanding East Asian Studies Program (ExEAS) http://www.exeas.org/about.html.
Japanese studies resources

Japanese academic publishers are slow to offer digital content beyond CD and DVD formats. Because most CD and DVD products are run by proprietary software and impose strict usage conditions, it is nearly impossible to use them in network environments. Japan’s top newspaper publisher still refuses to sell old newspapers in CD to US academic libraries to avoid potential copyright and other legal risks. Japanese ebook count is now at about 15,000 titles, but few of these are academic.

Last year a Japanese national institution tried to create an online union catalog of Japanese rare books held outside of Japan. Everything was ready, but the project was shelved because of opposition from a publisher who puts out a series of catalogs with the same content. There is a profound gap between users’ expectation and what publishers offer. It is our role to advocate users’ needs and keep sending these publishers wake-up calls.

Academic digital content is more actively being developed outside the publishing sector.

National Diet Library is the largest source of digital academic content in Japan. Through its Electronic Library project, it offers 55,000 volumes of Meiji period monographs. One can access this vast repository 24/7, wherever you are; this is an immense benefit, particularly to scholars outside of Japan.

National Institute of Informatics develops and offers digital academic content including NACSIS Cat and NACSIS-ELS as well as building infrastructure for academic information flow. NII’s information scientists are now leading Japan’s academic computing.

Japanese universities and academic institutions also are striving to digitize their holdings of unique and rare materials and to make these accessible through their web sites. University of Tokyo’s Historiographical Institute, Kyoto University library, National Institute of Japanese Literature, International Research Center for Japanese Studies are only a few of many. They are now essential resources for Japanese studies. However these resources are very much independent and there seems little organized effort to establish standards and protocols to connect each other, not to mention effort to develop a comprehensive preservation policy. DOI (Digital Object Identifier) is not being used. Perhaps NII can help in this area.

There are numerous grass-roots web sites that are valuable for Japanese studies. “Aozora bunko” is Japanese version of project Gutenberg, for example. As Japanese studies evolve and enter new fields such as pop culture and cinema, the labor-of-love web sites put together by individuals often provide unique contents and useful information.

What we should aspire to do?

After my journey of library landscape, I have a few suggestions to make. Let’s try to see things from user’s point of view, or at least keep that perspective in mind when we make decisions in the library. Try to make our service ubiquitous. This does not mean to operate a physical library 24 hours, but make library contents flawlessly and seamlessly available. It’s our job to find ways. Team projects like Institutional Repository and course-management-system, literacy in information, collection and service architectures are obviously of critical importance: we need to learn these so that we can participate and contribute.

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9 In March 2005 when the paper was presented this was true. In April 2005 the company announced to sell the CD product in North America with some conditions. Whether these conditions are acceptable for US libraries remains to be seen as of late May 2005.
Lastly, try to be a good collaborator. Since we are working in an interconnected environment as I described earlier, opportunities for collaboration outside of the library will only increase.

As Japanese studies librarians, we will naturally be invited to join the next open access project focusing on film studies, for example. Working with experts in other fields in a team will afford us new ways of thinking and/or solving problems. And we’ll return to the library as catalysts and agents of change.

21st Century Academic Library

As a conclusion of my inquiry, let me imagine the near-future of 21st century academic library. It will continue to be a central space in campus for students and researchers to read and research. This social aspect of library space will remain important especially for group study. Only contents that are not digitized are physically consulted by users, however.

While users are quietly reading, or tapping a keyboard at the library’s public space, librarians are busy working behind the scene to make library services ubiquitous and fully integrated. One of the new challenges is to work with large amounts of unstructured materials on the Web. Areas of concerns include digital objects management, preservation metadata, content packaging and applications standards. It is clear that we need to collaborate with information technologists to make the library fit for 21st century users.

Library service and information technologies will be seamlessly merged to deliver information to our users.

While entering this new territory, it may be useful to affirm a fundamental role of our profession as stated by Peter Drucker: “Your business is finding, defining, and transmitting information that allows others to be effective.”

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10 Keynote speech, Special Libraries Association Annual Conference, June 10 2002 in Los Angeles.