
These days, everybody knows that academic libraries are undergoing huge changes, primarily because of the increasing ease with which information can be accessed electronically by those who need it—and, thanks to the open access movement, a lot of it is free. This new, easy way of accessing information has resulted in a sharp decline in the use of print collections; circulation is plummeting everywhere.

Meanwhile, collection budgets are falling behind rising prices: in Canada, we can bemoan the collapse of the dollar, but even in the US, many academic libraries’ budgets are not keeping up with inflation.

Academic libraries are also seeing a collapse in the amount of reference help provided users: who needs help when information can be easily accessed online? And of course, staff complements have been shrinking—why should a university replace staff when fewer are needed to do the job?

Most tellingly, many academic libraries are losing space: often as collections become digitized, print collections are being weeded from the facility and the space created is being turned over to learning commons, centers of academic excellence, and/or IT services. True, there is still space, but it is being used by students not so much for library work but for almost everything else, including doubling as a cafeteria.

So, should university libraries stand idly by and see themselves slowly go out of existence over the next 20 years?

Who better to answer this question than Rick Anderson? Currently the Associate Dean for Collection and Scholarly Communication in the J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah, Mr. Anderson is a regular contributor to the Scholarly Kitchen blog as well as Library Journal’s Academic Newswire. This book is a lightly edited compilation of his posts, mostly from the former, a few from the latter and other sources. This book is not based on extensive research conducted by the author.

That said, Libraries, Leadership, and Scholarly Communication is a thought-provoking collection of ideas. Here is one example: when budget time comes around, instead of just asking for more money, university librarians are advised to 1) record accomplishments of the previous year, and 2) show how, with sufficient financial backing, the library can help move the university to achieve its own strategic goals. Here’s another: instead of buying books “just in case” start buying “just in time.” In other words, let actual patron requests drive book purchases because such books will be actually used rather than sit on shelves. And a final example: if libraries want to
maintain their relevance, they should place far more emphasis on their special collections, which frequently house material unavailable elsewhere.

There are 22 short chapters devoted to ideas such as these in the first section of this book, “Libraries and Their Collections, Now and in the Future.” but there is a second section of 15 chapters on the general topic “Scholarly Communication and Library-Publisher Relations.”

This section includes interesting chapters on topics such as print-on-demand (Anderson is not a great fan), tips for sales reps on dealing with librarians (don’t brag about your company, and don’t waste librarians’ time by offering to train them and their staff on a product—if it isn’t easy to figure out, then libraries don’t want it).

However, Anderson really warms up when the discussion turns to open access. One might think that a collections librarian would love open access in a time of budget restraint. One, however, would be wrong. Not only is open access a threat to the existence of academic libraries but, in many respects, according to Anderson, it is unfair to publishers.

The crux of Anderson’s argument revolves around cost, and he particularly wants to challenge the notion that because taxpayers paid for research, they should have the right to see its results—for free. “It costs money to perform research, it costs money to turn research results into a publishable scholarly document, and then it costs money to make the document available to the world and to archive it permanently” (p. 176). Most of these latter costs are not covered by the original research grant. But if they are not incurred—and an article can be posted as submitted, bypassing a rigorous peer review process in an open access journal—the scholarship behind the article will be viewed as suspect.

While Anderson may not appreciate the irony of his complaining about unfiltered open access scholarship—since his book largely originated as a series of [moderated] blogs, the fact is that overall, the book is excellent. To be sure, there are a few essays that might bemuse the reader (best example: “Can, Should, and Will,” which appears as Chapter 6). Generally, however, Anderson’s thoughts are set out in clear, provocative prose.

This book stimulated this reviewer enough that he has subscribed to the Scholarly Kitchen blog so he can enjoy more of Anderson’s ideas.

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