

## The Embedded Curator: Reexamining the Documentation Strategy of Archival Acquisitions in a Web 2.0 Environment

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AN EMBEDDED CURATOR uses his or her physical and virtual presence within a selected community to document that community while simultaneously serving as a resource to it. While the “embedded curator” term may be relatively new to the profession, the practices that inform its implementation are not.

Collection development for special collections, particularly for archival materials, has a robust history of debate about the best methods for encouraging and managing gifts.<sup>1</sup> Embedded curators require a pragmatic and flexible written collection development policy that values occasional serendipitous acquisitions, as well as a strategic plan to build ongoing collections that focus on particular communities.<sup>2</sup> They also need to be willing to implement a modified version of the “documentation strategy” method of archival collection development by being on the spot as a community resource for research help and help with self-documentation methods, either in person or online, much as embedded librarians do for individual courses or departments.<sup>3</sup> Embedded curators understand that the way we produce the cultural record has changed and take steps to ensure the longevity of born-digital materials in addition to paper. They may choose to leverage social media and open-source tools, as well as expedited processing of archival materials through More Product Less Process (MPLP), to build and manage donor and community

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1. Terry Abraham, “Collection Policy or Documentation Strategy: Theory and Practice,” *The American Archivist* 54, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 44–52, available online at [www.jstor.org/stable/40294401](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40294401) [accessed 29 March 2010].

2. Elaine B. Smyth, “A Practical Approach to Writing a Collection Development Policy,” *RBML* 14, no. 1 (1999): 27–31; R. Joseph Anderson, “Managing Change and Chance: Collecting Policies in Social History Archives,” *The American Archivist* 48, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 296–303, available online at [www.jstor.org/stable/40292919](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40292919) [accessed 29 March 2010]; Kathryn M. Neal, “Cultivating Diversity: The Donor Collection,” *Collection Management* 27, no. 2 (2002): 33–42.

3. Abraham, “Collection Policy or Documentation Strategy”; Olivia Olavares, “The Sufficiently Embedded Librarian: Defining and Establishing Productive Librarian-Faculty Partnerships in Academic Libraries,” *Public Services Quarterly* 6, no. 2–3 (2010): 140–49; Bernd W. Becker, “Embedded Librarianship: A Point-of-Need Service,” *Behavioral & Social Sciences Librarian* 29, no. 3 (2010): 237–40; Lynne M. Rudasill, “Beyond Subject Specialization: The Creation of Embedded Librarians,” *Public Services Quarterly* 6, no. 2–3 (2010): 83–91.

relationships, in addition to the collections, both paper and digital, that result from those relationships.<sup>4</sup>

### The Problem with the Test of Time

Since personal computing became ubiquitous in the 1980s, libraries and archives have struggled with models for documenting, sustaining, and preserving long-term access to electronic works in addition to our paper-based materials. We remain in very real danger of creating a digital “dark age” through our inability to provide long-term access to born-digital materials.<sup>5</sup> The Library of Congress notes, for example, that much of the campaign information from the 1996 presidential election is lost, because there was no mechanism to archive the Web sites tied to the election; the Internet Archive was launched after 1996.<sup>6</sup> Even small steps can help prevent the loss of our electronic cultural record.<sup>7</sup> One of these small steps is to talk to creators much earlier in their careers.

Special collections archival practices have tended to wait until creators are “important” or “established” enough to be “worthy” of documentation—the proverbial “test of time”—sometimes waiting until after their deaths to even consider adding them to collections. In a paper-centered collection, this practice is only problematic if papers get destroyed by the creators or their literary executors and heirs (either at the behest of the creator, or despite them). Paper is shelf-stable through established benign-neglect preservation practices. We have time to make our decisions about what belongs in the cultural record.

As born-digital materials constitute a larger percentage of our collections, waiting until the end of a creator’s career to document them will create a significant gap in our cultural record through a combination of bit rot and obsolescence. Using the “test of time” method for collection development of born-digital materials practically guarantees that we will lose a significant portion of the documentation we intended to create. By the time we determine that a creator is “important,” the documents we seek (such as electronic manuscripts) may no longer exist; or, if they do, they may not exist in a currently readable format. Storing floppy disks with no hardware and software to access the data that live

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4. Beth M. Whittaker and Lynne M. Thomas, *Special Collections 2.0: New Technologies for Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Archival Collections* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Libraries Unlimited, 2009); Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208–63.

5. Jonas Palm, *The Digital Black Hole* (Stockholm: Riksarkivet, 2006), available online at [www.tape-online.net/docs/Palm\\_Black\\_Hole.pdf](http://www.tape-online.net/docs/Palm_Black_Hole.pdf) [accessed 9 February 2012].

6. Whittaker & Thomas, *Special Collections 2.0*.

7. Whittaker & Thomas, *Special Collections 2.0*; Ben Goldman, “Bridging the Gap: Taking Practical Steps Toward Managing Born-Digital Collections in Manuscript Repositories,” *RBM* 12 (Spring 2011):11–24.

on them is an exercise in futility. Talking to creators earlier in their careers can encourage them to migrate their digital archives forward to current formats. Popular cultural materials are particularly vulnerable to loss, as many creators assume that their work is not “important” enough (or too commercial) to be archived in the first place.

Most contemporary writers work in some combination of electronic and paper drafts, with the trend moving toward solely digital. Numerous artists compose exclusively using computers. Writers and artists may routinely recycle paper drafts (the electronic version is the “working” one—the paper draft is merely convenient) and may not bother to migrate electronic files forward to new computers. Many contemporary publishers have moved from paper to digital copy-edited manuscripts and page proofs, a shift in the publication process that requires documentation for historians of the book in itself.

Curatorial practice is grounded in well-rounded, educated selection, but that selection process needs to happen much earlier than before. This requires reading widely in the selected subject area and making choices about whom to approach. As we build relationships with our creators and discuss self-archiving and forward migration of electronic files, building collections much earlier in their careers, when they get to the “important enough” stage, the digital and paper files have a much better chance of existing. Requests for additional server space may begin to outpace requests for additional shelving space. We do risk that some of the materials collected through this method will turn out to be, by some standard, “not important.” If that happens, we will still have created a valuable snapshot of the selected field at a given point of time. Well-designed collection development policies and deeds of gift can provide curators with tools and documentation that allow them to change their minds about the direction of the collection at a later point should they need to do so.

### **Popular Culture, Posterity, and Community**

Gretchen Lagana argued in the 1980s that the special collections community needed to focus not only on popular cultural books but also on archival papers to allow for the study of their creation.<sup>8</sup> Science fiction and fantasy literature has been collected since at least the 1960s in the United States. The Winter 1982 (2:1/2) issue of *Special Collections*, edited by Hal W. Hall, was a themed issue: *Science Fiction Collections: Fantasy, Supernatural & Weird Tales*. It features articles about well-known academic collections at Texas A&M, the Eaton Collection at UC-Riverside, the

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8. Gretchen Lagana, “Beyond the Book: Collection Development and the Special Collections Librarian,” in *Energies for Transition: Proceedings of the Fourth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries*, ed. Danuta Nitecki (Chicago: ACRL, 1986), 90–91.

Library of Congress, New Mexico State University, Syracuse, and MIT, as well as an article about fan-held collections by Forrest J. Ackerman.<sup>9</sup> The bulk of the articles describe the genesis of the collections, most of which were built using the most traditional of methods: gifts from donors affiliated with those particular universities as alumni or faculty, and purchases that build upon the initial gifts. Syracuse did presentations at science fiction conventions in the 1970s; consistent acquisition via gifts stopped in the 1970s due to a combination of the revision of tax laws in 1969 governing gifts and lack of funds.<sup>10</sup> At MIT, student involvement in the MIT Science Fiction Society (MITSFS) eventually led to the formation of the New England Science Fiction Association (NESFA) and the founding of Boskone, a Boston-based SF/F convention.<sup>11</sup>

Rare Books and Special Collections at Northern Illinois University has been one of eleven depository libraries for the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA), since 1979. In that time, our science fiction (SF) literature collection has grown to over 5,000 volumes. We began actively pursuing archival SF materials in 2004. Since then, we have gone from no archival materials to speak of within the SF genre to holding at least partial papers for more than fifty authors in the field, made possible through embedded curatorship. The first archival donation to the SFWA collection at NIU came through a chance meeting with a local fan and convention-runner at a comics trade show; a casual mention of our collection's status as a SFWA Circulating Book Plan repository led to an invitation to speak at the Nebula Awards weekend, a gathering of SF professionals, in Chicago in 2005. That speaking invitation led directly to the donation of our first set of science fiction archives, the papers of Jack McDevitt.

Kathryn Neal notes that "developing a network of supporters from within the archives' collecting universe has been the mainstay of traditional, single-group ethnic repositories."<sup>12</sup> One of the key actions that Neal took to develop her collection was to "become a recognized presence in the black communities in the state"; she also describes the "friend-of-a-friend" donation phenomenon. "The identity I share with potential donors helps to establish rapport and trust."<sup>13</sup> In the SF/F community, approaching potential donors as a fan of the genre who happens to also be a cultural heritage professional develops rapport and trust quickly (authors really *do* love librarians and archivists). As in many aspects of special collections

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9. *Science Fiction Collections: Fantasy, Supernatural & Weird Tales*, ed. Hal W. Hall. *Special Collections 2*, no. 1/2 (Winter 1982).

10. Fred Lerner, "Syracuse University," *Science Fiction Collections: Fantasy, Supernatural & Weird Tales*, ed. Hal W. Hall. *Special Collections 2*, no. 1/2 (Winter 1982): 59–62.

11. Kenneth R. Johnson, "The MIT Science Fiction Society Library," *Science Fiction Collections: Fantasy, Supernatural & Weird Tales*, ed. Hal W. Hall. *Special Collections 2*, no. 1/2 (Winter 1982): 69–77.

12. Neal, "Cultivating Diversity."

13. Neal, "Cultivating Diversity," 40.

work, “the development of archives have often depended on the vision and toil of nonarchivists.”<sup>14</sup> The most common response to inquiries about the disposition of a creator’s archives is “that’s interesting; have you spoken to [x] as well?” Many of our collections’ acquisitions are based on friend-of-a-friend donations, particularly among writing groups and social circles.

The community involved in the SFWA collection is a self-selected community of choice based upon a shared literature, rather than a community defined by a shared ethnic or racial identity, but the basic principles of community involvement and shared identity to develop trust and rapport with potential donors remain. Active members of SF fandom gather regularly at conventions, where panel discussions of literature, media, and gaming, along with author readings, performances, and social events, take place over the course of selected weekends. Conventions, much like professional conferences, provide intensive networking experiences for professional writers and editors in attendance. Depending upon the size and scope of the convention, there are from a dozen to several hundred SF/F professionals in attendance on a given weekend.

In addition, most conventions have a significant number of nonprofessional attendees, fans of the genre or the particular writers or editors in attendance. This is part of the culture of the convention—the experience is designed for fans to have access to the writers. Writers attend conventions with the specific aim of being accessible to members of their community. For an archivist trying to talk to working writers, this is ideal. A concentration of writers accessible at conventions allows archivists to be efficient, talking to numerous people over the course of a weekend.

Of course, it can be difficult to remember all of the people to whom one has spoken in the course of a weekend, particularly at large gatherings. This, especially, is where curatorial and collection visibility on social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs can reinforce brief and fleeting connections and begin the process of donor development. A curatorial socially networked online identity allows donors to examine my public persona, and that of my institution, more thoroughly after talking to me in person at conventions. Thus, donor cultivation, which begins with getting to know me and my institution, is accelerated, with minimal effort on my part (other than maintaining the social media presence that I have already created, which I do routinely). Online relationships, through consistent contact and interaction, may develop more quickly than those

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14. Anke Voss-Hubbard, “‘No Document—No History’: Mary Ritter Beard and the Early History of Women’s Archives,” *American Archivist* 58, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 16–30, available online at [www.jstor.org/stable/40293886](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40293886) [accessed 29 March 2010].

in real life, at least on the level required for trust between a library or archive and its donors.

Social media for donor relations can be more efficient for curators, because they work on a broadcast model: one post on Facebook or Twitter reaches as many of my followers or friends as I designate, so I can build numerous relationships simultaneously with less effort. Archivists and librarians can therefore become embedded in a community much more quickly and manage their relationships with a much larger potential donor base using these tools. An institution's social media presence encourages donors to think about archiving regularly, which leads to a relatively short time lag between soliciting and gifting; most gifts come in within a year of initial contact. This broadcast model also allows cultural heritage professionals to remain updated on news within the community, as provided by community members. Deaths, job changes, and new projects being launched often appear on social media within a given community.

Being successfully embedded does require a commitment of some time and energy to that community, but the benefits of that commitment come right back to our institutions. Providing appropriate informational and reference support leads to a role within the community not only as a member seeking something from the community but also as a demonstrated contributor to that community. Contributions such as those detailed below build trust within the community for our gift-seeking efforts.

When the initial Google Books settlement was released, I received several questions about it from SF/F writers archiving their papers at NIU. Their questions led to a blog post about the topic on my library blog, which then led to an invitation to serve as a panelist talking about the impact of Google Books on writers as well as libraries for an online informational forum for SFWA members about the topic. This reinforces the image of libraries and archives as trustworthy places providing good information and working in the best interests of creators and potential donors.

Sharing our professional knowledge with our selected communities can also make our own jobs easier. My presence in the SF/F community, enhanced through a social media presence, has led to guest blogging about the process of archiving papers from a library/archival perspective for the SFWA Web site. Donors who understand the archival process are more likely to keep their paper files together and organized, and their digital files consistently backed up and migrated forward, until they reach the point of submission to their selected archive. This is particularly important as electronically produced literary artifacts rapidly

achieve critical mass (and already have in some communities). Given that our collection at NIU emphasizes writers who began their publishing careers after the advent of the personal computer (1985), robust instruction on both paper and digital preservation of literary papers is essential for their very survival.<sup>15</sup> See NIU's Collection development policy at <http://www.ulib.niu.edu/Policies/RB-SCCollDevelopPolicy.pdf>

### **The Costs of Being Embedded**

Embedded curatorship does require modest administrative support (both fiscal and ideological), but the ratio of benefit to expense is on a par with the buying trips funded for our Curator of Southeast Asia materials (a colleague in the same library division with similar duties). We must also consider the cost of the curator's time. While it has not been an issue for the curator at NIU, SF/F Conventions are typically held on weekends, often holidays (Memorial Day, 4th of July, and so on), when hotels are less likely to be booked.

The first time the curator attended an SF/F convention on library funds with the intent of talking to authors as a pilot project, two new collections were garnered. One reconnected an alumnus with his alma mater and quickly converted him into a planned giver; the other has been crucial in bringing in additional authors for the collection, including Hugo winners, in addition to their own papers. Thus, the gains easily exceeded the costs of the trip, which totaled less than \$400.

Rare Books and Special Collections is a cost center in our library: we have a dedicated departmental budget, administered internally by the curator. Travel funds have, understandably, been scarce in the current budget climate, but are stretched by limiting attendance to conventions within driving distance of the library. Costs are limited to mileage, hotel (at much lower than typical rates) for a couple of nights, per diem, the occasional author meal, and registration fees. Registration fees are often reimbursed by the convention if participants volunteer to serve on panels. Since participants often want to know how to preserve their own book collections, or get reading recommendations at the very least, this can provide great opportunities for librarians to speak. In the case of our library, hotel, registration, per diem, and mileage are handled through library funds, while author meals are reimbursed through foundation funds. The curator, as cost center manager, is responsible for not exceeding the set budget, and annual planning determines which conventions will have the curator in attendance. Choices are often based upon the invited Guest of Honor, the creators

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15. Rare Books and Special Collections at Northern Illinois University Library's collection development policy is available online at [www.ulib.niu.edu/Policies/RBSCollDevelopPolicy.pdf](http://www.ulib.niu.edu/Policies/RBSCollDevelopPolicy.pdf) [accessed 28 February 2012].

whose works are celebrated at that particular convention. Guests of Honor attend the convention for free, specifically providing access to a nonlocal author for convention attendees.

The cost of getting archival materials to NIU is partially incorporated into travel funds (the curator routinely accepts boxes of materials at conventions) and a nominal amount of money (typically about \$500 per annum) for shipping materials to NIU, which is available mostly by request. We accept materials piecemeal (that is, a box at a time rather than all at once), and some authors will pay shipping themselves, if the shipment is small.

With the exception of the purchase of a group of golden age correspondence by the Friends of the NIU Libraries, SF/F materials at NIU have all been received as direct gifts and bequests from the authors themselves and/or their literary executors, despite tax laws that discourage direct giving by creators, and a minimal acquisitions budget for purchases that is shared among other collections. Gifts in kind are documented according to university policy.

In most cases, gifts came merely by asking. Initial approaches by the curator after interest is indicated by potential donors include a discussion of tax implications, the furnishing of an example deed of gift agreement, copyright, and the management of expectations for processing and availability of materials. The reputation that special collections and archives has for the test-of-time method of collection development means that early-career writers are often quite flattered to be approached and are donating materials often before they have had significant critical acclaim (and before their papers have an opportunity to develop significant value on the collectors' market). The collectors' market for literary manuscripts is headed for a significant change in the next few decades as we determine how to value an easily copied Microsoft Word or Scrivener document. At least a portion of the original manuscript artifacts donated to NIU are now digital; their gift-in-kind value is currently treated as nominal, until we have better evaluative information.<sup>16</sup> See sample deed of gift at <http://www.ulib.niu.edu/rarebooks/Deedlibrarygeneric.pdf>

## Managing Gifts

Of course, once the gifts of books or archival materials come into the building, they still must be managed, processed, documented, and made available to our user community. This is where MPLP methods come into play.<sup>17</sup> MPLP processing

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16. A sample Deed of Gift is available online at NIU's site at [www.ulib.niu.edu/rarebooks/Deedlibrarygeneric.pdf](http://www.ulib.niu.edu/rarebooks/Deedlibrarygeneric.pdf) [accessed 28 February 2012].

17. Greene & Meisner, "More Product, Less Process."



is routinely completed by our half-time graduate assistant (GA) and a half-time manuscripts processor on staff, with additional assistance from the occasional volunteer or practicum student. (Our two undergraduate student workers occasionally help with marking already processed boxes and folders.) Typically, our half-time processor handles larger donations, and our GA and volunteers handle smaller groups of materials and additions to extant collections. This year, we have also implemented Archon, which we expect will expedite the processing cycle. Archon also allows us to create EAD finding aids for the first time (previous practice generated PDF and Excel files posted to our departmental Web site). As collections are processed and made available, progress is routinely announced on the departmental blog and social media, which reassures donors that we continue to make inroads into our backlog, even if we have not yet processed their specific materials. Since we began accepting materials in 2005, we have created finding aids for roughly half of the materials donated. Donors are warned up front about processing timelines.

We encourage currently working authors to deposit in a piecemeal fashion, often a box or two at a time, after projects are complete. This method encourages consistent contact between archive and donor, allowing everyone involved to be less overwhelmed by the donation process and its aftermath. For a donor with a larger collection of papers, organizing a donation of dozens of boxes may seem daunting, and thus be delayed, but sending along one box seems achievable, for both the processing institution and the donor. This also allows for measured growth in the use and management of departmental space. Early-career authors who may not have significant accumulations of “foul papers” (in other words, manuscript drafts) also then incorporate archiving practices into their writing practices (that is to say, boxing up everything from a completed project and sending it to the archives). As an inducement to timely archiving, we offer photocopies of originals back to authors who find that they need to access material that they have previously archived; few have taken us up on the offer, but they are reassured that it remains available to them should they need it. We have also implemented a free scan-on-demand service in our library; if authors prefer digital copies of their own materials, that is easily arranged.

Digital preservation is still a challenge at our library (as at many others), but we are in the process of launching a DSpace institutional repository with a dark archive component configured to maintain in-copyright electronic archival files in addition to publicly available materials. Northern Illinois University also received, along with partner institutions Chicago State University, Western Illinois University, Illinois State University, and Illinois Wesleyan University, a \$575,000 grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services to study and make recommenda-

tions for sustainable digital preservation practices for smaller and medium-sized libraries.

In the meantime, as we back up in the short term until we build a truly sustainable system, we have tried to be flexible in the manner in which digital files arrive and to provide for their continuing integrity, following Ben Goldman's philosophy that it is better to take small steps than none at all.<sup>18</sup> Portable media (thumb drives, CDs, DVDs) and a Gmail address are used for file submission, then copied to nonpublic directories of library servers and portable hard drives for ongoing backups until they are loaded into our institutional repository, with an effort to maintain and add appropriate metadata.

### **What We Have Learned**

As a library working to establish an archive of materials from scratch, we have learned a few important lessons. In our first few years, we were assertive about acquisitions, with a collection development policy that emphasized a minimum level of professional achievement (SFWA eligibility) rather than longevity of career, within a relatively defined region (the Upper Midwest), mostly defined by what is within driving distance of the university. The role of the curator has shifted gears from presenting publicly about the archive and its processes on panels to focusing much more intently on personal interactions with current and future donors.

The decision to gift one's literary archive to an institution is, in this community as in many others, often intensely personal. Several gifts have moved quite swiftly, based entirely on a gut reaction during the donor's initial contact with the curator. We have learned the importance of emphasizing and reiterating the role of the institution in the transaction. Donors may think of the process as sending their archives to that person they met at the convention, rather than sending their archives to an institution. Northern Illinois University is prominently featured in all marketing and correspondence materials, of course, but the curator still finds it to be an occasional uphill battle to encourage donors to think institutionally.

One of the other major lessons from this endeavor is the speed at which institutional collections are publicized and how it varies greatly between subsets of the communities in question. We immediately saw an uptick in interlibrary loan requests for copies from our golden age SF/F magazines when we eliminated their cataloging backlog in the past two years. Book collectors in the region are also quite well aware of our SF/F resources; several large donations of SF/F books and fanzines have resulted from the curator's presence in the SF/F community.

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18. Goldman, "Bridging the Gap."

We have yet to see a significant uptick in use by scholars and researchers, however, despite an annual fellowship that encourages the study of popular cultural materials in our collections. We suspect that scholars have not yet developed interest in studying the quite contemporary authors that feature most heavily in our collections (that is, those whose careers began after 1985), coupled with a lack of promotion in the scholarly subset of the SF/F community. Travel funding has not yet been sufficient to send the curator to the major SF/F scholarly conferences (such as the Eaton Conference at the University of California, Riverside; the Campbell Conference at the University of Kansas; or the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts), which may exacerbate the problem. Now that the rapid acquisitions phase has settled down to a dull roar, the curator can focus on promotion of the collections in hand, in the hope that scholarly interest will follow.

### **Conclusions**

Embedded curatorial practice does require a certain amount of personal commitment to participating in a particular community and an institutional commitment of resources to be present within that community (that is, travel funding), but the benefits for both the curator and the institution in question may be greater than the initial outlay of time and expense. Our institution has built a significant collection of archival materials in a specific field through gifts in kind that exceed the outlay of expense at least fifty-fold. Naturally, the process of embedding within a community is much more effective when the curator has an affinity for the community in question; embedding oneself as a curator becomes much more difficult if the curator is not personally interested or invested in the target community in some way. One of the unexpected but quite lovely benefits is the development of real friendships within the community, in addition to numerous collegial relationships between donors and curator, all of which can be maintained through social media between in-person interactions.

The choice to embed oneself within a community for donor cultivation is not a new concept; the tools have changed, particularly for institutions whose resources of time and effort outweigh those of finances for acquisitions, given free and low-cost open-source social media and management tools. When a curator can build a solid network of connections with people who are just as passionate about the selected materials as they are, the rewards of embedded curatorship can be a great boon to an institution's collections.



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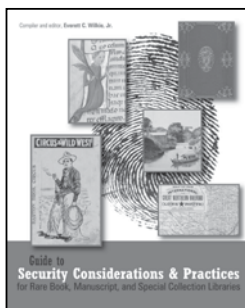


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