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Keeping it safe, keeping it available: theft prevention in special collections

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Abstract

Recent thefts of early cartographic material from several major special collections in the USA and abroad have refocused attention on the age-old problem of security and theft prevention in libraries. These thefts have highlighted a perceived lack of responsiveness of the legal system to these cultural crimes. Numerous commentators have recommended a host of preventive measures: security cameras, decreased accessibility to valuable items, visible and invisible markings of maps and prints, increased screening of potential researchers, weighing items at check-out and check-in, and more. Actual responses by major institutions have been mixed, with some enhancing visible security, and others responding with negligible change. Some of the suggested measures may not be implemented due to budgetary constraint, or due to fears of further marginalizing collection use (i.e., limiting access).

Introduction

Mendoza: I am a brigand: I live by robbing the rich.

Tanner: I am a gentleman: I live by robbing the poor.

From George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*, act 3, 1903.

Recent high-profile thefts from a number of respected special collections libraries have likely blunted the library world's appreciation of Shaw's clever repartee. These thefts have highlighted a perceived lack of responsiveness of the legal system to these cultural crimes. Numerous commentators have recommended a host of preventive measures: security cameras, decreased accessibility to valuable items, visible and invisible markings of maps and prints, increased screening of potential researchers, weighing items at check-out and check-in, and more. Actual responses by major institutions have been mixed, with some enhancing visible security, and others responding with negligible change. Some of the suggested measures may not be implemented due to budgetary constraints or fears of further marginalizing collection use (i.e., limiting access). Whatever actions are taken, it is important not to discourage the use of historical documents of cultural significance.

The Exploits of Smiley

The most current and highly publicized recent thefts from special collections are those perpetrated by Forbes Smiley (Campbell, 2007), a well-known antiquarian map dealer convicted of stealing 97 valuable maps. Most of these were removed from books, as opposed to being taken from the map collections, of various institutions (Carson, 2006), including Yale's Beinecke and Sterling Libraries, Harvard College Library, Boston Public Library, New York Public Library, and the British Library. A general list detailing the stolen maps may be seen at <http://www.nymapsociety.org/FEATURES/MASTER.PDF>, part of a larger set of pages maintained by John Woram (2006). Fortunately, in large part due to improved cooperation of the affected libraries with federal investigators, the vast majority of these maps were recovered. Smiley's method was relatively low-tech, relying on established trusts and an X-acto knife hidden in a sports coat pocket.

Smiley's thieving is not the only episode in recent decades. Nicholas A. Basbanes in his popular book, *A Gentle Madness* (1995), details the escapades of book thief Stephen Blumberg, who was not a dealer, but a collector who accumulated over 23,000 items during his "career." There is also Miles Harvey's *The Island of Lost Maps* (2000), which chronicles the map-razoring antics of Gilbert Bland. The most recent biblioklept expose is by Travis McDade (2006), detailing the antics of Daniel Spiegelman

Kim Martineau, a reporter from the Hartford Courant, has chronicled Smiley's publicized escapades from the beginning (see the ongoing list of news articles at <http://www.maphistory.info/smileynews.html>). Copies of Smiley's US District Court indictment (http://www.mcwetboy.net/maproom/files/smiley_information.pdf) and eventual plea agreement

(http://www.mcwetboy.net/maproom/files/smiley_plea_agreement.pdf) may be seen online.

The History of Book Theft

Book theft is nothing new (Nathe, 2005). Cicero had complained of the problem (Thompson, 1968), and it is likely that the problem has existed for as long as the library. The problems are international in scope (Fleet, 2002). Many historically prominent thieves were actually collectors, not dealers, and often would be considered connoisseurs (Gandert, 1982). Cremers (2005) has asserted that many rare book, manuscript, and map thefts are actually "insider jobs." This idea is neither universally accepted nor supported by existing theft reports (Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) Security Committee, 2005). What might be a more accurate statement is that the thieves are usually very familiar with the material.

Special collections have a unique nature, being part library, part museum, and part archive. They hold materials that are of substantial monetary and artifactual value. As evidenced by the preceding examples of Smiley, Blumberg, and Bland, whole volumes or individual plates can be stolen. Valuable atlases and plate books are secretly sliced for their salable content. The sale of these sorts of artifacts has, in recent years, been facilitated by the popularity of large, international electronic auction markets, the most prominent being eBay. These proliferating venues are very difficult to monitor, in part due to their size and the speed of merchandise movement (Waller, 2006). Some of the past writings on book theft nearly mythologize the process, unfortunately minimizing the damages done by the theft of valuable cultural artifacts (Carson, 2006). One historical problem, perhaps undergoing recent change, has been the relatively minimal punishment attached to book thefts (Allen, 1997).

Just Lock 'Em Up?

A knee-jerk response to the problem is simply to restrict all access to valuable materials held within special collections. Do not let anyone near the originals. Use digital surrogates. For many librarians this solution—impeding access by students, researchers, scholars, library staff, and other legitimately interested parties to their cultural heritage—is anathema. Daniel Traister, speaking to the South Carolina Library Association in 1993, expressed his opinions on the issues involved:

I learned to love books as a browser in library stacks; and most stacks in which I browsed could have been -- and were -- ripped off regularly. They were ripped off by a very small number of people whose misdeeds (it is at least arguable) ought not to condemn their more honest peers to conditions that make their ability to pursue their work awkward. If American libraries ever return to restrictive procedures with respect to materials in general circulation, then any relaxation of procedures instituted for special collections would also require reconsideration; but until then, in some libraries, in some situations, and with a proper attention to what some institutions conceive their function to be, even if for no one else, student browsing privileges might be worth a thought. I know what the costs of theft can be; I feel these costs daily, and pay for some of them, too. Even so, I am utterly unwilling to grant final victory to the thieves by curtailing our users' ability to make the fullest possible legitimate use of our collections out of fear that some tiny percentage of them will also prove to be thieves. (V, ¶ 9)

There are, in fact, quite a number of security enhancement options, all with pros and cons, including increased use of digital surrogates (Princeton University Library Digital Collections is one example), radio-frequency identification (RFID) tags (Molnar & Wagner, 2004), weighing books before

and after use (Baxter, 2001), security cameras (Shuman, 1999), avoidance of briefcases and coats in reading rooms (British Library, 2006), and indelible markings on valuable materials (Library of Congress, 2006). And these are just a few examples.

Securing the physical location of the collections can be problematic for many less affluent institutions, unable to afford the personnel, technology or physical plant required for the task. Data detailing the effects of specific changes in security policy on groups of users are difficult to find. Based on recent conversations with several special collections librarians at Harvard and the University of Virginia, I was left with the subjective impression that whatever the policies—security cameras, ownership stamps, restricting materials carried into reading rooms—that the policies have not reduced usage. Gathering data from less privileged institutions is even more difficult, and it is even less likely that major security changes would or could be implemented. A few people get irritated with newer (tighter) procedures, which is no surprise. The generation of specific utilization numbers is very difficult, given rapid change in the library world including increased digitization of catalogs, use of digital surrogates, and increased library efforts to work with the academic faculty and their students in an attempt to encourage library use. Designing meaningful survey tools to focus on the specific effects of changes in security policies would be a complex task, and not likely high on anyone's priority list. Making policy decisions based on sparse individual comment is likewise problematic.

The security recommendations of the Rare Book and Manuscript Section (http://www.rbms.info/standards/security_guidelines.shtml) of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) are general but extensive. They cover a number of interrelated areas (library security officer, security policy, special collections area/building, staff, researchers, collections,

transfers from collections, and legal and procedural responsibilities) and include several appendices (guidelines for marking books, manuscripts and other collections materials; addresses for theft reporting; related theft, transfer and ethical guidelines). The RBMS Security Committee also maintains an "Incidents of Thefts" list (<http://www.rbms.info/committees/security/index.shtml>). Those postings date to 1987, but are predicated on a voluntary reporting system, and likely understate the problem. On the same page there is a compilation list of state laws pertaining to library thefts. A recent RBMS listserv email (Tenney, February 13, 2007) indicates that a special collections security manual is in preparation. There were also suggestions regarding the education of law enforcement regarding the values of cultural property.

Even in the cases of well-publicized theft, after a brief flurry of publicity, little is done to improve the internal situation (Foley, 2005). Some of the problems lie with the libraries themselves and although it is irresponsible to "blame the victim," there are patterns of response that repeatedly surface with respect to many recent theft reports. Many of the listed security recommendations are consensus statements generated within committee, not always implementable or desired by individual institutions.

Everett Wilkie, a past chair of the RBMS Security Committee, outlines five major, recurrent problems and response patterns:

1) Failure of administrative will to make security a priority. Admin types like to talk about it and how important it is, but when it comes down to it, money is more likely to be spent on the library's web page or electronic serials than it is on security in special collections. Of course, when a theft does happen, that attitude often changes for a while, anyway.

2) Failure of cataloguing procedures. Again, properly cataloguing items so that they can be positively identified in case of a

theft is vital, and a recommended action.

But, again, this level of cataloguing is expensive and takes time. But if you discover a book is missing one of its maps, it's hard to determine the actual sequence of events if you don't know in the first place how many maps were in it to start with.

3) Failure to mark materials. As often as marking materials has been a demonstrated deterrent, it simply is not done enough, for various reasons.

4) Failure of physical systems. Special collections are often in spaces inappropriate to good security. They also often lack even the most basic physical protections, such as cameras, burglar alarm systems, etc. Again, I suspect a lot of that arises from cost issues.

5) Failure of credence. Although everyone knows someone could steal something from them, they don't take seriously the possibility that it could actually happen and let down their guard. Yale didn't even have its CCTV system in operation when Smiley stole from them. Other places just hope to get by on a wish and prayer. (personal communication, February 12, 2007)

Wilkie's points do strike a chord with many experienced librarians, and the lack of response to recent theft reports has been the subject of other discussions (Foley, 2005; Martin, 2000a, 2000b). Declining budgets over the past few decades are a well-known problem. Wilkie's "failure of credence" is likely a widespread problem, especially in smaller institutions. With respect to the Smiley case, it appears that after an X-acto knife was found on the floor, the security camera was then switched on to allow closer surveillance (Martineau, 2005). It is interesting that most of Wilkie's comments focus on the library environment itself, not on the thieves. This is also understandable, since it is a given that the thieves will be there.

Campbell, a frequent commentator on these issues, particularly as they relate to map theft (2002, 2005), emphasizes the needs for more careful and comprehensive

cataloging, along with the desire for increased use of digital imagery as proof of ownership and existence.

During a recent conversation with the head of a major special collections library, I asked if students were required to remove pullover coats with large pockets prior to reading room entry. They were not. The major reason offered was that the library did not wish to discourage student use of special collections, and in their opinion increasingly intrusive security measures did just that. This is in line with Traister (1993), and it is not hard to have a good bit of sympathy for these views, even in the wake of recent theft reports.

The use of indelible marks remains an appealing option, but can be a substantial chore in terms of staff time and effort, especially within a very large collection with a substantial cataloging/marketing backlog. This also means going back and identifying individual maps and plates in books, not simply the marking of complete atlases and plate books. The Library of Congress (2006) provides, at no charge, indelible, acid-free manuscript marking ink and guidance in its use, (<http://www.loc.gov/preserv/markings.html>). Many collectors and dealers not to mention some librarians, have an aversion to the idea of visible, indelible marks. They fear a reduction in collectible and hence commercial value.

Many of the recent well-publicized thefts are from well-recognized and relatively well-funded institutions. The problems for institutions with less financing are even more difficult. Many of the suggested remedies are simply unaffordable, and staff support is often precariously thin, at best.

The Forbes Smiley affair has had another deleterious effect on library function: increased strains between libraries/librarians and rare book/map dealers. Concerns surface about posting a list of potentially valuable or stolen items on

the Internet, for fear of “educating future thieves.” Some of this fear is excessive and misplaced. As already mentioned, much of library theft is by insiders (Cremers, 2005). That is not to say that experienced dealers and collectors do not fall into that category, because so do librarians, and a lot of angry finger-pointing does not help anyone.

What Should Be Done?

There is little question that many of these decisions will necessarily be left up to individual institutions, and will relate to existing budgetary and other priorities, though most special collections libraries do not control their own discretionary budget. However, a few general areas of consensus do exist that make the most sense for the most libraries.

The use of visible, indelible marks is repeatedly emphasized. While many libraries may not have the staff to readily mark materials already held or subject to an existing cataloging backlog, newer items or high-volume items (eg. atlases, plate books) can and should be marked. Objections by collectors and dealers to marking are of secondary concern and adjustment will need to be made—the marks should simply be considered part of the provenance of the item. The marks can identify ownership and potentially stolen property, a critical issue in a world with rapidly expanding, worldwide markets for auction and sale. The use of marks does not deter user access. Placed on the back of a page, but within the text or image area, they are not readily trimmed or easily removed (though with enough skill, almost all marks can be removed.) The Texas State Library & Archives Commission has gone so far as to post a page regarding its ownership markings on the web (2007; <http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/arc/markings.html>).

A photographic record can not only serve as proof of ownership, especially if associated with an expertly constructed catalog record, but is also a record of identifying marks.

These photographs do not need to be performed with high-end scanners aimed at producing museum quality displays. Modern digital cameras, available in the range of \$300 or less, come with prepackaged software that will store images in stable TIFF formats. Even with lesser resolution, features such as browning, stains, foxing, plate-marks, fold browning, and worming can be seen.

Simple physical measures—prohibition of briefcases and pocketed coats, for example—in reading areas will also help. Security cameras, especially if in readily noticeable locations and actively monitored, may be of benefit, although they run the risk of alienating clientele. The British Library (2006) posts a moderately detailed “conditions of use” explanation on their website (<http://www.bl.uk/services/reading/conditions.html>).

Conclusion

There has been some complaint about Smiley’s plea bargain agreement (which can be found at http://www.mcwetboy.net/maproom/files/smiley_plea_agreement.pdf). The United States District Attorney’s office felt they would never have retrieved the amount of material they did without Smiley’s cooperation. It is difficult to imagine that negligible punishments of the past will deter future thieves. Monitoring the online auction business, though desirable, is an enormous task. The bad blood that was generated between dealers and libraries will hopefully settle, and one hopes that library security measures can generally be improved. Some of the measures suggested herein will likely prove of partial benefit in the future.

Although newer technologies, such as Hitachi’s “powder” RFID tags (see <http://www.technovelgy.com/ct/Science-Fiction-News.asp?NewsNum=939>), tweak the imagination, persistent budgetary or

privacy constraints are likely to delay or prohibit widespread implementation in the near future. One of the simplest measures, the direct marking of materials, can and should be more widely employed. This suggestion has been made for decades (Martin, 2000b). Decisions regarding the marking of long-held items are useful in themselves, forcing the library to identify valuable maps and plates in individual books, not simply entire books of plates and maps.

More aggressive judicial sentencing could function as a deterrent, although that is by no means a certainty. More aggressive and public reporting of thefts, combined with better detail of the stolen materials, may facilitate the work of law enforcement, including the recovery of stolen materials (Cultural Property Protection Group, 2006). Increased inter-library collaboration may promote the use of digital surrogates, thereby reducing, in some cases, the need to directly examine originals.

Although a recent EDUCAUSE (<http://www.educause.edu/>) survey (Dewey & Deblois, 2006) indicates that “security and identity management” has reached the top of the priority list for information technology managers of major library institutions, it is not clear whether any of these concerns will substantively affect the world of special collections. In an era of reduced funding, especially if past patterns of response are any guide, optimal theft prevention measures will be difficult to implement. Whatever happens, access to the collections should be preserved, and the use of these primary historical documents should be encouraged, not restricted.

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