

Slavic Studies and Slavic Librarianship in the United States: A Post-Cold War Perspective (Excerpts)

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This article reprints excerpts from Aaron Trehub's piece about the relationship between Slavic studies and Slavic librarianship in the United States in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War. The author, who at the time was Slavic librarian and bibliographer (and former Soviet affairs analyst), notes that through a curious quirk of history, the collapse of communism coincided with the birth of a powerful new communications medium (the World Wide Web). Together, these geopolitical and technological developments have fundamentally changed librarianship in general and Slavic librarianship in particular. Trehub's discussion of the various day-to-day difficulties experienced by Slavic librarians in the post-Cold War period pays special attention to the challenges that new information technologies create for patrons, as well as the instructional burden that this places on librarians. He suggests that excessive reliance on the Web may erode the capacity to reason critically, but admits that the long-term effects of digitization on education and research are unclear. In effect, Trehub's essay provides the historical background for re-evaluating what competencies constitute Slavic information literacy in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS *Slavic studies, Slavic librarianship, information technologies, United States, library, libraries*

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SLAVIC STUDIES AND SLAVIC LIBRARIANSHIP

Simply put, the mission of Slavic studies in the United States is to support education and research on the Slavic world and East-Central Europe, promote public awareness and understanding of the region, and contribute to intelligent governmental policy-making. In the words of Horace G. Lunt, emeritus professor of Slavic languages and literatures at Harvard University, the mission of Slavic studies has been “to make Americans aware of the Slavic world and its culture, as a matter of general significance, and to train a few Americans in the languages and the history so that dealings with Slavic countries can be conducted intelligently.”¹

If the mission of Slavic studies is to promote scholarship on and public understanding of the region, the task of Slavic librarianship has traditionally been to support this mission by identifying, acquiring, and organizing the raw material of education and scholarship: books, journals, and, increasingly, electronic resources.

In some respects, the history of Slavic librarianship in the United States has paralleled the history of Slavic studies, with a sustained period of growth and expansion beginning in the late 1950s and continuing well into the 1980s. This can be seen in the growth of Slavic library collections. The authors of a 1957 study identified five major Russian and East European library collections (50,000 or more volumes) in the United States: the Library of Congress, Columbia University, the Hoover Institution, the New York Public Library, and Harvard University.² A similar census conducted today would have to add the collections at the University of California, Berkeley (600,000+ Slavic and East European volumes); the University of California, Los Angeles (300,000+ volumes); Stanford University (over one million “information units”); the University of Washington at Seattle (380,000+ volumes); the University of Kansas (300,000+ volumes); the University of Wisconsin at Madison (550,000+ volumes); the University of Chicago (525,000+ volumes); the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (638,000+ volumes); Indiana University (525,000–550,000 volumes); the University of Michigan (376,000+ volumes); Princeton University (250,000+ volumes); and Yale University (600,000+ volumes).³ There are also archives and special collections devoted to Slavic and East European topics at large and small universities alike (examples: the Osip Mandelshtam Papers at the Princeton University Library, the Alliance College Polish Collection at the University of Pittsburgh, and the Amherst Center for Russian Culture at Amherst College).⁴

In a 1996 article in *Solanus*, the British journal of Slavic librarianship, June Pachuta Farris of the University of Chicago Library identified six specific tasks of the Slavic librarian: (1) to provide the library’s primary users with the materials and information they need to conduct their study, teaching, and research; (2) to maintain a reasonable and representative level of

acquisitions of newer materials in all of the languages and from all of the countries in our field; (3) to maintain in-depth coverage in those areas of the humanities and social sciences that have formed the basis of the library's academic collections; (4) to build collections in new areas of research; (5) to preserve the library's collections using traditional and new technologies; and (6) to continue to make the library's collections as physically and bibliographically accessible as possible, using traditional and new technologies.⁵

Although these tasks have not changed, the events of the past decade have made some of them more complex. The day-to-day difficulties of Slavic librarianship in the post-Cold War period have been the subject of much debate in the professional journals and online discussion groups. The main problems appear to be the erosion of bibliographic control, the disappearance of established vendors and their replacement by a bewildering number of new and untested firms, stagnant or inadequate acquisitions budgets, and ineffective exchange programs.

1. Bibliographic control. One of the casualties of the collapse of communism in Russia and East-Central Europe was the system of bibliographic control. In the old days, when state publishing houses had a monopoly on the publishing business, it was fairly easy to find out what had been published in which subject areas. Since the fall of communism and the spread of independent, commercial publishing companies, finding out what is available has become more difficult, and Slavic librarians have had to resort to a patchwork of sources of varying quality and dependability.⁶
2. Vendors. The events of 1989–1991 and their aftermath upset long-standing relationships between Slavic librarians in the United States and commercial vendors in the U.S. and Europe, some of whom went out of business. It has taken a few years for Slavic librarians to find new sources of supply, although the worst crisis appears to be over.
3. Budgets. Acquisitions budgets for Slavic materials at most institutions have stagnated or declined since 1991. Even relatively stable budgets can be problematic, since prices for books and serials from East-Central Europe and the former Soviet Union have risen since 1991, as have postage costs.
4. Exchange programs. Exchanges have become an especially controversial topic among Slavic librarians in the United States since the end of the Cold War. Supporters of exchanges argue that they provide cultural and professional benefits that cannot easily be quantified, although some proponents have attempted to show that exchanges can be cost-effective, or at least no less cost-effective than traditional purchases.⁷ Skeptics argue that exchanges are inefficient, ineffective, and consume staff time and resources that could be better applied elsewhere.

Exchanges, they say, should be replaced by straightforward business arrangements. In the words of Stephen D. Corrsin of Wayne State University, "money is used because it works."⁸ The observer is left to conclude that while exchanges may be difficult to justify financially, many institutions will continue to support them out of the conviction that the cultural benefits outweigh the material costs. Given the fluid publishing environment in Russia and East-Central Europe, exchange partners can also play a useful role as on-the-ground acquisitions agents and sources of information on the local publishing scene.⁹ Perhaps the last word in the exchange vs. purchase debate should be given to Murlin Croucher of Indiana University, who pointed out during a lively online discussion of the topic that purchases and exchanges are, in the end, equally unsatisfactory. In Croucher's words, "neither system works."¹⁰

SLAVIC LIBRARIANSHIP, THE INTERNET, AND THE WORLD WIDE WEB

Through a curious quirk of history, the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War coincided with the birth of a powerful new communications medium: the World Wide Web. The advent of the Internet and the Web has fundamentally changed librarianship in general and Slavic librarianship in particular. Thanks to the Internet, Slavic librarians in the United States and their colleagues in other countries can remain in virtual contact throughout the year, independently of conferences and meetings. Slavic librarians use the Internet to trade information about vendors and book prices, verify bibliographic citations, request copies of materials not in their collections, and discuss issues affecting the profession generally. The *Slavic Librarians' E-Mail Forum* was started in 1991 by Allan Urbanic of the University of California, Berkeley. It now has over 250 members in the United States, Canada, Eastern and Western Europe, and the former Soviet Union. Newcomers are welcome; the only requirement is that members work at colleges, universities, or other non-profit institutions and have some professional connection with Slavic librarianship or information management. In its almost nine years of existence, the *Forum* has proven its worth repeatedly. Reference questions and requests for bibliographic citations or copies of articles are almost always answered the same day, often within a couple of hours.

The array of Slavic offerings on the Web continues to grow, outstripping the ability of even the most diligent monitors to keep track of it. In a 1997 article, Ingo Manteuffel briefly described over 140 Web sites in North America, Europe, East-Central Europe, and the states of the former Soviet Union that are devoted to Slavic studies.¹¹ Many of these sites are still active, but many are not, or are doing business at new addresses. Perhaps

the best-known gateway to Slavic and East European resources on the World Wide Web is *REESWeb*, which is maintained at the University of Pittsburgh by Slavic Bibliographer Karen Rondestvedt.¹² Keeping *REESWeb* up to date is a full—time—perhaps even a Sisyphian—job.¹³

It is now possible to read attractive online versions of Russian and East European newspapers and magazines. Using World Wide Web plug-ins (accessory software programs, often available for free) librarians, scholars, and students can use their desktop computers to listen to broadcasts in Russian, Polish, and other languages, and watch videos. They can participate in moderated online discussion groups on a wide variety of topics in our field; for example, the Michigan State University-based *H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online* offers several discussion networks that touch directly or indirectly on Slavic studies, including *H-Russia* (Russian History), *HABSBURG* (devoted to the “culture and history of the Habsburg Monarchy and its successor states in central Europe from 1500 to the present”), and *H-German* (German History).¹⁴ They can read online descriptions of archives in Russia and East-Central Europe, and even peruse detailed finding aids. And they can order copies of hard-to-obtain materials through online document-delivery services.

There are gaps in this impressive array of resources, however. Five years ago, I remarked that the number of online bibliographic resources in Slavic studies (including online library catalogs in Russia and East-Central Europe) was relatively small.¹⁵ This is still true, but the situation is improving. The *Libweb* list of library Web servers around the world currently has links to 64 libraries in East-Central Europe and the former Soviet Union, including the national libraries of Belarus, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Russia, Serbia, and Slovenia.¹⁶ The *GABRIEL* gateway to the national libraries of Europe contains links to these libraries, as well as information about (and, where available, links to) the national libraries of Albania, Bulgaria, Latvia, Macedonia, and Romania.¹⁷ The *Russian@Rus* Web site (formerly called AU!) has links to over 90 libraries in the Russian Federation, including many regional libraries.¹⁸ The fact that a library has a Web page does not necessarily mean that it has an online catalog, however, and there are many library Web sites in Russia and Eastern Europe that provide general information about their collections but no way to search them. Even when an online catalog is available, trying to search it can be a frustrating experience, primarily because of problems with incompatible keyboard drivers and character sets. These difficulties can be overcome, but the effort is not for the easily discouraged. One can only hope that the rapid evolution of the Web will bring improvements in this area.

Progress is being made in other areas. In addition to *ABSEES Online*, researchers can now access an online version of the *European Bibliography of Slavic and East European Studies*.¹⁹ Together, the two bibliographies will

soon cover much of the recent (since 1990) scholarship in our field published north of the Rio Grande and west of the Oder-Neisse Line. *RussGUS*, a large (170,000+ records) bibliographic database of German-language materials on Russia and the former Soviet Union, formerly housed at the Freie Universität Berlin, recently moved and can now be accessed through a Web server at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.²⁰ Finally, the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS INION) bibliographies are available online (for a fee) through the Research Libraries Group's *CitaDel* collection of specialized databases in the social sciences and humanities.²¹

For all its usefulness, however, the Internet is a mixed blessing. It has facilitated communication among Slavic librarians and helped to restore a measure of bibliographic control. At the same time, it has led to the proliferation of expensive electronic resources and the crowding-out of more traditional tools. Some of the new resources are very good and represent a substantial improvement over their print or microform counterparts. Others do not. Either way, evaluating electronic resources—comparing them with the traditional products they purport to replace and figuring out the intricacies of the licensing agreement—takes time.²² There is also the problem of back issues. When a library buys a book or a serial, it acquires a tangible product that can be used even after the library's subscription has expired. Online resources are ephemeral. They are there only as long as one pays for them; and in most cases the library that cancels its subscription cannot access back issues it has already paid for. In short, online resources put an additional burden on the already inadequate budgets of Slavic librarians. They can divert money away from less advanced but more stable—and in some cases more useful—materials. Resisting the allure of digital resources can be difficult, especially if faculty members or other library departments are lobbying for their acquisition. In Bradley Schaffner's words, "librarians must avoid the danger of prioritizing the acquisition of electronic resources over the acquisition of equally important publications which are not digitalized."²³ Electronic resources also place an additional instructional burden on librarians. Reading a book or journal is an intuitive activity. Locating and navigating a Web site, or downloading and installing a new font, or searching an online database, are not. Instead of making things easier for patrons, the technology has presented them with a new set of challenges. The Slavic Reference Service at the Slavic and East European Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign typically handles around 3,000 reference questions a year. According to its manager, Helen Sullivan, the service now spends up to fifty percent of its time helping patrons with computer-related problems.²⁴ Finally, the growing popularity of electronic resources contains a more subtle danger: the possibility that the availability or non-availability of research materials in electronic form will determine the research agendas of students and future scholars in the field. In other words, there is a danger that the medium will drive the scholarship.

There are signs that this is already happening. Schaffner, head of the Slavic Department at the University of Kansas Libraries, writes that “on several occasions, students have asked for assistance in changing the focus of their research to a topic that could be searched using only electronic sources.”²⁵

I share Schaffner’s and Sullivan’s reservations about electronic resources, and could add a few of my own. Although this complex question is outside the scope of this essay, I am skeptical about predictions of the death of the book and the demise of traditional print-based libraries. Most of the human record is on paper or in microform. Converting it all to digital form, even if it were technically feasible, would be prohibitively expensive. Some sort of triage is inevitable. Nor am I convinced that all digital resources are inherently superior to their printed or microform counterparts. The long-term effects of digitization on education and research are unclear. For my part, I suspect that tangible, linear artifacts—books—have distinct cognitive advantages over Web sites and hypertext, at least when it comes to the transmission and assimilation of knowledge. Precisely because they lack interactive embellishments, books induce the reader to use his or her imagination to achieve the kind of original insights on which knowledge and scholarship are based. There is a danger that excessive reliance on the Web as a tool for teaching and research will erode the capacity to reason critically.

That said, electronic resources are here to stay (or perhaps not, if concerns about their long-term accessibility turn out to be valid). There is not much that we can do to reduce their appeal to students and researchers. Our task as librarians is to encourage the production of high-quality electronic products (with liberal licensing policies) and to see to it that poor products or products with overly restrictive policies do not flourish.

Above all, we need to turn the new technologies to our advantage. One way to do this is to create new online resources in Slavic studies. This is not as improbable as it may sound. The Web is a powerful tool for publishing and disseminating information, and the experience of *ABSEES Online* and the *European Bibliography of Slavic and East European Studies* has shown that it is possible to create high-quality online databases with fairly modest resources. Furthermore, the last two or three years have seen the appearance of increasingly powerful and user-friendly commercial software packages for linking back-end databases directly to the Web and controlling how the records are displayed. Librarians can also take advantage of commercially available software programs that enable users to design professional-quality Web sites.

The Web has also created interesting possibilities for international collaboration in the development of new online services. Collaboration in the production of reference works is nothing new. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is a monument to scholarly collaboration, as is the *Oxford English Dictionary*. *The Handbook of Latin American Studies* is compiled with the help of more than 130 contributing editors from around the world.²⁶ However, the Web has made collaboration easier, and a number of reference

works have already taken advantage of it. Some examples of Web-based collaborative reference works in the social sciences and the humanities are the *Social Science Information Gateway* (SOSIG);²⁷ the *Global Legal Information Network* (GLIN);²⁸ and the *Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale* = *International Repertory of Music Literature* (RILM).²⁹ SOSIG and GLIN are free services; the RILM is fee-based.

Like SOSIG, GLIN, and the RILM, *ABSEES Online* is adopting the collaborative model. The editors are currently developing a Web-based work form—complete with pre-formatted picklists for document type, language, journal, publisher, series title, date, and subject headings—for creating and submitting bibliographic records from anywhere in the world.

We expect that the new system will be in place by the fall of 2000. When it is, it will bring a long-standing goal within reach. In 1993, Prosser Gifford of the Library of Congress outlined an international project to create a single integrated database combining national library catalogs in East-Central Europe with Slavic studies bibliographies in the West.³⁰ Dubbed WEBNET (for World East European Bibliographic Network), the project failed, largely because of technical problems (the first graphical Web browser, NCSA Mosaic, had not yet appeared), a lack of coordination among the participants, and the rapid pace of political change in the region. Thanks to the interactive properties of the Web, the vision behind WEBNET can now be realized. The content is there; so is the technology. What is needed is a plan for bringing them together—and the resources and the will to do it.

CONCLUSION

At the end of her 1996 overview of Slavic librarianship in North America, June Pachuta Farris predicted that the latter half of the decade would see a better understanding of exchange programs, improved bibliographic and physical access to special collections and archives, improved bibliographic control over published materials in countries of interest, a more stable infrastructure for publishers and commercial vendors, a more stable pricing system, and a continuing increase in communication and cooperation among Slavic librarians around the world.

For the most part, these predictions have come true.³¹ Slavic librarians in the United States have managed to adapt to the post-Cold War environment. The grim scenarios envisaged by some observers just a few years ago—of ever worsening bibliographic chaos and collections in the United States slipping into irreversible decline—have not come to pass. To be sure, some things are more difficult than they were ten or fifteen years ago, but the profession is coping.

The Cold War is over, and with it the extraordinary prominence of Slavic studies in the United States. To paraphrase William Butler Yeats, Slavic

studies—and Slavic librarianship—have experienced a “withering into the truth” since 1991. Some observers may regard this as a return to normalcy; others may view it as a sign of decline. So far at least, the process appears to have been rather good for the field, with the drop in external funding and student enrollments being partly offset by a more lively intellectual atmosphere and new opportunities for research and scholarly collaboration. In much the same way, the end of the Cold War has given Slavic librarians in the United States the opportunity to rethink their mission, forge new alliances with colleagues in other countries and other disciplines, and explore the possibilities offered by the new information technologies. The task now is to exploit this opportunity.

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NOTES

1. Horace G. Lunt, “On the History of Slavic Studies in the United States,” *Slavic Review* 46, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 296.

2. Melville J. Ruggles and Vaclav Mostecky, *Russian and East European Publications in the Libraries of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 297. This census was the first—and, unfortunately, the last—attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of Slavic and East European library collections in the United States.

3. A list of Slavic and East European library collections in the United States and other countries can be found at http://www.aatseel.org/russian_and_east_lib.

4. For information about these collections, go to: <http://diglib.princeton.edu/ead/getEad?id=ark:/88435/736664523>; <http://www.library.pitt.edu/libraries/ac/ac.html>; and <http://www3.amherst.edu/~acrc/>.

5. June Pachuta Farris, “Slavic Studies Librarians in North America: Current Challenges and Future Expectations,” *Solanus*, n. s. 10 (1996): 181.

6. For a concise overview of this and other questions having to do with Slavic acquisitions, see Thomas D. Kilton, “Selecting and Acquiring Materials from Abroad,” in *Understanding the Business of Library Acquisitions*, ed. Karen A. Schmidt, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: American Library Association, 1999), 100–142.

7. Tatjana Lorkovic and Eric A. Johnson, "Serial and Book Exchanges with the Former Soviet Union," *Serials Librarian* 31, no. 4 (1997): 59–87.
8. Stephen D. Corrsin, "Notes for the 1997 AAASS Exchanges/Purchases Panel," 29th National Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Seattle, Washington, 20–23 November 1997. Availability: send e-mail request to slavlibs@library.berkeley.edu.
9. My thanks to Robert H. Burger of the Slavic and East European Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for this point. See also Karen Rondestvedt, "Russian-American Book and Serials Exchanges Viewed from the United States," a paper read at Seminar for Slavic Department Librarians, Moscow, Russia, 5 October 1998. Availability: send e-mail request to slavlibs@library.berkeley.edu.
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12. *REESWeb*, <http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/reesweb/>.
13. Karen Rondestvedt, "Growing Pains at *REESWeb*: Thoughts on Restructuring a Link Site Which Has Outgrown Its Organization," *Journal of Internet Cataloging* 1, no. 3 (1998): 47–57.
14. *H-Net*, <http://www.h-net.msu.edu>.
15. Aaron Trehub, "Slavic Librarianship and the World Wide Web: Creating Content," in *Libraries in Europe's Post-Communist Countries: Their International Context* (Cracow: Polskie Towarzystwo Bibliologiczne, 1996), 211–217.
16. *Libweb*, <http://lists.webjunction.org/libweb/>.
17. *GABRIEL*, <http://search.theeuropeanlibrary.org/portal/en/index.html>.
18. *Russian@Rus*, <http://www.atrus.ru/rus/themes.asp?id5175> (defunct).
19. *ABSEES Online*, <http://www.library.uiuc.edu/absees/>; *European Bibliography of Slavic and East European Studies*, <http://ebsees.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/>.
20. *RussGUS*, <http://www.ib.hu-berlin.de/~pbuhrn/russgus.htm>.
21. *Russian Academy of Sciences Bibliographies*. The *Russian Academy of Sciences Bibliographies* database is now marketed through *OCLC* as part of its FirstSearch service: <http://www.oclc.org/support/documentation/FirstSearch/databases/dbdetails/details/RussianAcadSci.htm>.
22. For the factors that go into evaluating an electronic reference resource, see Mark D. Steinberg and Helen F. Sullivan's review of K. G. Saur's *Complete Archival Guide to the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art* on CD-ROM in *Slavic Review* 56, no. 2 (1997): 350–352.
23. Bradley L. Schaffner, "The Effects of the Digital Revolution on Libraries and Research," *AAASS NewsNet* 38, no. 3 (1998): 1–3.
24. Helen Sullivan, personal communication, 15 November 1999. The Slavic Reference Service can be found at <http://www.library.illinois.edu/spx/srs.html>.
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28. *Global Legal Information Network*, <http://www.glin.gov/search.action>.
29. *Repertoire International de Littérature Musicale*, <http://www.rilm.org/>.
30. Prosser Gifford, "The Libraries of Eastern Europe: Information and Democracy," *Representations* 42 (1993): 100–106.
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