Ten Commandments for Special Collections Librarians in the Digital Age

Jackie Dooley

Abstract

The speakers for “Rare and Special Bytes: Special Collections in the Digital Age,” the 2008 Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Preconference, presented an exceptional array of ideas and opportunities for our profession to consider as we confront the challenges of the digital age. The sands are shifting under our feet on an almost daily basis. How to keep up and make the best decisions going forward? Are there any basic principles to guide us toward the most productive responses and actions?

In this paper I propose ten principles. I freely admit that “principles” is too grand a word—perhaps they’re . . .

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In a digital age, failure could mean relinquishing our nascent collective agency to the machines themselves. The Process appears to have already begun.” Digital media are that different, and biased just as deeply. Just as the shift in the Axial age required us to contend with law, monotheism, ethics, accountability, and so on, the shift in the digital age will require us to contend with new sorts of collaboration, socialization, permanence, loss of privacy, change in our notions of individuality, and so on. The people of the Axial shift got Ten Commandments to help them contend with a world bound by written rules-laws. So I thought we all deserved ten commands to help us gain command over a world bound by programs. As for where to start, I put The digital world has forced us to think somewhat differently about the value of the library. Once we valued the library for the duplication it could sustain, as represented in the annual ranking of library volumes and acquisition expenditures. These data points told me that the book I wanted that I knew to be in the University of Illinois library was likely to also be in the Bancroft Library. Physical duplication of common titles proved to be the touchstone of library quality. Indeed, I can still remember the impressive repetition of the major university library acronyms in the entries of the National Union Catalog. Those eight or ten libraries whose initials always appeared under every citation were surely the best for they duplicated the most. In a digital world, no one cares who has the copy we find on line.