Research support

An expanding role for librarians in academia?

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Introduction: the changing face of librarianship

Academic librarianship has changed greatly over the last few decades. New higher education sector funding systems, new technologies, open access publishing, new working practices such as a greater emphasis on scholarly communications, and digital initiatives have altered the way we work, and how the students and academics whose research we support operate. In addition, workplace opportunities for academic librarians are declining. Stephanie Maatta (2013) reports that in response to this, recently graduated librarians are increasingly following career paths related to their MLS studies, but not necessarily in libraries. Arenofsky (2012) discusses this change and finds that the definition of librarianship is widening to take into account new roles and jobs. Both inside and outside the academic library sector then, the role of librarians is changing. This article focuses particularly on how research support – a traditional feature of what we do – could become one of these areas for change.

While many of us have always seen research support for scholars as part and parcel of our role, it has traditionally been fairly limited. The largest part of our involvement has often been aiding scholars in finding sources and helping with citations. However, this article will deal in detail with a recent initiative that seems to offer a model in which our role is far more integral to the scholarly research process itself. I would like to suggest that if this model were used more widely by academics and librarians, it could help both to improve the quality of research carried out in academia and to elevate the role of librarians by emphasising more fully the contribution we make to the advancement of knowledge. The initiative I shall describe is the production of Graham Cairns's book Reflections on architecture, society and politics: Social and cultural tectonics in the 21st century (London: Routledge, 2016).

Librarians supporting an innovative project

Reflections on architecture, society and politics is of interest in its own right of course. It brings an interdisciplinary set of leading thinkers together and contains the first full engagement with questions of architecture and urban design by Noam Chomsky, for example. Polemical projects in the field of architecture and politics are discussed more broadly. However, the most interesting aspect of this book from the academic librarian's point of view is its development of the 'interview-article' – a fascinating attempt to develop a more scholarly and academically rigorous version of the interview format.

This format is illustrated in a series of interview-articles by Cairns, with support from a team of librarians involved with the open access scholarly journal *ArchitectureMPS*, which, with its broader research group, AMPS (Architecture, Media, Politics, Society), has always been underpinned by collaboration between librarians and academics in which I have been involved from the start. In the early days of the interview-article being trialled I, together with a team of librarian trainees who were on work experience under my guidance, helped source materials, analyse the relevance of sources, fact-checked the arguments and references made by both interviewer and interviewee and later helped with copyediting and dissemination through various online open access channels. This level of engagement in research support subsequently also characterised the production of the book, and enabled it to break new ground in its genre and ensure that the interview functions with the utmost academic rigour as a format.

In these 'interview-articles', interviewees develop discursive answers to questions that are themselves wide-ranging, the aim being to allow an extensive exploration of ideas. Interviewees are able to revisit the text after it has been edited to ensure that they give fully considered responses that do justice to their depth of experience in the field. Furthermore, the interviewer adds to the main dialogue text through wide-ranging discursive footnotes in

which s/he develops their own position more fully, identifies further reading sources and directs readers to third parties with different opinions. Key to this are the comprehensive bibliographies that accompany the interviews which, with the footnotes, are compiled in conjunction with a number of academic liaison librarians, who collaborated with the interviewer from the beginning to the end of the process. This is where we really see both the unique nature of this interview-article format and the role of librarianship in the process.

Librarian supported scholarship: the wider picture

The research support described above did not happen in isolation. The academic librarian collaborations of AMPS are broader and longer term than that. The librarian support team at AMPS has worked with academics to develop a number of other research support activities and resources. Whilst these are still in development, the results can be seen in the resource repository of AMPS, which uses social media formats, particularly Pinterest, to present relevant research to academics and students in the field. The sourcing of information that was part and parcel of this support exercise results in a bibliography and webliography. The research support offered by the librarian team on this project continues a practice first developed by AMPS on an earlier research initiative. The previous initiative helped to develop scholarly materials relating to the use of architecture in political imagery, and it was supported by an American Library Association grant.

Further extensions of the definition and practice of research support used in the production of Cairns's book include the creation of materials for Twitter and Facebook: AMPS uses these materials as a form of research guides for scholars and students, as well as more traditional research guides available as downloadable pdfs on the AMPS website which replicate the materials presented through social media. In addition, the support offered to the researcher in this case has become a model for how the librarian team at AMPS supports early career academics in developing papers for publication in book or journal formats. Currently, the team is seeking funding to enable it to develop this initiative fully.

Reflections on architecture, society and politics is ground-breaking in its own right – as an innovative genre, and as the most visible demonstration of the collaboration of librarians in research support and scholarly communication. It demonstrates just how far librarians can extend their research support role into research publication and the development of research resources in academia and shows how versatile the librarianship profession is. AMPS is a completely online organisation, in which all scholars and librarians operate remotely in a virtual workplace which, while related to the traditional library context, is actually quite different. AMPS is an international research cooperative with various publishing activities both online and in print. The fact that we as librarians have been able to expand our role to operate in this context with ease is testimony to how adept we are at working with various end-users in various contexts, whether they be students, the public or, as in this case, research-focused academics with whom we interact virtually. In summary, the book we have focused on here is not a 'normal' piece of scholarship, but has come into existence only as an outcome of the wider notion of librarian research support.

References

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