

## Against the Grain

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# Op Ed--IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

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## Op Ed — IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

## Give the People What They Want — or What They Need?

Column Editor: **Rick Anderson** (Associate Dean for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Phone: 801-721-1687) <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

Here's a thought experiment: imagine a ten-year old boy. Imagine that he's thirsty. If he's thirsty, he's not only going to *need* something to drink, but he's also going to *want* it. When it comes to thirst, the connection between need and want is very close: if we offer a thirsty boy what he actually needs, he will experience us solving a problem for him by giving him something he also wants.

Now suppose that this same ten-year-old boy has a vitamin deficiency that can only be remedied by eating more broccoli. In this case, it's relatively unlikely that he's going to feel a craving for broccoli, even though he needs it. In fact, he may not feel any discomfort at all, at least in the short run. In this case, the connection between need and want is much more tenuous, and if we try to get the boy to eat broccoli it's very possible that he will not perceive us as solving a problem for him — in fact, he may feel that we're *creating* a problem for him. Now, he may be wrong about that in fact, but his perception, whether right or wrong, will shape his behavior towards us when we encourage him to eat broccoli.

Why am I talking about water and broccoli in an *Against the Grain* column? It's because I've been involved lately in a number of conversations about the future of academic libraries, and those conversations tend to center on trying to figure out what our patrons, both students and faculty, are going to need in the future. But here's the question that increasingly worries me: what if, for our patrons and in the context of their scholarly work, the connection between *need* and *want* is tenuous? In other words, what if they don't want what we are confident they need?

(Let's leave aside for now the question of how good we are at knowing what they need. That's an important question, but for the purposes of this particular column I'm going to take it as given that our assessment of what our patrons really need, as distinct from what they want, is always reasonably accurate.)

When we talk about the future roles of academic libraries, some of the ones we commonly identify include these:

- Helping patrons make sense of a confusing abundance of information.
- Helping patrons find their way through a maze of information options.
- Certifying and selecting high-quality content on our patrons' behalf.
- Archiving and curating research data.
- Making our faculty's scholarship freely available to the world.
- Personalizing the information experience.
- Connecting scholars to each other.

There are several questions we need to ask ourselves about these roles. One is: are they important roles — does someone need to be performing them for the good of our patrons, of scholarship and of society generally? Another question is: should that someone be the library? These are important questions, and I think we're pretty good at asking them.

Here's another question, though, and it's also important: do our stakeholders care whether those roles are performed, and if they do care, do they want the library to perform them? These are also important questions, but I don't think we're very good at asking them. Sometimes this is because we assume that the answer to them is obviously yes (so what's the point of asking?), and I think sometimes it's because we think the answer *should be* yes, and if it isn't yes, then it's our job to educate our patrons — or, in other words, to change their minds.

Those who read a column I wrote for *Academic Newswire* (<http://bit.ly/1nKFBPP>) back in January of last year may be getting a sense of déjà vu here; I'm back on the topic of *is* versus *should*, or "science" versus "religion." By the provisional definitions of those terms that I used in that column, figuring out what our patrons actually want is a matter of "science" — of using empirical evidence to establish the objective truth of a proposition like "Our patrons want X." Figuring out what our patrons *should* want is a matter of "religion" — applying values to a question in order to determine how things ought to be ("Should our patrons want X or Y?").

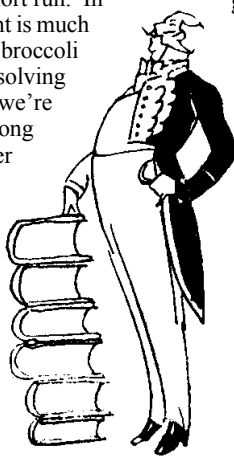
In that earlier column I emphasized that both kinds of thinking are essential, but that it's important always to bear in mind the differences between them and to know when we're involved in which kind of thinking.

So what happens if our patrons don't think they're confused and don't *want* us to "make sense" of the information world for them, or to tell them whether or not a source is trustworthy, or to personalize their information experience? What if they're not interested in making their scholarship freely available to the world, or in securely archiving their research data — or at least not sufficiently interested to adopt the new workflows and practices that doing those things would require?

Clearly, in such cases we have only two choices: either change what we're offering them so that it corresponds to what they want (this would be the service model of librarianship) or try to change them so that they will want what we know they need (the education model). The first option kind of grates on us as professionals; the second is fraught with frustration (since changing people is notoriously difficult) and political peril (since the people we're trying to change are also people whose support is essential for our professional survival).

At this point, most readers are probably saying "Come on, Rick, you're advancing a false dichotomy here. We don't have to choose between service and education; as librarians we do both, and we always have." Fair enough. But what concerns me is that I think I see a growing distance between what we, as librarians, think our patrons ought to do and what they demonstrably want to do. We want them to start their research with the library's website or discovery layer; they want to start on the open Web. We want them to make their scholarly work available on an open access basis; they mostly don't care much about OA. We want them to check out books; they do so in decreasing numbers. We want them to archive their research data; they don't do it.

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If I'm right — if the distance between what we think our patrons should do and what they actually want to do is getting wider — then there's a real tension between our service and education roles, and that tension is increasing. And if that's the case, then we face some pretty difficult questions in the near- to mid-term future, and whatever answers we come up with will be fraught with risk. Move too far in the direction of "just give the people what they want" and we end up abdicating our role as professionals and (in many cases) as faculty members. Move too far in the direction of "educate the people so they learn to want what they should" and we run the serious risk of alienating our stakeholders. The appropriate and effective resolution to this tension is going to vary from library to library and institution to institution, and will depend on (among other things) the amount of political capital the library has in reserve, the actual amount of distance existing between patrons' desires and library practices, and the nature of the changes the library wants to see in patron behavior.

What does not vary from library to library, I believe, is the radical importance of paying attention to these questions and addressing them in a careful, mindful, and strategic manner. Our future probably depends on how well we do so. 🌱

## against the grain people profile

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### Jason Coleman

**BORN AND LIVED:** Born in San Antonio, TX; college at **University of Texas at Austin**; graduate school (MFA) at **University of Virginia**; three years in the Netherlands, where I was married and my first child was born; working in publishing for nearly fifteen years now.

**FAMILY:** Wife **Margot**, daughter **Kate** (currently attending **UT Austin**), and son **Jan**, plus English lab named Lobo, and two lab rats — sorry, I mean cats.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** I'm surrounded by scholarly books at work, so it's pretty much all fiction on my own time — **Joyce's Ulysses**, the **Modern Library** edition of **Chekhov's** stories, **Jesus's Son** by **Denis Johnson**, **Philip Roth's Zuckerman Bound**, **Alice Munro's** Selected Stories, **Moby Dick**, **Lolita**...I could go on.

**MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT:** Helping to turn **Rotunda** from a grant-dependent side project with one title and roughly a dozen customers into a resource that is available in the majority of **ARL**-member libraries and provides a robust revenue stream for the Press.

**GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW:** after selling plenty of other people's books, I'd like to publish my own.

**HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS:** The digital revolution will create a publishing environment in which nothing goes out of print, where even small publishers have a far greater awareness of alternative markets, and where new technologies (XML workflows, data mining) result in increasingly fluid content. I believe, however, that the book as a physical object will remain the centerpiece of publishing. 🌱

Talk of **Open Access** is everywhere! **Michelle Flinchbaugh's Biz of Acq** about **Maryland's Shared OA Repository**, **MD-SOAR** is about how ten university libraries implemented a consortial repository, this issue, p.70.

Moving right along, **Don Hawkins'** report on **The Impact of OA Model** (p.67) includes many interesting discussions. I especially noticed the **View of the OA Front from a Graduate Student** (**Kenneth Yancey, Cornell**) and the comments by **Mackenzie Smith** (University Librarian, **UC Davis**) about the increasing disconnect between European and American approaches to OA (gold vs. green). You might recall that **Mackenzie Smith** riveted us during the **2011 Charleston Conference**

when she spoke about **Data Papers in the Networked Era**.

<http://www.slideshare.net/CharlestonConference/data-papers-in-the-network-era-by-mackenzie-smith-mit-libraries>

And not to miss, **Cabell's The Source Multibrief on Open Access**.

<http://www.multibriefs.com/briefs/cb-cabell/cb-cabell021616.php>

**The National Information Standards Organization (NISO)** has announced that **Jill O'Neill** and **Henrietta Verma** have joined the organization as **Educational Programs Manager** and **Editorial and Communications Specialist**, respectively. **Jill O'Neill** has been an active member of the information community for 30 years, most recently managing the professional development programs for the **National Federation of Advanced Information**

**Services (NFAIS)**. Her publishing expertise was gained working for such prominent content providers as **Elsevier**, **Thomson Scientific** (now **Thomson Reuters**), and **John Wiley & Sons**. **Jill** continues to write for a diverse set of publications, including **Information Today** and the **Scholarly Kitchen** blog.

**Henrietta Verma** is a librarian who has worked in public libraries in New York, first as a librarian then as a library director. In 2006, she started her publishing career at **School Library Journal**. **Etta** continues to review for **LJ** and is also working on book about writing and reviewing that will be released in mid 2016. Congratulations to **Etta** and **Jill** and **NISO**!

I just ordered the book **Your Digital After-life** by **Evan Carroll** and **John Romano** (New Riders, 2010). Did you know that you need a digital executor for your estate? How about your Facebook pages? Your emails? I remember an article a while ago (several years) about a woman whose sister had died and she wanted access to her deceased sister's Facebook account and pictures. Apparently this is not always possible depending on the policy of the provider. I had no idea. Do you?

<https://www.rockettlawyer.com/article/appoint-digital-executor-estate-plan.rl>

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### Future Dates for Charleston Conferences



	Preconferences and Vendor Showcase	Main Conference
2016 Conference	2 November	3-5 November
2017 Conference	8 November	9-11 November
2018 Conference	7 November	8-10 November
2019 Conference	6 November	7-9 November
2020 Conference	4 November	5-7 November