EPHEMERA COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT AND ITS ROLE IN PRESERVING THE NATION’S HISTORICAL VALUES

Laisa, Dedy Junaedhi
<dedy.pnri@gmail.com>

National Library of Indonesia, Acquisition Division
Salemba Raya 28A, Jakarta, Indonesia 10430

ABSTRACT

Until today, most of libraries, especially in developing countries, have not seen ephemera materials as one of essential materials to be considered as library collections. Its wide variety and also its temporary usage is worried may cause some difficulties in its acquisition and processing. That’s only one of the reasons why it is not received enough attention in the library world. In fact, with its unique characteristics, ephemera materials may provide so many benefits and play important roles like other library materials. Ephemera materials can give a big contribution in tracing historical values of event, institution, and beyond that, a nation. By implementing a good policy in ephemera collection development for libraries, the society and the government may take an advantage to support their efforts in preserving historical values of the nation. In the same time they can give the citizens more options in learning their nation’s long history by using an alternative information resource that have rarely used before.

Keywords: ephemera, library collection development, preservation, history

Introduction

Nowadays, we can easily find that many people who plunge into library sector, e.g. students in library studies, library staffs, or even library managers, do not familiar with term of ephemera. This reality probably caused by lack of comprehension about ephemera significance for library, librarian, and library user, moreover other sectors or professions. Because of that reason, before the benefits of ephemera being more discussed, this paper will try to evoke our memories about ephemera briefly.

The word ephemera was taken from the Greek: epi (on, for, about) and hemera (day), which means something which lasts a day or a short period of time. It also evokes the mayfly, an insect whose short life not only shines brightly but attracts those hungry (predators) to feed. The ancient sense brings us to the early conclusion that ephemera is created for the short time utilization and meant to be thrown away, not meant to be retained or preserved, when it is no longer used.
Maurice Rickards, the founder of The Ephemera Society, world’s first ephemera society, described ephemera as “the minor transient documents of everyday life”. Long before the society has established, John de Monins Johnson (1882-1956), the owner of The John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, one of the largest and most important collections of printed ephemera in the world, expressed all of his collections as “a little museum of common printed things, to illustrate at one and a same time the historical development of our social life and the development of printing”. Later, the term ‘printed ephemera’ which has used privately by Johnson, was established by the public in 1962.

Ephemera covers a wide range of formats, including business cards, greeting cards, postcards, leaflets, pamphlets, broadsides, menus, timetables, tickets, bulletins, newsletters, newspapers, and many others. The materials can be found easily in daily life, commonly produced to meet an array of immediate needs, usually transitory in nature, and not intended to be saved.

In the beginning, many collectors considered ephemera materials as collectible items. This could be seen from many communities had established by the people who had a same interest in collecting things in ephemera category. Many activities related with this new hobby were held, such as exhibitions, auctions, etc., which had opened the eyes that ephemera is a reasonable commodity to be traded. In 1993, The Centre for Ephemera Studies, the first of its kind in the world, was inaugurated in University of Reading, UK. Its emergence had been asserted that ephemera has some more added values than a private collection. Along with time, its existence has also tempted the library world to consider it as a type of collection or subject which should be counted and given more attention.

**Ephemera Collection Development**

In library and information science, the term ephemera can be described as published single-sheet or single page documents which are produced to be used as a sign of events or programs, and like mentioned before, meant to be thrown away after one use. It has some added values, moreover from the information and historical perspectives, even when the events or programs have been ended. For the library world, ephemera has other benefits which probably not realized or predicted by the creators. Ephemera products may have much information which potentially can be used as tools to trace people or events from different perspective, besides the utilizing of other information resources. Its wide range formats which can be found in our daily life enable us to use it as an alternative in tracing of historical values of people, events, institutions, and beyond that, history of nations.

Recently, many top academic libraries and national libraries in developed countries have considered ephemera as a special collection with special treatments, too. They collect, organize, preserve, and treat it as a historical evidence which has an invaluable contribution for supporting their efforts in tracing, studying, and preserving the history of their institutions or nations.

One of the largest ephemera collections organized by a library is ephemera collection in The Library of Congress, which has more than 28,000 items in collection. The material dates from the seventeenth century to the present day and
covers innumerable topics. Those collections are relating to the key events of American history, including the Revolutionary War, slavery, the Western land rush, the Civil War, women’s suffrage, and the Industrial Revolution. The printed materials were produced as the events unfolded and offers unique snapshots of the nation’s past.

In Indonesia, and also other nations in Asian region, the great significance of ephemera actually had been sensed for a long time despite it is only take place in some limited circles. Lack of comprehension about ephemera might cause many people and institutions did not recognize or realize its existence whereas it can be found easily around us. Minimum efforts in socializing its existence and significance, especially by the people who works in library sector, could be another factor in making this happens.

Some researches about ephemera in two or three decades before the second millennium held by scholars in Indonesia had shown us that some libraries in government institutions and universities had an interest in discussing this material since a long time ago. However, it seems that the factors mentioned above have became an obstacle in promoting ephemera to the libraries and librarians in Indonesia.

Meanwhile, in national level, The National Library of Indonesia (NLI) had given a special attention to ephemera in 2012, by including this material as a special collection in The National Library Collection Development Policy. In the policy, stated that The NLI selectively collects the ephemera materials which contain documentary records about social and cultural values, and other materials with the very latest information. The collecting is focused on ephemera resources related with the nation, in particular contain the history records about historical events, presidential agendas, national heroes, etc. It is also mentioned that ephemera materials are primarily collected from Ministry of State Secretariat, Kingdom’s Palaces (Keraton), Presidential Palace, Vice President’s Palace, Secretariat of The People’s Consultative Assembly, and Secretariat of The People’s Representative Council.

Great efforts in developing ephemera collection have shown by the National Library of Australia (NLA) through their representative office in Jakarta. They continuously and actively collect ephemera materials from many events in Indonesia. Political and social issues are their major interest, especially those which are strongly related with Australia. General election campaigns, political parties’ activities, human rights movement, and demonstrations against the Australian Government’s policies are just a small number of events which have become their focus in gathering ephemera materials as many as possible. Those materials are very important in providing information for the Australian people so they can learn about their identity and position in the global world.

Ephemera’s unique characteristics make it has to be treated differently from other information resources. Libraries should give a better attention to ephemera collection development, too, so that its presence can produce some optimum benefits which can be sensed by every user who wants to utilize it as a tool in tracing the historical values.
According to the collection management policy published by The Library of Congress, ephemera materials are defined as non-commercial, non-books publications in the form of pamphlets, handbills, leaflets, broadsides, position papers, minutes of meetings, information sheets, bulletins, newsletters, posters, moving images and photographic documentation. Ephemera may also be produced in a variety of electronic formats, such as web sites, web pages, web logs, pod casts, etc. These materials are typically published outside of official or normal channels, encompassing both political concerns and a wide variety of currently topical social, economic, and ideological issues. Various collections of materials which contain ephemera as defined above should be acquired for the special collections of their political and historical significance or rarity.

Libraries should seek to obtain ephemera when such materials contain important information on current developments or provide a perspective on issues which are of importance and of particular interest to the users and which may not be readily available through mainstream publishing. Emphasis should be placed on materials of contemporary interest which provide unique testimony of the social, cultural, economic, and political events frequently under-represented in mainstream book format.

Ephemera should continue to be considered as an exceptional category of acquisitions. By its nature, such materials are typically intended to be of only temporary interest and should be only selectively retained for the library’s permanent collections. Libraries shall inform other libraries or institutions of their ephemera collecting activities and inquire into similar programs that they may be conducting in order to coordinate and maximize its efforts in this field, avoid duplication, and encourage possible cooperative projects. (Library of Congress, 2008)

The Library of Congress has given good example that libraries have to determine strong basic principles to fulfill their mission for collecting ephemera. Specific criteria applicable for individual collections of ephemera should be identified and included in libraries’ written proposals for ephemera projects. Some of those basic principles are:

1. Collecting ephemera should be organized by target areas. Materials should be collected from specified geographic areas documenting special local circumstances such as rapid political and social change, or ideological trends reflecting economic, environmental or societal pressures.
2. Ephemera collecting should be prioritized. Libraries should not endeavor to collect ephemera materials unless they are perceived to answer a high priority needed by significant users.
3. Ephemera collecting for any given target area should continue only so long as development in that area remain of critical interest.
4. Collections of ephemera should supplement and enhance already existing strong collections of the libraries. For certain areas, libraries may neither have traditionally collected nor have anticipated developing a strong collection.
5. Collections of ephemera should be limited to representative sampling of available source materials.

(Library of Congress, 2008)
Ephemera may be produced by a wide range of special interest groups of varying legal status in their particular setting, including, but not limited to the following: dissident political groups, human right groups, refugee groups, women and feminist groups, environmental groups, urban groups, labor and worker groups and movements, youth groups and ecumenical groups. In the process, libraries should not discriminate those groups. Every source has the same potential in providing ephemera materials and has right to receive the same treatment that their products can potentially collected as the library collection.

Library managers shall frequently evaluate ongoing ephemera projects to determine if the project should be continued and to evaluate the status of the materials already collected. This effort is absolutely needed in order to find out how effective and efficient the achievement of the project.

Role of Ephemera in Tracing the Nation’s Historical Values

The First President of Indonesia, Sukarno, in some occasions emphasized strongly that “Do not even leave the history!”, or had been widely known as one of his famous jargons, “Jasmerah!” (Jangan sekali-sekali meninggalkan sejarah!). From this expression we can take a lesson that history, and its evidences, hold an important role in preserving the historical values in the society. Ephemera is clearly one of that evidences who can lead us to the deep study about so many important events in the past, and beyond that, to learn about the history of human mankind in general.

As mentioned above, by utilizing the ephemera collection appropriately, we can take great advantage in tracing countless things about various subjects in many events, too. This becomes more valuable when the event is related with monumental moments in particular environment, such as organization, moreover, nation.

Ephemera materials had became potential to be utilized as an information resource since it can be found easily, almost every time and everywhere in numerous events happening in our daily life. Terrie L. Wilson and Erika Dowell (2003) concluded that the ephemeral (art) documentation of our communities will provide researchers with a rich field in which to work when today’s ephemera becomes tomorrow’s historical documentation. This means, in the future, today’s ephemera will hold an important role in providing alternative information to any researcher who wants to complement their observations. Interestingly, sometimes it also offers information from different perspective which can’t be provided by any other information resources.

Jacqueline Cooke (2006), based on her experience in handling art ephemera, stated that ephemera have many qualities that make them a valuable resource. They have a particular kind of directness, being produced at the specific time by those involved. From that experience we can comprehend that every ephemera material produced for an event may have a highly significant relation with the event itself, including all elements (date, place, organizer, participants, agenda, etc.) connected with it.

Rickards was the first person who had an interest to discuss the possibility of creating a society like-minded individuals who as he then put it would “love
ephemera for its own sake, but also recognize its value as historical evidence”. With the society he formed 40 years ago, he has inspired so many people and communities, especially in library sector, to give more attention to ephemera and exploit its presence in supporting the efforts of investigation and development in history and many other studies.

Indonesia and other nations with their own diversities and historical backgrounds surely can utilize ephemera as an alternative source to regenerate their efforts in excavating their historical values and make it available to be accessed and learned by the young generations. Consider ephemera as a library collection can be a first important step to bring the prospect into reality.

**Conclusion**

Ephemera is any transitory written or printed matter not meant to be retained or preserved. It can be found easily in our daily lives because almost all of our activities, especially held by organization or community, need publication as a sign of its existence. Historic ephemera materials can tell us much about the issues or events that have shaped our past.

Cook (2006) stated that ephemera may provide evidential information or documentation about the event or the activities of participants after the event is past, or may represent an event in an archive. Even in its simplest format, ephemera can be considered as an evidence of a particular event. It shows where and when the event being held, who is the organizer, what is the agenda, and so forth. That's why it can be directly reputed as historical evidence.

Until today, most of libraries, especially in developing countries, have not seen ephemera materials as one of essential materials to be considered as library collections. In fact, with its unique characteristics, ephemera materials may provide so many benefits as important as other library materials. Ephemera materials can give a big contribution in tracing historical values of event, institution, and beyond that, a nation.

Good implementation of policy in ephemera collection development for libraries will enable the society and the government to take a great advantage to support their efforts in preserving historical values of the nation. In the same time they can give the citizens more options in learning their nation’s long history by using an alternative information resource that have rarely used before.

**References**


---

**Laisa, Dedy Junaedhi**
National Library of Indonesia, Acquisition Division
Salemba Raya 28A, Jakarta, Indonesia 10430
e-mail: dedy.pnri@gmail.com
He was born in Jakarta, April 6, 1979. In 2003, he graduated from the Faculty of Communication Science at the Padjadjaran University majoring Library and Information Science. He formerly worked as a librarian at Research Institute for Democracy and Peace (RIDeP), a non-governmental organization, in 2004. A year later, he joined the National Library of Indonesia as a librarian in Acquisition Division, until now. He was selected as a participant in “2011 Cultural Partnership Initiative (CPI) Program for the Education and Training of Foreign Librarians” held by the South Korean Government through the National Library of Korea as the host institution. Currently, he is a student of the Library Science Master Program, Faculty of Humanities, University of Indonesia.