Guest Editorial

The Crisis in Research Librarianship

by Rick Anderson

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The academic research library, as currently configured, is designed and organized to solve a problem that its patrons no longer perceive: the problem of information scarcity.

When information is scarce, it presents two primary difficulties: first, it is hard to find; second, it is expensive. These may seem like trivial observations, but they go to the heart of a growing crisis in librarianship. The crisis does not stem from the fact that information is now universally cheap and easy to find, and therefore that librarians are no longer needed; on the contrary, some kinds of information (high-quality science publications, for example) are still expensive, and some (including unique documents like manuscripts and grey literature) are still difficult to find. In the face of these and other persistent information problems (such as the difficulty of distinguishing between authoritative and questionable sources), librarians continue to offer valuable help in their roles as brokers and as research guides.

So the problem is not that libraries fail to offer value to their constituents. The crisis stems, instead, from the following three facts:

Perception matters more than reality. To be more precise: the future of libraries will not be determined by the degree to which libraries offer genuine value to their patrons; it will be determined by the actual behavior of their patrons, and patron behavior is shaped only partially by the real value of library services. If patrons believe that they have free access to all of the information products they need, and if they believe that they are fully capable of finding those products and using them effectively without help, and if they act on those beliefs, the effect on libraries will be exactly the same whether those beliefs are correct or incorrect. Furthermore, trying to convince patrons that they are wrong in their beliefs will, except in rare and isolated cases, be a losing battle; patrons' persistent confidence in their self-sufficiency as information users has been amply documented, most recently in the OCLC report *Perceptions of Libraries, 2010: Context and Community.*[1]

Patrons genuinely do not need librarians as much as they once did. Although it is true that *some* kinds of information products remain expensive and difficult to find, this is no longer true of *most* kinds of information products—even very high-quality ones. This fact has snuck up on us. For centuries, the only way to find reliable factual data and high-quality scholarly publications was to travel to a library and ask a librarian for help. The decline in the number of people willing to do this—at least in research libraries—over the past 15 years has been staggering: according to Association of Research Library (ARL) statistics,[2] the number of reference transactions taking place in ARL libraries has declined by more than half since 1995. Control that statistic for enrollment and the decline is greater: in 1995, ARL libraries provided an average of 10.1 reference transactions per student FTE; in 2009 the number was 3.6, a decline of over 60%. Such statistics strongly suggest (though do not prove) that patrons are finding information effectively without help; at the very least, they support the proposition mentioned above—that patrons largely and increasingly consider themselves fully capable of doing so. While surveys designed to measure the affection and respect in which libraries are held among the general public continue to provide heartwarming results, the actual behavior of patrons in research libraries points to a more sobering reality.

Value that is not valued is not valuable. In the marketplace, the value of a consumer good (such as a car or a toaster) is determined entirely by the consumer. A toaster company may make a value proposition ("Manufacturer's suggested retail price: $39.99"), but unless customers agree with that proposition in sufficient numbers, it is meaningless: a product is worth only what buyers are willing to pay for it. As librarians, we pride ourselves on operating outside of the commercial marketplace. However, whether we like it or not, we are working in an information environment the dynamics of which are very much like those of a free market, except that the currency spent by our "customers" is not money, but time and attention. We procure for our patrons products (books, articles, etc.) and offer services (bibliographic instruction, one-on-one research guidance, etc.) that we believe are valuable, and our patrons choose whether or not to invest time in our offerings based on the value they expect to gain from doing so. We may believe, for example, that our carefully-crafted catalog records provide excellent value in return for the time and energy required to use them—and we may be right. But if our patrons doubt that the catalog will return good value in exchange for the time and energy required to use it, then whatever value the catalog may actually contain becomes irrelevant. Nor, as Karen Calhoun explained

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in her monumental study "The Changing Nature of the Catalog and Its Integration with Other Discovery Tools"[3] does the catalog's value necessarily increase as we increase our investment in it. This same principle applies to virtually all library services just as it does to consumer goods in the commercial marketplace.

What are the implications of these three realities, and how have they contributed to the current crisis in research libraries?

Although libraries have moved their products and services (with varying degrees of willingness at first, but now generally with enthusiasm) into the digital environment in which virtually all information-seeking now takes place, we hold many of our traditional organizational structures, practices, and mindsets in an increasingly desperate death-grip. It has taken us a very long time to realize, for example, that an ejournal is not just a print journal in a different format; it is a different animal entirely. For many of us it remains difficult to acknowledge that even in the print environment, books were more often used as databases than as texts for extended linear reading (regardless of what their authors may have intended). And we continue to view the comprehensive and well-crafted library collection as an end in itself.

Meanwhile, our competitors in the marketplace of time and attention have not been saddled with the same legacy of assumptions: Google comprehended quickly that for researchers, much of the value of a printed book lies in its usefulness as a database, and acted accordingly to turn millions of printed books into ebooks, thus making them much more effective as databases. Wikipedia is founded on the belief (largely correct, as it turns out) that crowds both can and will provide high-quality content and metadata to the world at no charge. For our part, in research libraries we still tend to treat books as if they are primarily tools for linear reading, and metadata records as artisanal products. We still build collections that are fenced off from the larger information world and encourage our patrons, against all reason, to begin their information searches within the confines of our artificially limited collections.

What is the crisis? It consists in the fact that so many of the functions and structures to which we cling play such a marginal role in the real lives of our patrons. Virtually none of them begin a research project at the library's website; the average student at a major research university has fewer than four interactions with a reference librarian in a year (and even fewer of those are substantive reference interviews); printed books circulate at lower and lower rates every year. Students continue to use our libraries in droves, but primarily because libraries often provide the most spacious, comfortable, and well-equipped study space on campus. Offering a better and more academically serious version of the student union is not a bad thing—but by continuing to invest very large portions of our time, energy, and budget in services that are of decreasing value to our clientele at the same time that our sponsoring institutions are coming under increasingly desperate financial pressure, we run the serious risk of having our missions pulled out from under us.

Can the research library go out of business? Yes. What might "going out of business" look like? Like any other death, it can take a variety of forms. Some symptoms of possibly terminal decline might include the following:

- As information becomes more and more divorced from physical formats, campus administrators see less and less of a meaningful distinction between the library and general campus information technology infrastructure; library directors' reporting lines begin shifting from provosts to CFOs, and the directors themselves are eventually replaced by IT administrators. Retiring librarians are replaced not by new librarians, but by information technologists.
- Improvements in both hardware and software make laptops and handheld devices ubiquitous, powerful, and versatile enough that large computer labs become obsolete, robbing libraries of a significant percentage of their users even as reference transactions and circulation of physical materials continue their precipitous declines.
- Continued budget pressure leads campus administrators to investigate more rigorously the return on investment of library budgets (especially materials budgets) and to find that investment—rightly or wrongly—less cost-effective than, for example, the building of new classroom buildings or refurbishment of aging lab facilities.
- Libraries begin to disappear by erosion: units such as knowledge commons, instruction labs, and classroom facilities are gradually handed off to other campus entities. Eventually the term "library" becomes an honorific attached to a building, rather than a meaningful designation for what happens inside it.
- The library's brokerage function is obviated. Imagine this scenario: the library refuses, with good reason, to renew a restrictive and financially unsustainable ejournal package subscription. In response, the publisher goes directly to individual faculty members, offering them individual access to the same package at a very low individual subscription rate. If that sounds unrealistic given the costs of such retail selling, consider the publisher's alternative if the library cannot afford to continue its subscription: no sale at all.

Today, the research library is at an inflection point. Unfortunately, it is easy to ignore that fact. Although many libraries are suffering budget cuts along with other campus entities, there is in most places little direct evidence of a coming crisis of support. We continue to enjoy the respect (and sometimes even the veneration) of faculty and administration, and support for the library is still invoked somberly as a bedrock principle of academic seriousness. But the foundation on which that support is built has eroded over the past two decades: supporting the library in the old ways (primarily by funding the amassing of large but still fatally limited collections selected according to librarians' speculations about future needs, and by hiring large faculties of librarians whose services are decreasingly demanded by researchers) is not sustainable in the current environment. Unless we give our funding bodies better and more compelling reasons to support libraries, they will be forced by economic reality to stop doing so—or to stop doing so in the ways they always have. We must look with cold and hard-headed rationality at our current practices and ask ourselves not what value they offer, but rather what value our patrons believe they offer. If what we offer our patrons is not perceived as valuable by them, then we have two choices: change their minds, or redirect our resources. The former is virtually impossible; the latter is enormously painful. But the latter is possible, and if we do not undertake such a redirection ourselves, it will almost certainly be undertaken for us.

Notes and References

1. Available: http://www.oclc.org/reports/2010perceptions.htm (March 29, 2011).
2. Available: http://www.arl.org/stats/annualsurveys/arlstats/index.shtml (March 29, 2011).
3. Available: http://www.loc.gov/catdir/calhoun-report-final.pdf (March 29, 2011).

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