Superhero librarians are coming

Get your capes on!

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I'll let you into a secret. Information professionals are not renowned for being loud and proud. Used to promoting our library services, but when it comes to marketing ourselves? Not so much. And in the current climate we need to be demonstrating our impact more than ever – to senior management, to our profession as a whole and perhaps most importantly to the wider world. The superhero librarian roadshow is a practical hands-on workshop which empowers library staff to get out there and engage as scholars – actively looking for opportunities to publish papers, present at conferences and use social media. To tell people about what they are doing. To challenge the typical librarian stereotype. To surprise themselves.

How did it start?

Elizabeth Malone (Head of Content Development / Co-director Library & Learning Services) at Kingston University wanted to encourage more Kingston library colleagues to have the confidence to present and publish. She invited Leo Appleton – from the University of the Arts, London – to lead a workshop entitled 'Librarians engaging in scholarship'. To be brutally honest I only went along to the session because it was on a Friday afternoon and I wanted some recent CPD to add to my upcoming annual appraisal form. I was (and still am) your average bog–standard subject librarian and I had never presented at a conference or published an article. But as a result of attending the session I realised that actually this was do-able. Not only do-able but fun. Catapulted into action by the original workshop, in the space of 18 months I have published four pieces in various journals and spoken at ten external events, culminating rather alarmingly in being asked to speak at an international conference in Texas in 2018. I have come rather late to the party – and I wanted to encourage other library staff to wake up to the opportunities out there earlier in their careers. It also occurred to me that there was a superhero analogy between the self-deprecating persona we routinely adopt on the library helpdesk and the self-publicising role we should be aspiring to. Clark Kent / Diana Prince / Peter Parker need to get their capes on and emerge from the LRC in their alter ego forms to rescue library services everywhere. Batgirl's day job really was working as a librarian. It's true. Google it if you don't believe me. But I digress. Suffice to say the superhero librarian roadshow was born. Leo's original session was re-jigged with suitable branding and – taking our own advice – we spoke about it at 2016 UKSG Forum https://www.uksg.org/event/FORUM2016 and at the annual M25 conference in 2017.
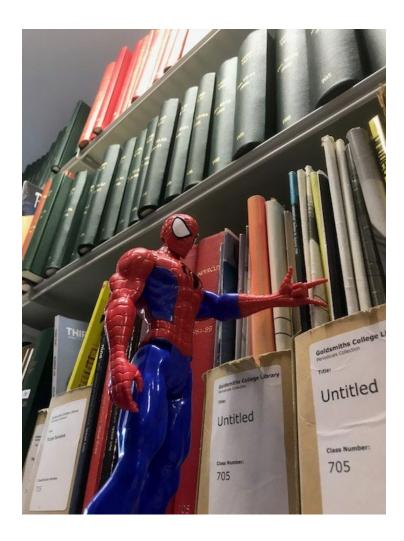
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Who are we targeting?

So far we have run workshops for library staff at University of the Arts, London; Kingston University London; Cambridge University; Birkbeck, University of London; and the University of Essex. We are constantly refining the content in the light of detailed feedback and evaluation from the participants and are gathering additional new superhero presenters as we go along. Claire Sewell from Cambridge University Library has now joined the regular team who deliver the workshop and we happily masquerade as Captain America, Black Widow and Wonder Woman for a delicious three hours of Marvel-lous (sorry) focused library revelry. (No costumes, in case you're interested, but occasionally the odd T-shirt.) It's a tremendous blast, but it has a serious undercurrent and is beginning to show real impact as attendees find the confidence – often after experiencing a lull in their professional lives – to showcase their special projects or achievements by pitching to conferences and submitting pieces for publication.

What do we cover in the workshop?

We start by asking our delegates how proud they are of their profession. We have a 'Superhero scale of professional pride' running from Antman (no. 1) to The Hulk (no. 10) and our would-be caped crusaders have to position themselves – metaphorically – on the scale. So Antmen are people who never mention they are librarians (often even to close friends) and Hulks are library megaphones who evangelise at every opportunity. Honesty is then the order of the day as the cohort rises to its feet and then each group sits down as the roll is called. We end up with just the Hulks left standing. Guess who usually ends up joining the presenting team? But it's always interesting to see how many points individuals have climbed up the scale by the end of the session.

The Superhero scale of professional pride

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

We then talk about individual achievements – starting with personal goals (which may be something as simple as passing your driving test or something as life-changing as becoming a parent) and then move on to significant things in their professional lives that our participants are particularly proud of. The cringe factor kicks in at this point, but it only goes to demonstrate how uncomfortable we are when we have to big ourselves up.

Ice broken, we go on to talk about why we should involve ourselves in scholarship, and we list various opportunities to present. We suggest starting small – showcasing in-house research projects by speaking at internal events, then moving on to local professional networks. We talk about selecting the format for the talk – would a plenary session, a workshop or perhaps a lightning talk be best? The workshop is very interactive, so we then divide into superhero-themed groups for a practical exercise in writing a conference abstract and a personal biography. Each group agrees on a current project (or fantasy project, which is often even more entertaining) and writes a pitch to the imaginary conference organisers which is subsequently read out to the room. In addition, each delegate produces a personal biography to accompany the abstract. Reading your bio is optional and not popular – but it is an invaluable exercise in proving that you can always find engaging and impressive things to include. The delegate pack provides multiple examples of conference abstracts and biographies to use as a template to kick-start the process.

We move on to opportunities to publish – looking at the pros and cons of peer-review journals, and how to get an initial foot in the door through blogs. Each group is asked to think about where they might publish the research that they have just spoken about at their imaginary conference – will it be *CILIP Update*, *UKSG eNews*, *Insights*, *Sconul Focus* (!), *Journal of Information Literacy* or the *New Review of Academic Librarianship*?

Our final section is quite possibly the most important. Presenting or publishing on a topic is simply the start. Today's information professional needs to be immersed in the world of social media if they want to promote their work proactively and widely. This also puts us on a level playing field with our academic colleagues who are constantly discovering new ways to publicise and promulgate their own research. We ask our delegates what sites they are currently using and whether they have a social media plan. We talk about why it is so important to use social media in all its guises – personal blogs, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook or any number of emerging new arrivals. We also cover how to measure the impact of your research profile – how altmetrics differ from traditional metrics – and we share best practice on disseminating outputs via social media.

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We conclude by asking our attendees what things they think they will need in order to be able to engage actively in scholarship. Turns out it's mainly time. Support from managers and peers as well, but above all time to write – and time to be released from regular duties to spread their capes outside the library and speak to the wider world.

Where to now?

Anecdotally, and through our feedback sheets, it looks as though the end result of the superhero roadshow has been in a number of cases from zero to hero. A growing list of pieces published, blogs uploaded and papers delivered, not to mention new converts to Twitter. What we want to do now is to collate some detailed impact for the workshop – and to continue delivering it across the academic library community. Any takers? I have even introduced a shortened version of the session to my local colleagues in the public library service and it seems to chime with that sector as well. So where to now? We strongly recommend boldly going where librarians have not gone before. Be loud and proud. Boast about your achievements. Buck the stereotype. Unexpected item in bragging area? We hope so.

Reference

UKSG (2017) *The innovation game: breaking the rules.* [online] Available at: https://www.uksg.org/event/FORUM2016 [accessed 1 August 2017]