How to decimate your library's collections in three easy steps: a practical guide for the modern library manager

J.E. Traue

The Roman custom of decimating legions by randomly selecting one in ten of the troops for summary execution in order to motivate the survivors has fallen into disuse[1] in modern times. The decline of despotism, the spreading of ideas of equality after the French Revolution, the growing belief in fairness, and the rise of democracy have all contributed to the increasing unacceptability of draconian measures affecting members of majorities in a random manner. The wise manager with a decimating bent now looks to practice her skills on those at the margins of the group—the old, who will be on their way soon anyway, the slow-moving, the decrepit, the unwanted, the unwashed, and all those without a vote. This practical guide to modern practices of decimation in the field of library management draws heavily on two recent examples in Wellington, at the National Library in the 1990s and at Victoria University in 2004.

Step 1: Marginalise your victims

The introduction of electronic cataloguing of the collections presents an unrivalled opportunity to marginalise your intended victims. The National Library, when moving from the card catalogue to an electronic catalogue in 1982, decided that the first priority was to catalogue all new incoming material, then to catalogue those items used in-house or requested on library interloan. The bulk of the existing collections would have to wait until additional resources were provided by government—effectively, in the ideological climate of the 1980s and 1990s, what John Buschman[2] has characterised as "the new public philosophy" where the market is worshipped, public services are starved, libraries are businesses, books are commodities, and library users are consumers. A significant proportion (some 75%) of the existing Central collections (those located in Wellington and not intended, like the Country Library Service collections, to meet popular demand from the public library sector) consisted of very low-use items, often copies of last resort not held by any other library. Since the 1940s the National Library Service had deliberately selected items to fill gaps in the national coverage of printed materials, concentrating on monographs in series and runs of serials that senior librarians in the universities and scientific research institutions considered of national importance. In addition, monographs requested on interloan and not held in New Zealand[3] were purchased for the National Library Service's Central collection, and last copies shed by other libraries were welcomed.

To make items earn their keep in such a slow-moving collection, designed to meet national interloan demand at the margins, it was imperative that they should be listed electronically. Initially interloan librarians throughout New Zealand remembered that they needed to consult both the card records (National Union Catalogue of Books) and the new national electronic records (Bibliographic Network). As time went by, and institutional memories faded in a period of hectic change, librarians in the National Library in Wellington and elsewhere forgot about the old card records. I can recall having requests for interloans of older works that I had used in the past rejected by younger Victoria University reference staff in the 1990s on the grounds that the titles were not held in New Zealand (i.e., not listed on the Bibliographic Network), and having to draw their attention to the microfiche of the Union Catalogue. The older core collections were very effectively marginalised by their exclusion from the Bibliographic Network, and their usage dropped markedly, which meant that even fewer items were requested and catalogued electronically, so demand dropped even further. The virtual library was being heralded by the creation of an actual cemetery of older books.[4]

Victoria University Library followed a similar path from 1984. All new books, plus a core of the more used books, were the priorities, and the older and less-used items were added only when they were issued. Retrospective cataloguing of the remainder was abandoned in 1998 "because of competing demands." A group of low-use items was placed in compact

storage (some 50,000 volumes). The need to obtain permission, a key or an. access code, plus a heavy spanner to wind open the compact storage were additional barriers to use, and as a result very few of these items found their way into the electronic catalogue. It is estimated that just under15% of the collection is not electronically catalogued, with a much higher percentage for the items in compact storage. My observations of students and staff using the OPAC at Victoria in the 1990s indicate that 99% of the students, and well over 50% of the staff, are unaware of the need to consult both the electronic and the card catalogue. The long-term effect was to skew usage away from the older and less used items, substantially in the humanities and the social sciences, and to consign such items into the graveyard of dead books. Harold Miller (University Librarian 1928-1966), of whom a contemporary, Clifford Collins, wrote "I was at first amazed, almost shocked, to see Miller buying book after book and set after set that no-one was likely to look at in the then retarded state of New Zealand scholarship,"[5] will be spinning in his grave. But then he was planning ahead for the good, if not great, library that he believed Victoria deserved.

A library collection is like a comet: a small part of its mass is concentrated in an active head (some 20% of a collection can be expected to meet 80% of the demand) while the rest is unevenly distributed over a long tail (stretching back some 550 years for a printed collection). A public or a school library can without serious risk keep on pruning that tail. An academic library does so at its peril. Trim the tail too hard, or too often, and you change the configuration of the collection from that of a library to that of a bookshop.

Step 2: Ensure a space crisis by preaching the death of the book

Most senior librarians in New Zealand in the 1990s were seduced by the incantations of the gurus in the computer world and librarianship (FW. Lancaster was the chief theorist in librarianship, but he had plenty of acolytes in public and academic libraries) declaring the imminent demise of the book and its replacement by the new electronic "library without walls." "As we move towards the year 2000, there is increasing emphasis on the Library as an electronic resource ... electronic access to information is racing ahead ... Much effort is going into planning for the day when the Library will truly be a library without walls—the information available by computer to schools, libraries and home users"[6] ... "a move from collections to clients as the central focus of the library's

organisational culture."[7] Victoria began the "identification of real user needs" in 1995, after adopting in 1992 the "self renewing library policy based on the decision to cap the growth of the collection ... and the subsequent purchase of access to major remote electronic citation databases ..." because of the "conviction that ... it was time to reassess the appropriate balance between ... seek[ing] to acquire and retain for on-site users all the materials its users may require and adopting an access policy in which the library endeavours to provide access from remote sources through a range of document supply systems" after the "emergence of an environment in which information technology and, in particular, access to world wide electronic networks have given academic libraries the opportunities to readjust [the] balance in favour of access ..."[8]

In this brave new world there would be a decreasing number of books in paper format needing to be stored on shelves in expensive buildings, a message warmly embraced by government and university management. The day of the "steady state," or decreasing, library collection had now arrived. The available evidence however pointed in the opposite direction, to the new electronic media stimulating traditional publishing, to a marked increase in the number of book titles published on paper, a need for university and research libraries to spend more on acquiring printed monographic materials to keep up with the tide, and the need for more, not less, accommodation for library collections. Apart from a few reference works, the overwhelming majority of these new books were not, because of copyright restrictions, available in electronic forms. In 1981 there were 48,793 titles published in the United States, in 1991 there were 48,146, in 2001 there were 141,703.[9] In the twenty years of the rise of the home computer the number of book titles published in the United States increased by some 190%. In Britain, from 1982 (48,307) to 2002 (125,390) the increase in the number of titles was 159%. The international statistics, although they are flawed by omissions, and figures for some countries are heavily dependent on imagination, show a similar pattern for English language book titles. The long-term trend has been for hardback titles to increase, and for mass-market paperbacks to decrease as more and more people turn to the electronic media for entertainment.

The results of past neglect compounded by the policies adopted by Victoria in the 1990s are there for all to read in the latest comparative statistics published by the Council of New Zealand University Librarians

(CONZUL). Of the six major universities, Victoria has the smallest collection, the lowest rate of acquisitions of monographs, the lowest expenditure on its collections, the lowest total library expenditure, resulting in the lowest borrowing figures and the highest dependence on interloan borrowing (4.1% compared with the national average of 2.2%).[10] Victoria has been so short-changing its students and staff and failing to meet its obligations to the national university community (it lent 5,027 items to other libraries and borrowed 16,370) that the ritual disembowelling now being contemplated, by dispatching a third of the main library's collections to compact storage in the basement, seems a fitting resolution to its shame.

Step 3: Advocate ruthless pruning to meet the crisis

Once you have prepared the ground as outlined above, the handiest instrument for devastating your collection is the "10-year circulation rule."[11] All books not circulated in the past ten years are set aside in a pool and experts are called in to nominate those to be saved, with the rest to be declared unwanted and disposed of. It's neat—all guilty until proved innocent, but always a difficult task, which is why every civilized legal jurisdiction has abandoned it. You can always blame the experts for the inevitable miscarriages of justice that time will reveal. Also, and this makes it even more appealing to the practical library manager, you can guarantee absolutely that it will yield at least 10% of the collection. At Victoria the first cull will net 130,000 titles of monographs, a stunning 29% of the collection of 439,393 - an achievement outstripping the sacking of Rome by the Vandals in 455. In really great research libraries, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, and UCLA, you will really strike it lucky with more than 50% of your collection neatly marked for the knackers' yard. In the National Library in 1999, using the criteria of books published more than 20 years ago and not circulated within the past 10 years, 189,450 titles out of 710,000, or 26.6%, were identified. Of these 60,000 were deemed fit for deselection after a review by external experts.[12]

Your arguments will be unassailable if your institution has accepted the economic rationalist model of the new public sector organisation and its accounting practices. In this model (the American corporation as theorised by neo-classical economics) clear objectives and "business" disciplines, the separation of capital and operating expenditures, the valuation of all "assets," selling down fixed assets to free up cash for productive investment, depreciation, the payment of rent for space occupied and a firm bottom line are imposed. It is, alas, not one of Plato's ideal forms but St Augustine's City of God, where deviations from received truth are not just wrong, but sinful and deserving of punishment. In the core public service a major instrument of this punishment is the capital charge, in the universities a gentler knout is the occupancy charge. Government departments are taxed up to 10% of the value of their assets to dissuade them from acquiring and holding assets in land, buildings and, wait for it, library collections in paper format and buildings to house them.[13] The National Library, at one stage when the Turnbull collections were valued at around $500 million, had a capital charge liability about twice its annual running costs. This provided powerful incentives to sell down its assets (the books), or as a young Treasury adviser put it in 1994, to "reduce the Government's ownership interest" in the non-New Zealand collections.[14] The absurdity index[15] for the application of the theory was such that exceptions had to be made and the Turnbull's assets were hastily removed from the National Library balance sheet in 1994 and reinvented as assets on the Crown balance sheet, where they sit alongside the collections of the National Archives, military equipment, the state highway system, and the national parks, and where they do not attract a capital charge. In 2003, however, the National Library was still paying back to Treasury a capital charge of $7 million on revenue of $44 million because it owned General and Schools collections valued at $20 million and buildings and equipment to make the collections available valued at $61 million.[16] In the universities a library is punished by the occupancy costs (rent) for every square metre of space it needs to house its assets, the collections on paper. However, the purchasing of electronic access to periodicals and reference books is classed as operating expenditure and is thus a neat way to avoid punishment. Alas, the absurdity index (at about 99) is not high enough to allow exceptions to be made for the universities. In the weird world on the other side of the looking glass conjured up by economic rationalism (Rogernomics in this country) the essence of a library, its collections, become an economic liability. Some university libraries have resisted being frogmarched by the bean counters into making major switches of expenditure from books in paper format (capital) to electronic resources (operating), but Victoria appears to have submitted without a fight. Warwick Clegg, the Pro Vice-Chancellor in charge of Information Technology Services and the Library, when defending

the decision to expropriate library shelving space for conversion to offices and a cafeteria, is on record "that it would be useful to shift the balance of funding from CAPEX towards OPEX to increase the number of online acquisitions ... he hoped the 2005 budget year would be the first transition year to change the budget progressively so it reflected a change in acquisitions to be increasingly digital."[17]

Notes:

1. An interesting modern application in the National Library is discussed in Traue, I.E. "What's wrong with the National Library's restructuring." *New Zealand Libraries,* September 1999, 35-39.

2. Buschman, John E. *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy.* Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003. Heavy going, but essential reading for real librarians prepared to challenge the received wisdom of those library managers who believe that a library is no different from a factory canning baked beans.

3. All readers under the age of 50 will need to consult W.J. McEldowney, *New Zealand Library Association 1910-1960 and its Part in New Zealand Library Development* (New Zealand Library Association, 1962) to find out about Book Resources and the national co-operative schemes designed to build a national resource to offset the poverty of our printed collections. A useful summary of New Zealand's unique achievement can be found in "Sharing: two themes and a coda," *New Zealand Libraries,* March 1981, 73-77, reprinted in Traue, J.E. *Committed to Print.* Victoria University Press, 1991.

4. In modern management-speak all those old books had now been successfully conceptualised as "unproductive assets" (see footnote 13).

5. "Harold Gladstone Miller Valedictory" *New Zealand Libraries* 29 no.3 (April 1966), 48-52.

6. Annual Report of the National Library of New Zealand 1995, p.4.

7. Annual Report of the National Library of New Zealand 1996, p.5.

8. Annual Report of the University Librarian, 1992, p. 5-6; 1995, p.5.

9. Bowker Annual, 1983,1993,2003.

10. New Zealand University Library Statistics 2002.

11. On the dangers of using circulation instead of use in an academic library see the standard works on library weeding: Slote, Hall, G.E. Gorman (ed), etc.

12. Final Report of the Review of the General Lending Collection, 9 April 2001 (\nl_cims\1 13437\1).

13. The capital charge is "designed to make the cost structure faced by departments mirror that of any other producer in the economy by including the cost of capital investment ... If the asset base is reduced, the charge is correspondingly reduced but not the appropriation, thus providing an incentive to dispose of unproductive assets." Boston, Jonathan et al. *Public Management: the New Zealand Model.* Oxford University Press, 1996. p. 273.

14. For the Treasury's vision of the National Library as a profit-driven business see "The Commodification of Information," *New Zealand Studies* 7 (July 1997), 23-29.

15. The measure of the deviation of theory from the reality of a non-profit public sector organisation; at 200 the consequences are so absurd that an exception has to be made.

16. National Library of New Zealand, Annual Report 2003, p. 41, 42,52

17. Meeting summary: Meeting between Collection Appraisal (CAP) team and FHSS, Tuesday 11 May, 12pm-1.20pm.

Jim Traue *(julia.traue@paradise.net.nz) is a former Chief Librarian of the Alexander Turnbull Library and teacher in librarianship a, Victoria University of Wellington.*