

Fundamental Unity: Cross Domain Collaboration of Libraries, Archives, and Museums

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### Abstract

The paths of libraries, archives, and museums, or LAMs, intersect even though they have different missions. Because of their similarities and the origins of historical collections, professionals have been looking to create a one-stop-shop for researchers by combining the collections of these institutions. It has not been without difficulty, though. Technology, which is meant to make life easier, actually has not solved the complexities of integrating descriptive aids, indexes, and metadata in a standard fashion. Time and persistent testing will prove if LAMs will benefit more from combining forces or remaining individual when trying to create the best environment for scholarly learning in today's world of internet technology. Arguments against conversion include loss of identity and tradition, but the defense of convergence also has strong ties to a historical period where collectors maintained cabinets of mixed record types.

*Keywords:* convergence, memory institutions, collaboration, library, archive, museum, technology

## Fundamental Unity: Cross Domain Collaboration of Libraries, Archives, and Museums

The topic of convergence of libraries, archives, and museums (LAMs) is not a millennial idea born out of the notion that information is to be made available on demand, with little effort from a simple Google search. The concept of convergence has been discussed since the 1800s. When LAMs have come together, they are commonly referred to as memory or knowledge institutions. Many factors involved when advocating for convergence include technology, education, the area of specialty, and proven case studies.

While many published studies have been conducted on this topic in the last decade, little progress has been made in the actual creation of converged resources and memory institutions. The question to answer and define relates to the sole purpose of the integrated institution. If not merely for remote access to electronic resources or to support a well-rounded comprehension of the past, then is technology the driving factor for convergence? This paper will identify components required in order for convergence to happen as well as analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of convergence through case studies to determine the value of convergence.

### **Background**

Since the beginning of LAM existence, they have experienced eras of both convergence and divergence. Libraries, archives, and museums sometimes are referred to as memory institutions or cultural heritage organizations, which gives the impression that they share similarities such as preserving cultural history, providing educational resources and making research materials available. However, what makes them distinct is the type of materials collected and how they are used. Convergence breaks down the divides among the three disciplines (VanderBerg, 2012).

During the Renaissance Period, the view was that "knowledge and objects of all kinds for study belonged together (Marcum, 2014, p. 82)." In the 17th century, scholars began collecting items of interest and housed them in locked cabinets of curiosities. They did not separate the books from personal journals or artifacts. It was more important to have access to the information in one place. Professionalism and specialization of the disciplines lead to a rise in the development of associations such as:

- 1876 - The American Library Association
- 1884 - The American Historical Association
- 1906 - The American Association of Museums
- 1936 - The Society of American Archivists
- 1940 - The American Association for State and Local History

Later in the 19th century, new ideas were developed as to how to maintain the vast amount of information collected, and how to make it available to the entire public whereas, in the past, it was only available to a particular class of people (Waibel, Erway, & Zorich, n.d.).

Scholars have varying ideas about what the fundamental purpose is for bringing libraries, archives, and museums together. Paulus wrote in a recent article that the objective is to "unify collections that have been broken up due to the type of materials in them, aggregates of related materials can be restored, and the possibilities for discovery, interpretation, and use can be enhanced (2011, p.186)." Another theory by Helena Robinson, who has written extensively on this subject, stated in an article that, "streamlined access to collection information, either by building integrated facilities, or creating joint digital pathways to information, will simultaneously deliver unprecedented access to knowledge for users (2014, p. 210)." Finally, Trant (2009) states a different opinion in that, "an integrated approach...of cultural heritage institutions needs to be built on an understanding of and respect for the differences between libraries, archives, and museums (p. 2)." These competing theories are what complicates a

decisive answer to the question of whether it is possible with these differences for LAM convergence to take place.

In order to better understand the intersection of libraries, archives, and museums, it should first be identified the specifics of each institution.

### **What are LAMs?**

Public and academic libraries exist for people to read and check out books as well as research information. Regardless of the type of user, both libraries contain multiple copies of published works cataloged by subject matter, which for the most part are available for circulation. Librarians are available to assist in the location of relevant resources but do not get involved in the use of the materials such as interpreting books for research questions. "This precludes the librarian from being an active educator or interpreter (Trant, 2009, p. 3)." Users may come and go without requiring documentation about what materials they accessed unless they desire to check them out of the library.

Archives act as repositories for agencies such as governments or corporations, and their subject matter is exclusive to the parent organization. These items are unique and non-circulating. Sadly, archives frequently have a stigma attached to them, which paint a picture of dusty, old, intellectual warehouses in basements. The collections are held by provenance and according to respect des fonds, and they have finding aids that govern the foundational information. Archivists play an active role in assisting the researcher in finding what they are looking for and can provide background and interpretation. Archivists will also maintain statistical information about the user and the collection (Trant, 2009).

Like an archive, museums are also subject matter institutions, such as modern art, natural history or local historical societies. Inside "unique artifacts, exceptional objects or specimens are presented in an exhibition space (Trant, 2009, p. 3)." These items have been removed from their original context, but have placards or labels describing and providing information about the items. While the museum is not a guided experience, the visitor is being instructed on what the curator wants them to see and in which order based on how the displays are situated. Museums are also an academic institution but can be more of an entertainment experience. Visitors do not have to be doing research or actively learning in order to visit a museum, whereas, a research project usually triggers a trip to the archive or an academic library.

To summarize the differences, Trant (2009) details the divergent properties of LAMs are narrowed down to the type of use and the resources. Library resources are to distribute information, museums protect and preserve unique intrinsic items, and archives contain transactional evidence. The use of a library is an individual act, for a museum it is social, and in an archive, the user is seeking answers to specific questions or transactions.

In his 2012 article *Converging Libraries, Archives, and Museums: Overcoming Distinctions, but for What Gain?*, VanderBerg refers to Deborah Wythe's position on convergence as being cautious of endorsing it. The reasons for her hesitation, as outlined in her 2007 article, are that museums operate differently than libraries and archives, which are more closely related. Libraries and archives share professional skills, standards, access to collections, and new technologies. Museums have not formally adopted industry standards or agree on what is included in public access. Museums also have visitors who pay a fee while libraries and archives have users who seek information for free (Wythe, 2007, p.51-53).

Wythe's points are valid, but they shouldn't exclude museums from converging with libraries and archives or even other institutions of learning. As discussed later, Presidential Libraries have always had the museum component, whether they started out as a small temporary exhibit or as an adjacent building. In addition, a museum visitor could become intrigued by an exhibit and want to go beyond the visual display while the interest is still fresh, and research it more in depth. The addition of a library or archive to the museum would enable the visitor to become a user. Such an idea is currently being studied concerning The Milwaukee Public Museum merging with the faltering Mitchell Park Domes Horticultural Conservatory ("The Future Museum-Milwaukee Public Museum," n.d.). If it would come to fruition, a visitor could see an artifact from the rainforest and then walk next door and experience live plants and feel the actual climate. Both would benefit from increased visitor access and shared resources.

### **Proponents of Convergence**

Considering the similarities of LAMs, primary sources, education, research, public access it seems obvious that they should be linked together via convergence. In a 2008 report by Florida State University, it was concluded that, "finding and promoting areas of convergence between libraries, archives, and museums does not require...professionals to discard areas they do not hold in common (p. 12)."

Proponents view convergence as, "recombining cultural resource fields and curatorial service professions that have too long been separated (Marcum, 2014, p.80)." Cohesive operations create more than just a library physically joined with a museum, for example. When done correctly, they produce a living history that validates the institutions working together in an ideal representation of a complete history that serves an entire population. This view is from the

public benefit side, but the good of the institution must also be taken into consideration. In a recent article, Marcum (2014) stated that "the need to compete for public attention, the desire to save money, and the encouragement of government grants have all played a part in stimulating the rise in cultural agency collaborations (p. 78)."

In theory, the convergence of library, archives, and museums will create a diverse environment where visitors/patrons have access to an increased amount of resources, thus elevating the amount of potential knowledge to be gained (Robinson, 2014). This, of course, is contingent upon making the most of the collections, as knowledge is not gained merely because everything is available in one location. Robinson (2014) goes on to further explain that museums structure their exhibits in a cognitive order that makes history more understandable as compared to libraries and archives where once information is accessed it is to be assembled by the user into an order that makes sense according to their research.

Proponents of convergence tend to focus on the users who are doing digital research and have no intention of venturing out from behind their computer screen. "Users want information about subjects, not information from a particular source... irrespective of the nature of the artifacts [*sic*] involved (Marcum, 2014, p. 74, 83)." LAMs individually have worked to produce a suitable amount of online content, via social media platforms and the institution's website. It demonstrates a commendable effort on their part; however, the online content remains separate, so researchers have to look in three different catalogs before exhausting their research options. Convergence eliminates that process. An extreme viewpoint, as pointed out by VanderBerg (2012) in a recent article is that if LAMs do not collaborate, they will face extinction. However, he does not proceed to cite any statistics surrounding a drop in visitors that would suggest extinction is on the horizon.

LAMs can also assume the role of a partner institution without merging, per se. Dilevko and Gottlieb (2003) suggest that libraries incorporate artifacts into their collection with the intent to show the correlation between the books and the objects. When museums deaccession objects or do not have enough space to exhibit them all, a library could take control of these collections and display them in a manner similar to the cabinets of curiosity of the past. This is a better use of resources that will draw an audience which leads to the rise in popularity of institutions that are quickly declining in popularity because of technology.

### **Convergence Contraposition**

The duty of LAMs include acting as a repository for historical items and providing access to materials under their possession. “Cross-institutional collaborations are nearly impossible without solid progress in agreement on standards (Wythe, 2007, p. 53).” While convergence appears to be the way of the future, it may not be the avenue for all cultural institutions. With technology and monetary constraints as obstacles, LAMs will need to refocus the way they do business and their marketability by “injecting the values and demonstrating the importance [of LAMs] to the cultural progress of human civilization (Michalko, 2007, p. 79).

The generation gap caused by technology has created a subset of users who are not comfortable with digitization and online access. Younger researchers might not have ever encountered microfilm or even know how to use it. Whereas, the baby boomers, and Gen X, may not be interested in virtual research. In a recent article published in the *Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage*, Doucet (2007, p. 64) asked a regular government historian of the Library and Archives of Canada about his feeling of doing research online, to

which he strongly objected for the reason that he did not trust whoever did the digitization of the records.

Presidential museum and libraries are the most recognizable convergence, but not everyone appreciates them. Some have called them, "hybrid research institutions/celebratory monuments/minor tourist attractions... whose contradictions are evident in the reading rooms and nearby gift shops (Benedetti, 2004, Conclusions para. 1)." This diminishes the task of balancing productive institutions dedicated to a common mission which is governed by the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955. An increase in the museum visitors can be assessed as a positive sign for the archives as well because the refreshing and evolving exhibits persuade the public to return again and again.

The more it seems that society talks about convergence and the reasons for it, there are just as many reasons to remain separate. It is a never-ending circle of convergence and divergence. For example, The Library and Archives of Canada came together in 2004, but administration soon realized that their acquisition strategy needed revision because it was too big of a task to be the only governmental institution responsible for long-term preservation of documentary heritage and items of national significance because of the breadth and diversity involved (Doucett, 2007, p.62-63)." The only logical approach is to return to a decentralized model in which many institutions participate.

LAMs have their own mission when it comes to recordkeeping, as well as maintaining functions and specific attributes that allow libraries, archives, and museums to remain distinct. According to VanderBerg (2012), the sacrifice of individual identity is a risk when associated with convergence.

## **Education**

\_\_\_\_\_ Traditionally, an archivist wouldn't be tasked with creating a museum display, nor would a curator be asked reference-related questions in a library. The field specialization of working in a library, archive or museum is part of what makes these institutions unique. However because "libraries, archives, and museums share an essential compatibility and purpose around the concept of memory and history (Robinson, 2012, p. 414), universities have begun to shape their curriculum to cover the entire cultural heritage landscape to teach a shared foundational knowledge (Latham, 2015).

This crossover learning would suggest that when professionals enter the industry after graduation, they could expect to perform various duties in one or more of the LAMs that they did not major in. Thus a world where distinctions of LAMs is less prevalent. University curriculum for the interdisciplinary learning focuses on core competencies and skills to prepare students for careers as "cultural heritage information professionals that transcend traditional boundaries of libraries, archives, and museums (Florida State University, 2008, p. 11)."

### **Technology Factors**

Technology is a significant factor, but not the only point of convergence. Katre believed that convergence has primarily been "explored mainly at the level of access, but should be explored at all possible levels such as education and professional practice, collection development and management, preservation, administration and sustenance (2011, p. 197)."

Dinesh Katre (2011, p. 195) points out a correlation to the proliferation of information technology and emerging digital preservation among LAMs. He explains that occurred when museums' digitized artifacts, and libraries began collecting e-books, and archives retained electronic records. In their effort to remain relevant in the digital age, museums have taken to

replacing traditional objects with interactive kiosks that can tell a story and provide more information than reading a placard on the side of a display. This is described as "post-object" which means a new age of interactions and processes, but not a focus on things.

Because museums need to compete for the time and attention of visitors, they have been emphasizing entertainment-based programming while deemphasizing their collections (Dilveko & Gotlieb, 2003). Marcum described in her 2014 article, three general types of partnerships for LAMs; collaborative programming, partnerships to create digital resources and establishing joint-use/integrated facilities (p.76)."

The mission of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, through grants, research, and policy development enable museums and libraries to partner with historical societies and schools to create "traveling exhibits, learning modules, community cultural heritage databases, multimedia web-based exhibits, links between institutions' websites, online aggregation of images, and other kinds of collaborative digitization projects using material from multiple collections (Marcum, 2014, p. 77)."

Museums need to be challenged to reconsider what it is they are curating and how they can facilitate access to it (Paulus, 2011, p. 196) because schools are moving towards a curriculum connected to the internet, "and other means of electronic teaching. However, they have problems finding authentic, reliable, high-quality materials. LAMs are bursting with rich content, but they have difficulty in either reaching the public or in maximizing the public's use of their resources (Pijoux Jr., 2007, p.58)."

The result of creating online collections for distance learners is that the distinction between records, books, and other material types becomes less clear when digitally manifested (Paulus, 2011, p. 196). Users are unaware of what LAMs have or how to use the resources

"because they are becoming accustomed to going elsewhere to discover what exists, even if it means providing a surrogate for the real thing (Michalko, 2007, p 78-79)." It also appears to be ineffective according to Waibel et al. (n.d.), who found in a recent survey that 84% of respondents begin their research via an internet search engine compared to 1% who start with a library website.

Libraries, archives, and museums spend a significant portion of their budget on technology. This money could be saved if duplicative search platforms are consolidated with partner institutions in order to create one unified search. The Encoded Archival Description standard was developed in 1995 for the purpose of "listing and describing the holdings of libraries, archives, and museums in a manner that would be machine-readable and easy to search, maintain, and exchange (Katre, 2011, p.196)." In 2007, Katherine Timms wrote about the technological barriers to creating integrated descriptive systems. Two such obstacles described were technological and semantic interoperability.

In converging LAMs, it makes sense to share resources. However, it is not likely that each institution would be using the same type of technology platforms or information systems, so a method needs to be devised in which they could either be linked or integrated into one hybrid so that when searching, the results are generated from a variety of different sources. This is where the problem with semantics comes into play. While an archive may use the word creator, a library may use the term author, and this creates issues when attempting to do research. Unless a federated search tool is in use, the researcher would not be able to see results from both databases, but rather only the one whose keyword was used. To eliminate the semantic problem, field properties - not the content- would need to be mapped to each other when connecting databases (Timms, 2007, p. 90-98).

### **Online Computer Library Center (OCLC)**

The Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) is a "global library cooperative that provides shared technology services, original research, and community programs." Founded in 1967, it currently has thousands of members in more than 100 countries, as well as a research center designed to address the technical issues in which archives and libraries are struggling. The OCLC's mission is to "come together as OCLC to make information more accessible and more useful because what is known, must be shared ("About OCLC," n.d.)."

Throughout 2017 and 2018, the OCLC and sixteen partner libraries worked to research and test a program that would link and integrate data types and devised a Wikibase prototype. The way it proposes to work is to come up with a controlled vocabulary of search terms and reconcile them with bibliographic entries and descriptions and then create relationships between them, while also incorporating the WorldCat into the search explorer ("Linked Data Prototype," n.d.). As of December 2018, it is still in the development phase.

### **Case Studies**

The following case studies provide a summary of convergences of LAMs in a variety of settings in order to prove that the cross-domain collaboration is possible and successful. The complexity of the mergers are not always an obstacle and can be taken in stages after the process has begun.

In 2011, Paulus published an article on this topic using a collector named Myron Eells as an example of advocacy for convergence. The article demonstrates how collecting began as a

conglomerate, but over time had been segregated based on industry standards. The article advocates for returning the collection to the way was under Eells's possession.

As the title indicates, Myron Eells was a curious collector of things relating to the Pacific Northwest. Paulus described Eells as, "a student and curator of the written and unwritten records of the people and places around him (p. 186)." His collection started in 1874 and included, personal papers and journals, books he needed for reference, scrapbooks of printed material, photographs, and newspaper clippings, as well as other artifacts and specimens that he found significant; all of which were cataloged and indexed by Eells for future reference.

Upon his death in 1907, all he had accumulated on the Pacific Northwest was donated to Whitman College except for his personal papers which were kept by his family until 1961. The papers were not viewed as part of the original collection, and yet they contained the documentation to unify all elements of the collection. Eells's collection was ultimately dispersed according to the type of material to libraries, archives, and museums beyond Whitman College. Some of his 1,800 books were incorporated into special collections, others went into the general library collection, his personal papers landed in the archive, and many of the 1,600 specimens and objects are in a museum. This is in contrast to the way in which Eells maintained his collections in one place, "but in the new modern age of diversified specialization, LAMs began to diverge professionally, and collections such as Eells's- and the organic connections within them- were destined to become fragmented. (Paulus, 2011, p. 196)."

Paulus also pointed out that it was not easy to research once the elements of the collections were separated. If convergence is meant to coalesce the makeup of LAMs in such a way that makes it easier for researchers to locate a variety of sources, then those in charge of Eells's collection have failed by taking the traditionalist approach in compartmentalizing the

types of materials in Eells's collection based on the specializations of LAMs and to the point of potentially losing their true meaning.

The example of Presidential Libraries and Museums seem so commonplace today that many do not even recognize them as ever being separate institutions. The Library of Congress collected presidential papers and the like from George Washington through Calvin Coolidge. It was not until Franklin D. Roosevelt that presidential libraries, "raised expectations about the people's right to examine and analyze presidential records (Benedetti, 2004, Archival Considerations para. 1)." The Truman library devoted itself to fostering research in fields of history and political science by adding an oral history component to their archives as well as expanding the exhibits beyond the personal belongings of the president to include pieces from the era."

The next case study involves the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, which didn't undergo convergence, as at its inception it was connected to the Birmingham Public Library when it opened to the public in 1992. The fledgling institute benefited from the partnership with the library because it could draw on the library's established collection policies, and could piggy-back off of their website. Within a few years, the institute was able to separate, but continued to improve by collaborating with other facilities and schools to develop education programs, and online exhibits to, "produce an easily accessible means for getting high quality media into the hands of educators and students (Pijaux, Jr., 2007, p. 58)."

The Library and Archives of Canada were previously separate institutions, but they merged in 2004 to form a new kind of knowledge institution. The government saw this merger as a sensible solution because the buildings were physically located across from each other and the staff operated out of both locations. Other than that, the reasons for convergence were due to

dwindling resources, advancing technology, and solving the challenge of creating access for the dispersed population throughout Canada, the world's second largest country. The Library and Archives of Canada did this by "offering multichannel services, reaching people where they live through virtual reference, digital content and digitization on demand (Doucet, 2007, p. 64)."

They have a mandate from the government that allows them the authority to create museum-like buildings in order to increase the understanding of the Canadian experience. Other innovative features of the convergence involve an improved online search engine from only a single database to a federated self-search mechanism. For those who are visiting in person, they have created a new building layout, as Doucet (2007, p.63) describes it, similar to an emergency room triage where visitors' needs are assessed, and those who require assistance are directed one way, and the independent researchers go another. This system replaced the old layout of having floors dedicated to specific disciplines.

## **Conclusion**

The arguments for and against convergence, along with the case studies, demonstrate that common sense, as well as practical convenience, is to have a library, museum, and archive housed in the same facility to provide universal access. However, universal access oversimplifies convergence. Careful consideration by all institutions involved is vital so that the individuality of the LAMs are sustained. The primary goal is for public access, but because of the differences in which material is maintained and used at a library versus a museum or archive, lumping them together into a memory institution will not solve all of the problems. Retaining individual identity suggests a no vote for convergence.

After the research has been concluded and both sides of the convergence argument weighed, the best recommendation for LAMs is ambiguous. Maintaining a traditionalist attitude to remain individual despite having some overlapping qualities, may be the best answer in some cases. The overall experience involved in conducting research also adds to the knowledge scholars acquire. There is something to be said for appearing in person or even getting to hold history in your hand that cannot be replicated via the internet.

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