The Making of "Our Cultural Commonwealth"

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Abstract

Reflections on the ACLS Commission on Cyberinfrastructure

In Memory of Roy Rosenzweig

[1]

> Farewell to an idea . . . The cancellings,
> The negations are never final.
> (Wallace Stevens, "Auroras of Autumn")

Background

In January of 2003, the USA's National Science Foundation published a report from a "Blue-Ribbon Advisory Panel on Cyberinfrastructure," a panel chaired by Dan Atkins, then Dean of the School of Information at the University of Michigan. The Atkins report was perceived by many as presaging some major changes in the discussion (and funding) of computational infrastructure for the sciences, and it prompted a number of follow-up reports and responses from other quarters. One of these responses was commissioned by the American Council of Learned Societies, and it focused on cyberinfrastructure for humanities and social sciences.

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Process

This essay reflects on what goes into producing such a report. In practical and procedural terms, it takes:

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- A preliminary meeting (September 17, 2003) for about twenty-five people to discuss the idea of doing a report, after which a chair was appointed.
- A planning grant proposal from the ACLS to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (November 2003) to support the process of setting up the Commission.
- Conversations about Commission membership (December/January 2003/2004) with the chair, ACLS, and Mellon.
- An invitational workshop (February 2004) to provide feedback on the draft charge to the commission, suggestions of venues for information-gathering, and nomination of commission members.
- Ten Commission members, scholars and innovators with backgrounds in economics, art history, georaphy, archives, libraries, documentary film and television, literature, history, archaeology, and scholarly communication, appointed in March 2004.
- Nine domestic advisors, from the National Science Foundation, the Berkeley Data Center, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Coalition for Networked Information, the Library of Congress, UCLA's Department of Information Studies, the Council on Library and Information Resources, and the American

Council of Learned Societies.

- Ten international advisors, from England, France, Germany, Norway, Amsterdam, Canada, and Australia. A full proposal for funding submitted (March, 2004).
- Thirteen committee meetings (2004-2006) including six public information-gathering sessions in different cities around the United States (April 27, 2004, Washington, DC; May 22, 2004, Chicago, IL; June 19, 2004, New York, NY; August 21, 2004, Berkeley, CA; September 18, 2004, Los Angeles, CA; October 26, 2004, Baltimore, MD).
- A mailman discussion list for the committee, and another for public comments on drafts.
- Three private drafts (March 2005, August 2005, October 2005), two public drafts (November 2005, March 2006), and a final version (November 29, 2006).
- Two editors (Abby Smith from April 2004-May 2005; Marlo Welshons from June 2005-November 2006) and an editorial subcommittee of four members of the Commission (Chuck Henry, Roy Rosenzweig, Steve Wheatley, John Unsworth).
- Meetings to review drafts with community stakeholders (February 2006) and representatives of funding agencies (June 2006).
- And for the chair, about 400 electronic documents, 1600 email messages, and 100,000 frequent flyer miles (for travel to sixteen presentations concerning the report at university colloquia, scholarly societies, summits, and other meetings in the United States, China, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Germany).

Results and Reactions

What actually happens as a result of such a report? In this case, as with the NSF Cyberinfrastructure report, the object was to change the funding landscape, but in our case there is no one funder who dominates that landscape as the NSF does in computational science. Therefore, in some real sense, it was an important outcome just to get representatives of the private foundations and the public funding agencies to talk with one another about a shared agenda, and it was an equally important outcome for the Commission to be able to represent the scholarly community in setting that agenda. [4]

The meeting with funders in June of 2006 to discuss the draft report was particularly interesting. The meeting was co-hosted by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and held at IMLS. Present, in addition to Mellon and IMLS representatives, were representatives of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the Library of Congress, the National Science Foundation, the J. Paul Getty Trust, the Teagle Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Archives and Records Administration. There were a number of useful and substantive suggestions made at that meeting, especially about the recommendations of the report and how to focus them more effectively on particular audiences and respondents. But for me, at least, the most striking thing about that meeting was the realization that it was extremely useful and important for the funding agencies to have a group and a process that could credibly claim to represent the aspirations of the community which those agencies served, because it would allow them to base their recommendations for programmatic goals on something other than their own perceptions of what was needed. In short, it would help them to make the case to their own boards, or (in the case of federal funders) to the legislature, that certain goals and activities were important to support. I have been working with both federal and private funders for fifteen years now, and in retrospect it should have been perfectly obvious to me that this was an important reason for doing the report, but it was not. Why? I think the reason is that when faculty think about research funding, we find it difficult to step outside of our immediate role as petitioners and think about the funding landscape from another perspective--that of the funder. It is a commonly understood dynamic, in science and engineering, that the community needs to come together and agree on research priorities for a particular field, in order for funding agencies to prioritize the programs they will offer and the goals they will pursue. Obviously, there are also other forces at work in setting funding priorities, and the process of "agreeing on research priorities" in a discipline is not necessarily a process that ends in consensus, or in a framework into which everyone fits. But in the humanities, the very notion of asking "What are the top research priorities?" in history or in English seems absurd, since the value of a research project in humanities disciplines is defined, to a large extent, by the originality with which it defines the question it aims to address. Nonetheless, one clearly useful outcome of the ACLS [5]

Commission's report was that it gave voice to some priorities of a research community--even if those priorities did not take the form of research problems to be solved, but of resources needed in digital form, or training and support, or policy changes.

Some of the direct effects of the ACLS Commission's report on funding agencies can be seen in their own framing of new programs. For example, in presenting its JISC/NEH Transatlantic Digitization Collaboration Grants program, the NEH notes that

> Collaboration between U.S. and English institutions is a key requirement for this grant category, based in part on the recommendations for international collaboration in Professor Sir Gareth Roberts's "International Partnerships of Research Excellence U.K.-U.S.A Academic Collaboration" (25-page PDF) and the report (51-page PDF) of the American Council for [sic] Learned Societies' Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Other indications are in the meetings sponsored, for example the NEH Summit Meeting of Digital Humanities Centers (April 12-13, 2007), organized with the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities and hosted at the NEH itself. The NEH's description says that "The meeting is part of NEH's Digital Humanities Initiative and was inspired by a recent report by the American Council of Learned Societies' Commission on Cyberinfrastructure" http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/cio/centers/. The Digital Humanities Initiative as a whole can be seen as a programmatic response to the ACLS report, and it was initiated about the same time that the draft report appeared for public comment. Other indicators of impact in funding agencies may be seen in the particular projects funded; for example, in the IMLS National Leadership Grants for 2007, the Council on Library and Information Resources was funded for "A National Program for Scholars' Analysis and Development of Cyberinfrastructure," which aims to coordinate "the new large-scale digital initiatives that are being developed across the country in line with the recommendations of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences" http://www.imls.gov/news/2007/092507_list.shtm. Further signs might be seen in what program officers are writing and speaking about, for example Joyce Ray (IMLS) speaking on "Building the Cyberinfrastructure in the U.S." at the JISC Digitisation Conference in Cardiff, Wales, July 19-20, 2007, or Chris Mackie (Mellon Foundation) writing on "Cyberinfrastructure, Institutions, and Sustainability" in *First Monday* in June 2007 http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue12_6/mackie/index.html, and what community thought-leaders are speaking about, for example Greg Crane's talk on "Repositories, Cyberinfrastructure And The Humanities" at the NSF/JISC Repositories Workshop in April, 2007, in Arizona http://www.sis.pitt.edu/~repwkshop/papers/crane.html. There's also been some international impact, as evidenced in "Our Cultural Commonwealth - notes de lectures," a largely favorable French commentary on the report dated January 5, 2007 http://artist.inist.fr/article.php3?id_article=376, and in Australia, where 2007's annual forum on Scholarly Communication, sponsored by the Australian Academy of the Humanities, featured discussion of the ACLS Commission's report http://www.humanities.org.au/Events/NSCF/NSCF2007/NSCF2007.htm.

Not everyone was happy with the Commission's report, of course. And while there were some *amicus curiae* briefs filed by scholars and academic libraries, the stakeholders who felt most alienated by the report were university presses and scholarly societies. This was in part because the draft of the report submitted for public comment was directly critical of presses and societies for failing to take risks, for taking a narrow view of their mission, and for lacking imagination. After some sharp feedback on the draft, the Commission did take a different tack in the final report, emphasizing positive examples rather than negative ones, and credit rather than blame, but publishers were not much mollified. A more or less typical response is this one, from Robert Townsend of the American Historical Association:

> [T]he report offers a rather fanciful lesson in the economics of scholarly publishing that makes first-copy costs and sustainability disappear into a fog of "public goods" and "collective action." The resulting picture should really trouble non-profit publishers, as the commission rather blithely erases our role in the system of scholarly communication along with the costs we have to recover. As a result, we seem to be re-cast as an unnecessary impediment to the development of a cyberinfrastructure. When the commission then calls on us to engage with other parties (librarians and university administrators) about these issues, it just seem to be inviting us into a dialogue about

the arrangements for our own funerals.

A more recent response, by Sandy Thatcher, director of Penn State's Press, repeats the complaint that the ACLS Commission's report is uninformed and unrealistic with respect to the harsh economic realities of university press and scholarly society publishing:

> [U]niversity presses would welcome the freedom to engage in the supply of a "pure public good" like knowledge free of severe economic constraints. Only the Commission doesn't tell us how to get to this promised land. It doesn't even include in the final report the acknowledgment of the draft report that...a variety of activities that presses could pursue..."could well produce sufficient value for libraries to be paid for in the cash economy in which publishers now largely operate, if publishers were properly capitalized to retool so they could provide such services." But that is just the point. Where does such capital come from?

And later in the same piece:

> University presses have been chronically underfunded, and even today few universities seem to have much inclination to invest in their presses so that they could "retool" themselves. On the contrary, to provide just one recent example, the announcement of the position of director of the SUNY Press includes this among its expectations: "increase financial assets of the Press with the goal of achieving financial sustainability within five years." In other words, the SUNY administration expects the press soon to operate with no subsidy from the university at all. There is no better way to hamstring a press from engaging in the kind of retooling and experimentation that the Commission calls for in this report. So long as such attitudes prevail among university administrators, the road to "open access" will remain closed as far as university presses are concerned.

What continues to puzzle me, as chair of the ACLS Commission, is that Presses don't see the report as anything that could be useful to them in their conversations with university administrators about just these issues, and also that these publishers--both university presses and scholarly societies--seem always to start from the premise that the status quo is non-negotiable, and then proceed to explain why they have no choice but to act as they have been acting, since the economic conditions under which they operate are non-negotiable. Certainly libraries and funding agencies did not respond to the report in that way, nor have libraries often missed the opportunity to turn criticisms to advantage, in their negotiation with university administrators. Still, it is true that there are some exceptional presses who are doing exceptional work that needs to be recognized--especially in those places where the press has worked out a productive partnership with the library (and, sometimes, the campus computing organization): Columbia's EPIC, The University of California Press's Mark Twain project (and CDL collaborations), and the University of Virginia Press's Rotunda imprint, which publishes a number of digital scholarly projects that began as library projects, or the University of Illinois' History Cooperative, which allows individual journals to experiment with pricing policies in a shared infrastructure for e-journal publishing. But these are remarkable precisely because they are exceptions, and the recent report from Ithaka ("University Publishing in a Digital Age") makes it clear that university presses are losing mind-share with their campus-level administrators, and losing the initiative to university libraries:

> In our interviews we detected significant detachment from administrators about publishing's connection to their core mission; a high level of energy and excitement from librarians about reinventing their roles on campus to meet the evolving needs of their constituents; and a wide range of responses from press directors, from those who are continuing to do what they have always done, to those who are actively reconnecting with their host institutions' academic programs and engaging in collaborative efforts to develop new electronic products.

According to this report, press directors

> acknowledge that they have not participated actively enough in the academic life of their campus,

nor have they effectively demonstrated their worth to faculty and administrators. As a director said, "We don't do a good job of telling our universities why we are important to them." One director spoke of a "feeling of divorce" from the university leadership, expressing what seems to be a common feeling among press leaders.

That divorce is not going to come with alimony, though, and if university presses don't figure out how to recast their role as more central to the campus each lives on, they will not be continuing their work somewhere else--they will be dismantled, possibly to be replaced by scholarly publishing offices in libraries, or by commercial publishers. Karla Hahn, who oversees the Association of Research Libraries' office of scholarly communication, estimated in a recent public presentation at the University of Illinois that over half of ARL libraries are now engaged in some kind of publishing activity.

Conclusion

These are internecine disputes, though. The most important audience for the humanities, and the audience least likely to be reached by a report from the American Council of Learned Societies--or by university presses, or by university libraries, for that matter--is the general public. And this was also the most difficult audience for the humanities scholars who addressed the Commission, and for the Commission itself. This is a point worth examining. The problem seemed to be that humanities scholars found it very difficult to say exactly why the work they do should matter to the general public; in fact, they often did not believe that it would. I believe that this is directly related to the aforementioned rhetoric of problem-solving: the sciences have a glorious and durable narrative of progress toward the greater good through medical advances, technological development, and scientific discoveries. Science, technology, and medicine are, arguably, insufficiently self-conscious about whether or not their research produces an unalloyed public good: in the history of the 20th century, for example, they seem remarkably untroubled by Hiroshima, at least in their public rhetoric; by contrast, the humanities seem to be keenly self-aware that expertise in the practice and appreciation of literature, music, philosophy didn't save Germany from Naziism, so they are reluctant to make simple-minded arguments about intrinsic social good arising from the appreciation of high culture. And the more complicated arguments that scholars might make for the value of their research or the importance of their disciplines seem to them to be arguments that will matter most to those who have already accepted the grounding assumption that the activity itself is worthy, rather than being arguments that would persuade someone to share that assumption. Interestingly, I think this self-abnegation is shared and even reinforced by university presses, who seem, on the whole, unable to believe in the Long Tail--unable, in other words, to believe that there are relatively large but widely dispersed and non-professional audiences for almost any humanities topic. In fact, I would argue that in this regard the humanities are much better off than the sciences: the public might want the results of scientific research, but they are not all that interested in the actual content and conduct of that research; in the humanities, research does have a general audience, but publishers aren't accustomed to looking for it. We need to look for it, though, and we need to connect with the public, in the cyberinfrastructure they increasingly inhabit in their daily lives. As I said in a 2006 presentation to the Association of American University Presses on "Vernacular Computing," the urgency to do this isn't just the presses'; it is also the universities':

> Fifteen years ago, the challenge before us was to imagine how new technology might provide a new platform for the practice of scholarship in the humanities, but today our challenge is the reverse. It is no longer about opening the university and inviting the public in: it's about getting out where they already live, and meeting the public in the information commons, on the same terms that everyone else does. In fact, it's almost too late for us. We will find that hard to believe, ensconced (as we all are) in solid-seeming residential universities, with long histories and the expectation of a long future — but older institutions on more solid foundations have been swept away or radically transformed in cultural upheavals of the past. In spite of the inertia of these institutions, which we all know so well, the forces of change outside the institution have much greater inertia, and all of the practical furniture of our daily academic lives could easily be gone, or changed beyond recognition, in a generation. (http://www3.isrl.uiuc.edu/~unsworth/ AAUP.2006.html)

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- "Revolutionizing Science and Engineering Through Cyberinfrastructure: Report of the National Science Foundation Blue-Ribbon Advisory Panel on Cyberinfrastructure." Dan Atkins et al. 2003. http://www.nsf.gov/od/oci/reports/toc.jsp
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