CHAPTER 3

Collection Development Policies for Theological Libraries in the Digital Era

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In 2011, Rick Andersen predicted that "it seems highly likely that the very idea of the 'collection' will be overhauled if not obviated over the next ten years, in favor of more dynamic access to a virtually unlimited flow of information products" (215). In Andersen's view, there would still be collections in 2021, but the day-to-day significance of those collections would generally be seen as minimal. Few theological librarians today would confirm the validity of this prediction: creating organized, accessible, and durable collections for researchers and students remains central to the work of the theological library. In the network context, our collections are not disappearing, but they can be made more visible, retrievable and immediately accessible, and thus more valuable and useful than ever before. But the notion of what these collections are is changing, and with it the notion of collection development.

In the last decade, theological libraries have felt the impact of the transition towards a digital network environment. The notion of collection first extended in the 1990s from ‘owned’ print collections to ‘licensed’ electronic collections. Undoubtedly this entailed significant adjustments in the areas of acquisition modes, accessibility and preservation, but at the same time both collection types—owned versus licensed—were ‘traditional’ outcomes of research in the sense that libraries acquire this content from publishers and make it available for their registered users only (outside-in movement). A more profound shift is the increased importance of materials that present an inside-out challenge for the library, such as special collections and institutional output, and materials that are freely accessible on the Web (Dempsey 2014, 402). Especially the latter type of materials mean that the scope of the collection is no longer defined by any single location or site but is extended to “a cloud of distributed resources in a variety of places around the globe that are made centrally available via the library” (Horava 2010, 151). The new collection directions challenge the traditional collection-building assumptions of permanence, control, and relative comprehensiveness, and urge us to reformulate our practices of selecting, acquiring, and/or giving access to collections (143).

Before the breakthrough of the digital network environment, collection development was the core task of academic libraries: they aspired to acquire all literature on all aspects of their discipline and did not fundamentally cooperate with other libraries in terms of collection development. Collection development policies have their origins in this print era. Libraries started to develop formal collection development policies in the 1960s, when budget fluctuations and management pressures made them look more closely at their priorities (Vickery 2004, 337). In 1979, the American Library Association Collection Development Committee issued “Guidelines for Collection Development” to support libraries in creating useful and effective collection development policies. In 1989 and 1996, these guidelines were updated and published as the “Guide for Written Collection Development Policy Statements.” Its conspectus model was the standard of proactive and well-planned collection building, providing a framework for describing the collection in terms of current and intended levels of collection in specific subject classes. Five collecting levels are identified in the conspectus—minimal, basic, study, research, and comprehensive (Van Zijl 1998, 104). The main issue was to guarantee a balanced collection with regard to subjects in accordance with the library's mission and the expectations of its user body. The conspectus model is still relevant today to guide the selection of content—provided the library continues to uphold a just-in-case purchasing policy—but has to be complemented with policies addressing the shifts in collection development today.

In the late 1990s, the importance of updating written collection development policies was emphasized in view of the integration of electronic resources, which were growing very rapidly. In 2001, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) issued its "Guidelines for a Collection Development Policy Using the Conspectus Model," taking into account the need to deal more adequately with non-print and electronic forms of information and access/ownership issues in collection development. But, since 1996 (ALA guide) and 2001 (IFLA guidelines), no such guides have been published that take into account the development and changes in the landscape of scholarly communication and publishing over the last two decades. Nonetheless, given the complexity and variety of collections today, the need for a collection development policy as a decision-making tool seems as evident as a business plan for a business (cf. Johnson 2009, 72). The reasons listed by IFLA in 2001 for investing in a written policy on collection development are still valid in the era of a digital network environment: (1) providing guidance in selecting and deselecting resources, (2) underpinning of future planning, thereby assisting in determining priorities for allocation of budgets, (3) supporting public relations towards stakeholders, and (4) serving as a basis for wider cooperation, even internationally (IFLA 2001, 1–2).

It is not our intention to give a detailed overview of what a collection development policy should look like today. This will vary greatly depending on the mission and goals of the library and the needs of its users. But there are some things that are best included. First of all, an introductory section explains the mission and goals of the library. It remains interesting to add here a history of the collection, its strengths and gaps, and the desired levels of collection depth and breadth. Here it is important to clarify the concept of 'collection' and to indicate which materials can be considered as potential components of the collection, e.g., specific types of open access materials or research data. The main part of the collection development policy should not consist in detailed guidelines for selection, acquisition, weeding etc., but should define fundamental options of the library with regard to such things as format (electronic or print), acquisition models, allocation of budget, digitization priorities, and accessibility for each of the defined collection components.

For an academic library in theology, a subdivision in collection types could be useful to structure a collection development policy: published, purchased, and licensed materials; open access collections (including institutional output); and heritage/legacy collections.

Published, Purchased, and Licensed Materials

This collection type concerns the traditional outcome of research, published in books or journals and acquired by libraries according to the outside-in model. Some crucial and highly interrelated issues that should be discussed in the collection development policy are the print-to-electronic shift, the preferred acquisition models, and preservation implications.

The print-to-electronic shift in libraries clearly needs to be strategized and managed explicitly (cf. Pinfield 2017, 24). Theological libraries do not necessarily want to move to an entirely electronic research collection. Print can be considered important to allow serendipitous discovery through browsing or can have other attributes that make print superior to electronic versions (Douglas 2011, 19). For instance, print is cheaper to purchase, provides better guarantees of long-term preservation, and is better suited for reflective or intense reading. Still, it is important that the policy of the library provides a clear direction and a basis for action. A policy could be to acquire reference works, handbooks, e-textbooks, collected essays, conference proceedings, and festschrifts in an electronic version if available, while scholarly monographs are purchased in print (paperback for economic reasons), just as religious art books, which are not well suited for an electronic format. Major text editions can be purchased in both print and electronic format, as to allow for both text mining and intense reading.

There are a variety of acquisition models and each library should consider which model best suits its mission: does the library fulfill the function of a general acquirer in the field of theology (just-in-case collection building) or is it mainly a user library (just-in-time collection building)? Does the library have a preservation function or not? Depending on the answers to these questions, the library will choose whether to subscribe to journals in print or to license them singly or collaboratively ('big deals'). Similarly, the library will choose whether to purchase e-books using patron-driven models or evidence-based acquisition.

Open Access Literature

Open access literature is digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions (Suber 2012, 2). The figures for the overall prevalence of open access show that open access levels have increased steadily across all disciplines, from 20.4% of all scholarly outputs in 2008 to 23% in 2010 and more than one third of all scholarly outputs later than 2010 (Severin 2020, 5). Although the open access uptake in the humanities is lower than in most other fields, undeniably open access publications have become a focal point in the collection development of theological libraries. This trend will only increase in the coming years.

By selecting and making accessible these resources via catalog records and federated search tools, libraries are implicitly telling their patrons that the resources have met the library's standards of quality and relevance and are to be used alongside commercial, fee-based information resources. The provision of access via the library is a credentialing, deliberate function that has collection-related implications (Horava 2010, 144). Therefore, fundamental options with regard to systematically selecting, disclosing, and archiving open access content should be included in the collection development policy. As it does for purchased or licensed publications, the library selects or 'harvests' open access content in line with its collection profile. In this context, the collection development policy can play an important role in making agreements between large theological libraries about the systematic selection, effective dispensing, and sustainable preservation of open access content in line with their historically determined collection profiles. If the large libraries assume their role in this, it may have very beneficial effects on small or medium-sized libraries. As the mainstream collections become increasingly comprised of open access materials whose sustainable accessibility is assured by large libraries, small or medium-sized libraries can limit their collection building to complementary and specialized collections of books, journals, and databases needed by their users but not (yet) available in open access (cf. Kemp 2014, 389).

Deliberate decisions have to be made on the kind of open access items that are to be made available (e.g., only gold open access items with CC license) and which version is disclosed (e.g., only published version). The library must also decide whether to invest a part of the collection budget in strategically important open access projects, so that relevant open access collections are preserved and made accessible in a sustainable way. A library could, for instance, decide to put aside 2.5% of the total library budget to support open and community-owned infrastructure (Cf. Verbeke 2021).

Finally, decisions have to be made with regard to transformative agreements. Transformative agreements are publishing contracts that seek to transform the business model of scholarly publishing, namely to move from a subscription-based model where readers pay to read, to an open access model where writers pay to publish. These agreements represent a further shift away from a subscription-only model to one which covers both subscription payments (the "read" element of the agreement) and article processing charges (the "publish" element). Transformative agreements will require a substantial investment from academic institutions, as a kind of new form of big-deals packaging of scholarly communication (Verbeke, 2019). Therefore, caution is required and a well thought-out policy should be developed in this regard.

Finally, part of the open access policy of a library should concern its role in providing long-term access to institutional output (publications of staff, dissertations and research data, green open access materials) that can also be considered part of the collection.

Special and Legacy Collections

In the last decade, the value of special collections in the collection development policy of academic libraries has grown significantly. The reasons for this increased value are closely related to the breakthrough of a digital network environment. On the one hand, as electronic resources become increasingly available and the collections of large research libraries seem homogenized, special collections offer an opportunity to distinguish the identity of an academic library (Rossmann 2020, 633). A library that can make available online for research and education unique resources like rare books, manuscripts, or archives—clearly distinguishable from ubiquitous mainstream scholarly content—might set itself apart in attracting scholars and students (Clark 2014, 433). In a digital environment, these special collections undeniably become more and more iconic. More importantly, digitization and open licensing of digital cultural heritage has immensely increased access to special collections, bringing major benefits to research and education (Terras 2015). Whereas before digitization the use of special collections was mostly limited to the immediate community served by the library, access to this heritage content can now be opened up for the international scholarly community. The digitization of special collections has been an important step in facilitating theological research by providing convenient access to primary historical sources.

By 'legacy collections' is meant here "bibliographic items or collections which reflect that portion of a Library's holdings which is the result of former teaching, research and broader cultural collecting" (McCarthy 2007, 351). It is that part of the collection which is not rated either as special or highly functional and therefore not likely to be fully digitized in the long-term future.

With regard to special and heritage collections, the collection development policy should at least contain a policy regarding gifts and a policy regarding digitization and disclosure.

The acquisition of special and legacy collections is usually passive: they are donated by religious institutions or private persons. Not infrequently, these are extensive provenance collections, which therefore play an important role in the collection development of theological libraries, all the more so because the relevance of older publications remains high for historically oriented theological scholarship. Thus, theological libraries will often add offered collections to their collection and make them accessible as effectively as possible. Consequently, a collection development policy should include fundamental guidelines on, among other things, conditions for acceptance and criteria for deselection.

A collection development policy may also contain a plan of approach concerning the priorities to be set for digitizing special and legacy collections, the collection budget to be allocated, and the way in which the digitized content will be made available to the widest possible audience, taking into account copyright issues. This plan can turn these special and legacy collections of both large and smaller institutions into inside-out resources of the library collection and thereby provide an unique contribution to the development of the open access collection in the field of theology.

Conclusion

In the digital era, collection development policies should help us to address the fact that the former ideals of control, permanence, and relative exhaustivity in collection development have to be redefined. In a network environment, libraries are dependent on community-sourced solutions with regard to their basic functions of providing access to relevant content and preservation of this content for future generations, functions that were previously organized locally. What constitutes the library's collection is changing rapidly and thus its collection development strategy should be reprioritized. In order to continue to fulfill the library's role in collection development in an effective manner, many well-considered decisions are required regarding the selection of content, the choice of certain acquisition models, and the division of the collection budget between acquisition/licensing, investment in open infrastructure, and digitization. This increasing number of choices demands, among other things, an effective partnership between the library and the research community in the development of both collection and collection planning and collaboration with other libraries. Drawing up a collection development policy as an internal planning and decision-making tool and as a foundation for partnership and collaboration with external partners is therefore a valuable strategic objective.

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