Hacking the Academy

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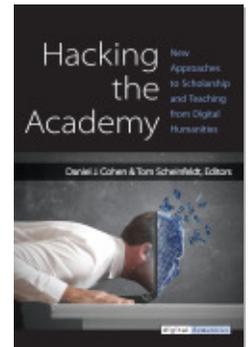Published by University of Michigan Press

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The Wrong Business for Libraries

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Our academic libraries have been in the wrong business for about 150 years. It was in the mid- to late nineteenth century that they began to be characterized as storehouses or warehouses of information. This information-centered model is a mistake. Before then, they were not stand-alone collections of books, but great complexes of mental and physical activity, and included museums, gymnasiums, and baths. The goal of the library was to support the great scholars of the day by providing them access to the most important sources of information, but also to everything else that was needed to turn that information into new knowledge—including a space for discourse and debate. Not that we should put baths or gymnasiums back in our libraries. We simply need to completely rethink both what it is that libraries do and why they do it.

The struggle of the academic library to stay relevant today is due to this switch from a scholar-centered model to an information-centered one. The imminent collapse of the latter model is causing tension not only across academic libraries and the field of library science, but across academia as a whole.

Prior to the Victorian era, most academic libraries were what Matthew Battles might characterize as Parnassan—small, well-focused institutions where what mattered was not the quantity of the collections, but the quality.[1] Then our system of universities exploded, and at the same time the cost of printing went down. Libraries began to put collecting at the top of their priorities. The result was that libraries changed from circumscribed institutions that fostered the entire life cycle of scholarship to what Andrew Abbott describes as a "universal identification, location, and access machine."[2] Where the Internet has made it possible to finally fulfill the idea of our university library as universal library (again, to use one of Battles's terms), our academic libraries have failed. In just a few short years, Google has come much closer to the creation of a universal library than our libraries have.

The problem is, of course, that we have spent nearly 150 years crafting this idea that our academic libraries are centers for information retrieval. Only one ALA-accredited graduate program has maintained the title "library science"; thirty have changed to "library and information science"; four put information first, but retain library—"information and library science"; and seventeen have dropped the library all together and are simply schools of "information science" or "information studies."[3] Similar trends can be seen in the United Kingdom, where most recently the program at University College London has changed from the department of "information and library science" to the department of "information studies." We don't even produce librarians anymore—we produce information scientists.

We librarians put all of our eggs into the "information basket" and it feels a bit late to turn back now. But the Internet has completely changed our relationship to information, and as a result, the model of library as information center is going to collapse.

It is time for a new theory of libraries—well past time, in fact. The user—the scholar—must be put back in the center of the academic research library again, but the users' needs must be considered within the broader context of the process of scholarship. In focusing on information, academic research libraries have, in part, been trying to address what users want, not what they need. As Ranganathan stated, "the majority of readers do not know their requirements."[4] It has long been the role of library and librarians to help scholars understand them.

The goal of any new theory of libraries must of course accommodate the increasing needs in research and scholarship for large quantities of information, but should not preface quantity of information over all else. As important as the information itself is, providing and supporting an environment that allows for the transformation of that information into new knowledge is essential.

What has been forgotten, for example, is that libraries were, and should be again, inherently social places. That these are spaces not just for getting access to resources, but to people—librarians, archivists, other scholars— with whom discourse can be entered about the resources therein. An academic research library should *first* be seen as a collection of services that support the creation of new knowledge. From this perspective, the library is not defined by its walls or by its collections, but by those very services. The goal of a library is not, then, to provide access to information, it is to provide a space—whether literal or virtual—for the support of all aspects

of the scholarship process, with information provision being just one of these services. The information commons, gateway, or storehouse should not be the goal or the fate of the academic research library.

The library is a combination of tangible and intangible elements: a collection—of the tangible or digital—an organizational system, and scholarship, but also the invisible environment that contributes to and connects all three. There is no library, for example, without a culture of inquiry. Everything that is done in the library (entering, lingering, reflecting), and everything the library holds (collections of objects, living things, knowledge, information, contexts, lessons, memories), when bound together by a systematic, continuous, organized knowledge structure supports the act of new-knowledge creation known as scholarship. The result of the resources invested in the library, therefore, is not measured in the size of the collection, or even in the number or satisfaction of users, but in their experiences.

Notes

1. Matthew Battles, *Library: An Unquiet History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2004).

2. Andrew Abbott, "Publication and the Future of Knowledge," 2008, http://home.uchicago.edu/%7Eaabbott/Papers/aaup.pdf.

3. American Library Association, "ALA: Alphabetical Accredited List," http://web.archive.org/web/20110605063115/http://www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/education/accreditedprograms/directory/list/index.cfm.

4. S. R. Ranganathan, *Five Laws of Library Science*, 2nd ed. (Bombay: Asia Pub. House, 1963).