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Hacking the Academy

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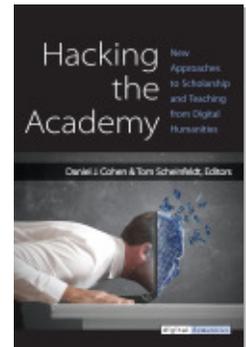
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The Entropic Library

Andrew Ashton

In the United States, over the past century, the practice of health care has transitioned from being a largely distributed and generalist profession to a much more corporatized and specialized one. It is a change that many greet with regret, despite the obvious advances in health care. One of our cultural touchstones is a romanticized image of the doctor or caregiver tending to patients in their homes; a leather satchel containing crucial instruments nearby. Still, we acknowledge a new reality—of health care as a consumer product: tranced and parsed into products designed for maximum efficiency. Home health care is considered a scarce and expensive resource. In other sectors, we see a similar trend. Local mechanics, hardware stores, and groceries are disappearing in favor of one-stop box stores. Geek Squad and Facebook are replacing specialists who used to fix computers in the home or provide websites for small businesses.

Academic libraries are different. They are, and have been for a long time, highly centralized institutions whose services and organizational structures are often designed to reflect a certain order that is perceived to exist within the broader institution.

Departments have liaisons, collection development often falls along disciplinary lines, and the library is treated as a destination—a physical and virtual domain—out of which the tools for scholarship will be doled. Academic libraries are faced with a challenge that is the inverse in other sectors: we are faced with a digital-scholarship environment that screams for decentralizing many library services. In order to do so, we must overcome a static cultural momentum.

In 2002, the American Library Association launched the massive Campaign for America's Libraries. The centerpiece of the campaign was a new marketing effort built around the slogan, “@ Your Library.” According to the ALA's website, the campaign has several purposes.

Promote awareness of the unique role of academic and research libraries and their contributions to society;

Increase visibility and support for academic and research libraries and librarians; help librarians better market their services on-site and online;

Position academic and research librarianship as a desirable career opportunity.¹

While these are mostly admirable goals, they betray the extent to which the library profession, as represented by the ALA, is willing to respond to the challenges of the digital era by simply marketing traditional services more aggressively. This approach is flawed; not because patrons do not value traditional library services, but because the services no longer reflect the character of the institutions that they serve.

When the traditional disciplines engage more with digital technologies, the familiar practices become fragmented and less familiar—a phenomenon that Wendell Piez describes as akin to “a field where native plants and wildflowers are overtaking a tidy lawn.” This unruliness disrupts the mappings that libraries have traditionally applied to the disciplines. Instead of designing liaison, cataloging, and collection-development services that support a predictable mode of scholarly work, libraries need to support scholarship that emerges from a state of relative entropy. The new mapping, in other words, is not to make traditional library services more digital, but rather to explode them out into a complementary state of entropy.

The entropic library is one in which the library is not only a physical destination and an institutional cornerstone, but also is a gravitational force in the digital scholarly life of the campus. It is a force that is exerted by library staff acting as consultants, software developers, funders, principal investigators, data curators, and mad scientists. It acts as a resource for the university’s scholars by helping to shape and support new digital methodologies, which it channels into programmatic activities when there is a potential benefit to the wider university community. Its first concern is not to get digital things into the library as new collections, but to get the library to where the digital things are being used, and make them accessible and sustainable.

Embracing entropy is difficult for an institution whose identity has been defined by its advocacy of order, and it can be difficult for lovers of libraries to see entropy as anything but a threat to everything that we cherish in our libraries. Our romanticized image of the library tends to be of the library as a destination. In this image we might imagine the cloistered stacks, the hours spent ingesting the wisdom in the books, and

the boundless potential in the unread volumes. It is a powerful image, and it is made more poignant by the sensory associations we often have with the library: the smell of the bindings, the muted sounds in the stacks, the concentration evident on the faces of readers. It is understandable that libraries, faced with the emergence of digital technologies in the 1990s, would design services that attempt to preserve the appeal of that library. Reference areas crammed with tables, lamps, and books transformed into computer labs, but the space retained its purpose as a destination for study and work. Card catalogs were replaced by Online Public Access Catalogs (OPACs), which were largely digital renditions of the same tools that libraries had always offered. Print-journal collections thinned as digital subscriptions became more cost-effective, although real challenges to the academic-publishing paradigm would not gain traction for at least another decade. The roles of librarians, however, largely remained the same—as gatekeepers and guides for information resources housed within and, to a limited extent, outside of the library’s physical and digital bounds.

Creating digital surrogates for traditional services was a necessary, evolutionary step toward modernization. But there remains a chasm between the notion of the modern library as a purveyor of traditional resources delivered digitally, and the entropic library—steeped in and defined by the new digital scholarship. The entropic library needs to cultivate physical spaces in which to do scholarly work using digital media. Yet it is no longer a font from which information flows. It is a kaleidoscope of data, knowledge, and interaction, brought together by the scholarly primitives and crystallized for moments in the physical spaces that the university contains.

Note

1. “Welcome to the Academic and Research Library Campaign,” *American Library Association*, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/advleg/publicawareness/campaign@yourlibrary/prtools/academicresearch/academicresearch>.