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IRs Rx for Libs? Possibly

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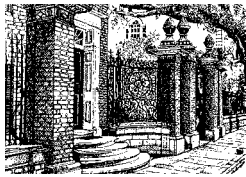
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Little Red Herrings — IRs Rx for Libs? Possibly.

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

Column Editor's Note: My thinking on this topic has been greatly aided and clarified by an excellent online course offered through **SOLINET** and conducted by **Kara McClurken**. — **MH**

Open access, or the idea anyway, came to life nearly a decade and a half ago. Now almost fifteen years later, we're still talking about it, still paying exorbitant amounts for periodicals, or their still relatively new counterparts, electronic aggregate databases. Experts tell me that fifteen years is not enough time for a good idea to catch on. I guess that's the way it is with **Murphy's Law**: bad ideas catch on instantly while good ideas come and go, most never seeing the light of day.

I'm not saying open access will not one day be the serial panacea (we Americans love one-best-ways or silver bullets for solutions to all our important problems, as witness the current presidential campaigns), but what do we do in the meantime? One place to look might be **IRs**, a.k.a. **institutional repositories**.

IRs have been around since the turn of the new century, or at least they have been talked about that long. Whether we define them as **SPARC** (**Scholarly Publishing and Academic**

Resources Coalition; see also <http://www.sparceurope.org/Repositories/>) has — a digital collection that preserves the intellectual content of one or numerous academic communities — or as **Clifford Lynch** has — a digital service to members of an academic community of its intellectual output — the idea is the same. Academic communities are responsible for creating enormous amounts of intellectual output, only a fraction of which see publication. This is as it should be since much of that work is in progress or always is in progress, and some is never meant as grist for the publishing mill. But unlike a house that is not very useful until it's completed, a good deal of intellectual output has "habitable" value while it undergoes the process toward any sort of formal publication. To mix a metaphor, bread that comes out of the oven too soon is inedible, while intellectual "bread-making" is more of a process, and can be, well, quite tasty for others. Even in the midst of that process, it does have intellectual value for its members.

Most of what goes into an **IR** falls under the heading of what is generally referred to as "grey literature." Grey literature usually isn't created with an idea for formal publication but for a specific purpose: a presentation to a group; transcripts of interviews that may

or may not air; a blueprint; news about that academic community; conference proceedings; university records; theses; dissertations; preprints or e-prints; audio and visual records — in short, almost anything that an intellectual community endeavors to create. While some see **IRs** as potentially competing with traditional publishing, I side with **Lynch** and others in seeing them as supplementary or complementary to it. **IRs** really aren't trying to supplant or in any way compete with publishing. They are more storehouses of materials that may or may not rise to the level of books or book-making.

The value of **IRs** both to the intellectual community and to libraries should be obvious. I see them as key ingredients to collaboration of that academic community's members with each other. We who have given our lives' work to academic communities talk a great deal about critical thinking and collaboration. After we have talked each other nearly to death about these topics (and we academics do drone on and on), we all go off into our own intellectual silos (Chemistry, Physics, Literature, Computer Science, Library Science, etc...), and never the twain shall meet. Meanwhile, all that work falls, not into cyberspace, but even farther

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afield, into a desk drawer, a trunk, or even the wastebasket. But it falls into these places, not because it deserves to go there (though some certainly do), but because there really is nowhere else for it to go.

Look at it this way. If professor A of physics, who is working on Time, knew that professor Z of political science was also working on Time (but, of course, from a completely different angle), wouldn't it be worth getting them together? The only way that's likely to happen now is if the two bump into each other in the cafeteria or at the ball game and begin talking shop.

Of course faculty aren't the only stakeholders here. So are students, administrators, librarians and really everyone involved in that academic community. Take just a few examples. Think of how valuable it could be if student B, who's working in biology, stumbled upon student P, who's working in Philosophy, and the two combined their differing intellectual outputs for a common effort much greater than their parts. Or, an administrator working in student services might discover that another administrator working in institutional design

shares a common intellectual pursuit. The list is nearly endless with possibilities. (For more on collaboration see: <http://miracle.si.umich.edu/>.)

A well-designed, searchable IR (complete with the appropriate metadata tagging) might well allow anyone working in an academic setting to get with anyone else working there and collaborate on outcomes. I've always heard that two heads are better than one, so who knows, they might make something together that really might be better than anything the two (or six or eight) of them could do alone.

Of course, IRs aren't the only way, and that's not my argument here. Professor A and professor Z might well both publish and eventually decide to put their heads together. But if they never do, or only one does, they are more likely not to collaborate on this or any other idea. IRs present a rather tidy way of making all of these good things more likely, possible, and systematic.

Sure, there are dangers, and many of these have already been aired. If I put my work-in-progress in an IR, won't I put my risk of being scooped much higher? Perhaps, but it's unlikely. Scientists, too, are generally much more likely to work on a problem for years — as opposed to months — before putting anything out for review. Meanwhile, my datasets are “out there” and may be manipulated in ways I don't want or like. Copyright issues loom, and they loom almost everywhere these days, and intellectual property rights are also a strong matter to consider. But none of these are “deal-breakers,” or rather

they shouldn't be. If the IR is only searchable by those within a given intellectual community, the risks of any of these are minimal. Besides, as many readers are already thinking, numerous IRs for various disciplines are already “out there,” though none are collecting at a rate to which they should or could be.

While I have made IRs seem easy to create, they are not. They require effort, willingness, technology, collaboration and, of course, funding. The latter is already present (I think here of places like SPARC, the IMLS (Institute for Museum and Library Services) and the NEH, not to mention Mellon, Bill and Melinda Gates, and others). Like the nature of an IR itself, making an IR run involves the collaboration of library personnel with IT and other administrators.

This space only allows a mere scratching of the surface regarding IRs. It's really a piece proffering support to hang on to IRs as an idea whose time may well have come. Much more could be written about them, and indeed already has been. But like most good ideas, they are only slowly catching on. Perhaps this is one of those good ideas that needs only a strong push by those of us who see their value. Meanwhile, the intellectual outputs come and go.

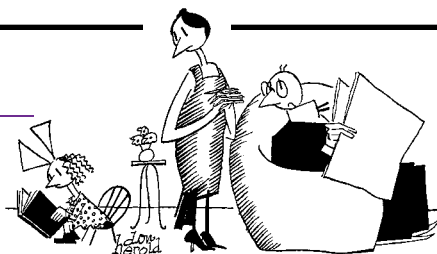
Are IRs good medicine for libraries to consider, even in a time of tight budgets and declining resources? I can't think of a better time. If not now, when?

If not those of us in libraries whose charge it is to preserve and disseminate information, then who? 🐣



Using Rare Books to Inspire Learning — Part 2: Drama - Travel

by Gene Waddell (College of Charleston) <waddelle@cofc.edu>



Editor's Note: We are pleased to publish here Part 2 of Gene's list of great books. You can find Part 1 in the February issue of *ATG*, v.20#1, p.70. — **KS**

Numerous lists of great books have been prepared, and this list contains many of the same titles, but differs in significant respects. It includes subjects that have generally been omitted from series of great books: anthropology, art history, architecture, art, book arts, correspondence, essays, exploration, geography, geology, inventions, law, sociology, speeches, and sports. It also includes shorter works that represent a turning point in the understanding of a subject.

I have included first-person accounts of major discoveries, explorations, systematic observations made possible by new instruments, sound analyses, verifiable experiments, and methodologies created for more specialized fields of knowledge. Each title set a new standard for scholarship and excellence, created a

new scholarly discipline, or set a new course for the study of a subject. In my opinion, the approaches used by these authors are the ones most likely to continue to provide the best basis for adding knowledge.

Even when the information they contain has been largely superceded, these titles represent the best thinking that had been done on their subjects at the time of publication. They provide models for how to try to deal with an entire field of knowledge and how to go about solving problems. They are most worth reading to learn how major problems were finally solved.

I have had to omit many famous histories and works of literature to be able to focus on the ones that I considered most worth acquiring. I have preferred well established principles to theories. I have nearly always omitted titles by living or recently deceased authors.

In some cases, better editions than the first have been subsequently published, and these editions and translations are also needed. In some cases, such as the first printing of the

Columbus letter or the Gutenberg Bible, a facsimile or later edition will nearly always have to suffice because of their extreme rarity. One first edition of a Shakespeare play could substitute for the *First Folio*. Regardless, every library should have as many first editions of key works as it can acquire.

To make more facsimiles and translations widely available of standard works is also a publishing opportunity. A surprising number of these titles are out of print, and some have never been fully translated into English.

As more first editions are becoming available online, what is the point of having copies that are too valuable to be handled? The point is to inspire similar accomplishments. A first edition can be as inspiring as an original work of art no matter how many copies exist. It is to make readers wonder why these books are important, what it took to create them, why they have been so influential, and why so many of them still need to be read.

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