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Strategic Engagement and Librarians

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Abstract: *The future of the academic book is a strategic engagement issue for librarians. Books might not be stored in or purchased for university libraries; they might not even exist in a physical form. How will academic books be organised and accessed in the future, if they are not in libraries? How will librarians at universities engage academic researchers in strategic conversations about the future of their academic books? This chapter argues that conversations between librarians and academic book authors about the future are more important than ever. It puts the current challenges in context, using data from the Research Excellence Framework and the University of Nottingham library catalogue, identifying the strategic role of librarians in shaping the future of the academic book through strategic engagement.*

Keywords: ebooks; JSTOR; library data; Open Access; relationship management; Research Excellence Framework (REF); strategic engagement; UK Research Reserve

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Academic books are those books used by academics in their research, and those books written as a result of academic research. While academics write books and prepare reading strategies for students, librarians develop systems, services and infrastructure for organising knowledge. But how do librarians engage academics in conversations about the future of academic books? This chapter examines the relationship between librarians and academic authors. It puts the current challenges into context, using data from the recent Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the University of Nottingham library catalogue, and identifies the role of librarians in shaping the future of the academic book through strategic engagement.

Challenges with the academic book have existed for a long time. While Vice-Chancellor at the University of Nottingham, Colin Campbell spoke about the future of scholarly communication. He described the library as his ‘laboratory’, but also highlighted some important issues: greater numbers of books are being published; student demands are increasing; academics increasingly require specialist material – to name but a few. Through all of these challenges ‘the library is emotionally important to academics and vital to the well-being of any University’.¹ Open Access promised reductions in the cost of subscriptions, but fees are adding to the ‘total cost of publication’ for journals.² It is obvious that if libraries are spending more money on expensive journal subscriptions, there is less money available for books. This puts further pressure on funds that could otherwise be invested in academic books.

Academic publishing has been described as a Wild West,³ but it is undeniable that long-form publications are important.⁴ Some monographs have been described as literary⁵ or ‘semi-popular’.⁶ During early conversations about the SOFT (Sprinting to the Open FuTure) project at Nottingham, which is part of the wider Academic Book of the Future project, literary outputs were identified as important. The REF is a key factor, as there may be a correlation between monographs and a four-star rating, creating a strategic university interest in some academic books. If academic books continue to be important to the REF and funding, it is more important than ever before to consider the place of libraries in this process.

Perhaps the most sensitive issue in the relationship between academic and librarian is the removal of books and other research materials from the library space. There are high expectations for many academics with regard to library holdings, and an even higher expectation that their

own authored books will be in the university library. Although printed books are being removed from libraries – to create new research reading spaces, for example – they will undoubtedly continue to be in university libraries for a long time. A review of the arts and humanities Authored Books submitted to the REF by the University of Nottingham in 2014 showed that 92 per cent were purchased by the university library, and over 90 per cent were purchased in printed format.

Consider the removal of journals from libraries. JSTOR has been publicly available since 1997.⁷ In 2012 the University of Nottingham removed most of the arts and humanities printed journals in libraries that were available through JSTOR. There were no objections from academic staff because of conversations over many years and the high level of confidence and trust in JSTOR. Many universities, however, continue to have printed journals on shelves when there is a trusted electronic alternative. The UK Research Reserve (UKRR) was created to de-duplicate journals and release shelf space but it may be extended to monographs.⁸ A focus on the UKRR out of scope materials, such as superseded editions of teaching materials, popular fiction, indexes and newspapers, will allow more time for conversations about the more contentious academic books. For many librarians the academic book of the future will be managed as part of wider, national and international ‘conscious coordination’.⁹ There is a need for conversations about long-term planning and this will involve challenges, but it is arguably the ongoing conversation that is important.

There is growing investment in ebooks to improve student access, particularly through new publishing initiatives such as Demand Driven Acquisition and Evidenced Based Acquisition, or by providing free core readings in e-textbook form to first year undergraduate students.¹⁰ Of the Authored Books submitted to the REF at the University of Nottingham, however, 40 per cent were bought as ebooks and 21 per cent as both print and ebooks, with just 3 per cent as electronic only. These ebooks still tend to look like familiar printed books, but there will be new forms of digital academic book that are not skeuomorphic.¹¹ It seems that for now and in the short term, only a small number of academic books will be available exclusively as ebooks.

Perhaps ebooks do not fit with all research and reading needs. They have been described as one more example of ‘content that never contents’.¹² Some academics report negative experiences using ebooks, terming them as ‘nerve-wrecking’ and ‘an absolute pain’. They have

claimed that ‘no one wants to read the d****d things’ and lamented, ‘it depresses me more than I can say that we can buy electronic resources seemingly without end but not books.’¹³ Librarians have an important role in bridging the digital divide.¹⁴ Some university libraries are now providing combined 3D printing and 3D scanning services.¹⁵ If there are preferences for reading print, new print services may emerge. Libraries may offer services based on printing whole academic books that are available online, flipping the traditional library-service development: instead of print to digital, digital to print. More than ever it is essential for librarians to talk with academics about their own research reading, and reading expectations for students, as well as with publishers about the ongoing development of new platforms and new formats for different forms of academic book.

There is an increasing need to put academic authors at the heart of libraries and to consider students as future academic book authors.¹⁶ If our students, the authors of the future, are to write sustained arguments over 80,000–100,000 words, they will need to read arguments of this length. The library is academic-led and library-administered. It is driven by what academics read and write, and by research and publication strategies – so it is important that they are involved with their university library. The arts and humanities collection in the Hallward Library at the University of Nottingham, for example, has more than one book by an academic author who works within half a mile of the library on almost every shelf. Yet there are some authors who never visit the library, even when they live in close proximity. How can this be addressed? One idea is using shelf-end signs with images of book covers or the photographs of authors as Aestheticodes,¹⁷ linking to films of academic authors talking about their books. In this scenario, authors appear when you browse the shelves, reading from the book or talking about the book. Making the physical library connect with the digital library might be one way to inspire students to write the academic books of the future.

Librarians are moving towards new forms of scholarly relationship management.¹⁸ Bains has described the change to a functional structure with separate research and academic engagement teams in one university library.¹⁹ Working in this changing environment is about keeping an agile mind open to many possible alternative futures, and adapting to thrive in whatever new conditions arise.²⁰ Kenny has articulated the challenge:

Can library liaisons play a key role in revitalizing human-to-human interactions by engaging individuals collectively in problem solving, creativity, and the production of new knowledge and awareness? Can the library become the center for engagement on campus, with liaisons providing critical human support and analysis that cuts across technology, disciplines, hierarchies, social norms, and institutional and cultural contexts?²¹

For many librarians in recent years, Open Access has been the basis for strategic engagement. Librarians have been ‘leading change’ in scholarly communication as ‘positional leaders’ and have been ‘an active part of the academic life on campus.’²² Some have developed strategies for ‘relational communications’²³ and Scholarly Conversations²⁴ or used Open Access ACCESS week ‘to provide leadership on campuses concerning scholarly communications.’²⁵ Changes and adjustments to policies²⁶ provide further opportunities for conversations. There is likely to be a high level of compliance with the HEFCE policy for Open Access journals and conference proceedings. Although no submitted Authored Books were available in Nottingham ePrints at the last REF, Nottingham authored monographs are becoming available through Open Access,²⁷ and it is likely that many more will be deposited in UK institutional repositories before REF 2026. One of the challenges for libraries will be integrating Open Access outputs with the indexed content in discovery systems. There is an opportunity for senior academic engagement librarians to focus on strategic and influential faculty conversations, including: the future of the academic book; changing publisher policies; licensing and third-party copyright; and new forms – from Open Access monographs to nanopublications and research data connected to books.

Working with academic authors is not always smooth, straightforward or easy. There is a need for collaboration.²⁸ Silver, for example, described how the Authors@UF programme enabled librarians to exercise this new role of outreach and engagement by working directly with faculty scholars to present his or her research, making the library the heart of interaction and strategic engagement.²⁹ However, librarians need support. Posner identified some of the common challenges and complexity facing librarians collaborating and engaging with academics.³⁰

Librarians have a key role in shaping the future of the academic book through strategic engagement with the academic community. More importantly, though, this involves placing academic authors at the heart of libraries and considering students as the authors of the future. We need to better understand how strategic conversations can be effective in

shaping digital scholarship and the future of scholarly communication. The AHRC/British Library Academic Book of the Future Project, and this volume of essays, generated by some of those conversations, show how complex and rewarding such collaborations can be.

Notes

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