



"Thomas F. Staley's roundtable discussion" in "Rare book and manuscript libraries in the twenty-first century, Part two, Session four: Roundtable discussion (four perspectives)"

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Thomas F. Staley

Anniversaries celebrate the past, and this occasion, which marks fifty years in the life of a great research library, has not been an exception. Situated as we are, however, in the last decade of a century, the speakers at this conference, while mindful of the past achievements of research libraries as cultural and social institutions, have pointed to the enormous challenges as well as the opportunities that lie before us, and in different ways they have looked to the complex forces that will influence our future. There has been much to digest, much with which to agree, and—perhaps—much with which to disagree as well. But for us to fail to take into account many of the cautions, explanations, and predictions is to ensure that future anniversaries of the Houghton Library and its peer institutions will not be marked by the same level of achievement that we have celebrated during these past two days.

The great advances in technology that are changing our institutions dramatically—and that will continue to do so in exponential proportions in the next century—have been spelled out remarkably well by a number of our speakers, but we have also heard clearly that we are in the middle of many other transformations so basic that it is difficult to grasp their implications. For example, the fundamental reordering of academic disciplines dictates fundamental changes for libraries to the extent that curators, librarians, and directors find themselves in a similar situation to Eliot's Prufrock, whose "visions" are fated to be merely "revisions." Yet unlike Prufrock, we who are committed to our institutions must grasp the situation and adapt. This message has been a leitmotif running through the papers we have heard.

In order to seize upon advances and opportunities, we must be aware of the shifting paradigms and assumptions in the disciplines we serve. At the Ransom Center, for example, changes in the transmission of the word have special importance. We have long assumed, as Harry Ransom himself did, that the written materials we collect, the precursors to final publication, are essential to the study of the creative process. In notebooks, journals, diaries, letters, drafts, false starts, we have a progressive view of the development of a literary work. Will our tacit assumption about the centrality of these materials for literary research be called into question when an author's entire archive arrives on slim compact discs as a finished, revised opus to be viewed on a screen? Such questions as this will arise often as the forms for transmission of the word change. We must make ourselves more aware of the deeper philosophical and structural implications these changes have for us. Both Bliss Carnochan and Stanley Katz spoke to these points in their remarks.

One very clear fact that overrides nearly everything else, however, and requires no seer's predictions, is the state of our increasingly constrained budgets. The ramifications of our hazardous financial condition and our diminished prospects are multiple. As resources flatten or drop, fewer periodicals, less staffing—less, less, less. There is an increased focus on quantitative issues; budgetary constraints have spawned an emphasis on the image of performance and service, pointing up the fact that we are measured by quantitative standards. Number of volumes, number of items, linear feet, items cataloged, number of patrons served: we gather these quantitative measurements not so much for ourselves, but for administrators, legislators, and the interested public. But we need to develop qualitative as well as quantitative measures to determine the success and value of our collections, services, and programs to provide a more complete picture of ourselves.



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A third issue addressed only partially here touches on the two points I have made, and that is our changing scholarly communication system. Envision this: a workstation for everyone, for all information needed, universal terminals that can handle multimedia in all formats, universal access to databases regardless of user and resource location. A researcher's dream! But amid these visions we must also see the cost of making these new resources available, and the rapid obsolescence of the technology that delivers these miracles of retrieval. We must retain some skepticism regarding the myth that technology will solve all our problems. Most faculty members and administrators possess an oversimplified view of the future library as one without books—an absurdity that we will continue to confront in the future. Think for a moment of how dramatically we must overhaul our own institutional environments if we are to begin to be part of the technological future. Technology will serve us, but there is a widespread lack of vision about how we get from here to there, especially who's going to pay the bill. Directors of major institutions need to shape this vision. In other words, we need to articulate clearly our vision in harmony with institutional goals and influence those goals and the budget.

In spite of the new opportunities with their concomitant problems, many of the old problems remain. I'm so happy that my colleague Nicolas Barker earlier told us that we've solved the problem of deacidification, because when you have a twentieth-century collection, you have yellow dust all around you. This problem cannot be ignored; reformatting is a poor second best. Yet the costs of conservation of twentieth-century materials are astronomical. Our conservation department, for example, spent 875 hours deacidifying the galley proofs and page proofs of *Ulysses* because they were crumbling along all the edges; every time scholars used them, one could see dust on the table and fragments of paper that had broken off. When you remember that Joyce wrote twenty-five percent of *Ulysses* in the margins, you realize that you are losing the textual insertions that he made by hand. In libraries we speak of permanence, yet we are confronted with decay.

During so many of these stimulating presentations I had a recurring base and vulgar concern: to face many of our problems we need creativity, vision, and perspicacity but also, alas, funding. I don't know about other directors of research institutions associated with universities, but I would say that last year fifty to sixty percent of my time was spent in fundraising. But our task as directors is more basic. The role and value of the research library in our culture has to be articulated time and time again to many publics both within and outside the university and the academic community. What I feel is incumbent upon us as we work with our staff members and patrons and donors is to share the vision of our central role in the culture. You can call it development, or maybe it is public relations—call it what you like—but research centers have a tremendous contribution to make within the culture and our speakers at this conference have made that abundantly clear to us. We must articulate that role to our supporters, present and future.