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Open Access and Academic Library Public Services: Roles for Reference and Instruction

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Abstract: Librarians advocate for open access to the scholarly literature as a way to promote the library values of openness, and also as a mechanism to effect change in scholarly communication. While librarians in collections and scholarly communication work may have become immersed in advocacy and even action, those working on the front lines of public services, especially in reference and instruction, may have not integrated open access publications and research tools into their “everyday” interactions with library users. This type of grassroots effort will be necessary if the open access movement is to be successful in changing the way library users view acceptable forms of scholarly literature for use in their various research endeavours. Reference and instruction librarians can use many venues to promote open access, and must change traditional practices if open access advocacy is to “filter down” to all library users.

Keywords: open access, instruction, reference, public services, openness, scholarly communication, advocacy, information literacy, LIS education

1. Introduction

Moving open access advocacy forward into action in academic libraries has required a sustained commitment on the part of librarians in their roles as authors, editors, liaisons, collection development specialists, publishers of open access journals and managers of repositories. However, a disconnect may occur when librarians do not change their behaviour in their daily public services work with library users. A plethora of research articles as well as the more passionate editorial pieces have predicted great changes to the business of libraries and the profession of librarianship as a result of a move toward open access. So much of the conversation may be missing the librarians who interface most with students, faculty, and the public; the reference and instruction librarians. “Best practices” for reference and instruction may not have incorporated scholarly communication trends, and an adequate awareness of the use of open access materials.

Two of the major reasons for librarians to “get on board” with open access advocacy have been the promise of libraries gaining some potential budgetary relief from the exponential growth of costs of serials, as well as for the promotion of the “library value” of democratization of access to information. Maximum accessibility of scholarly information is especially important for research that results from taxpayer funds. Many libraries have not realized much budgetary savings from open access but most librarians can agree that libraries of all types want scholarly information to be disseminated in ways that enhance society at all levels. Reference and instruction librarians take available collections, both subscribed and by extension, those freely available on the web, and present them to users in a variety of ways. Reference encounters and instruction sessions allow librarians a platform to communicate information about all relevant and available information resources to users and classes. If
these public services roles have not changed, and if librarians are relying only on traditional subscription products, then the library misses an opportunity to promote some non-traditional digital materials for use in research. The increasing presentation and integration of a variety of open access materials in library public services will increase researcher awareness of alternatives for their own searching, research, self-archiving and writing for publication. Extending the suite of materials presented to researchers to those out on the web need not diminish in any way the use of any traditional library materials. Scholarly communication librarians and committees, as well as university library administrators have exhorted librarians to go out to their constituencies and educate faculty about the value of open access to the community at large, as well as its potential as a vehicle for increasing personal and article research impact. This type of outreach can happen at the reference desk, in the classroom, and in the library’s virtual space as well. Librarians may find a scholarly communication role a new one, and will need continuous educational opportunities in order to maximize their own efficacy in this new and possibly unfamiliar role. LIS educators will set a tone when teaching about materials acceptable for use by librarians in reference and instruction at all levels. Listservs, blogs, articles and books have been written by sometimes evangelistic authors whose intent may be to see wholesale change in the way librarians do business with publishers and vendors, while opening up huge amounts of information that was formerly “locked up” behind access walls for a large majority of the world’s readers. Freeing information for readers and the ability to showcase an institution’s scholarly output have been major reasons for the development of repositories. The creation of open access journals and books, and collaborations with university presses and even college stores are only a few of the potential opportunities facing academic libraries. However, there may be a large segment of the library community that has not followed suit by changing public services roles that have the potential to open the discussion beyond the library and teaching faculty to other groups of library users such as students and the public.

Public services functions in libraries serve to extend the collection focus and partner in bringing the materials to the library users. Librarians in public services roles corral all of the available resources, and organize them for users. By virtue of this organization through library websites, portals, discovery engines, online research guides, and a variety of lists, the library is able to present the user with a coherent and manageable suite of resources with which to work. While organizing the library’s suite of offerings, the public services librarian is able to influence to a degree which materials are used and promoted. If public services librarians wish to continue the emphasis and advocacy carried on by various other groups, they may wish to keep a focus on open access materials, thereby removing the mystique and the issues surrounding “scholarliness” often plaguing open content in terms of credibility and level of peer review. Open access materials may differ by business model, but not by quality, relevance, or appropriateness. Open access materials, in the case of this paper, include all resources, whether articles in all forms, books, journals, media, repository materials, data, institutional output such as dissertations, and any other products of a scholarly nature. Whether created digitally as open access materials, open access status paid for by authors or institutions, or traditional materials transitioned to open formats, open access materials are free to readers. Aside from free to read, open access of course extends other benefits such as downloading, copying, or distribution. Librarians can assist in the search and discoverability of the open access material by
students, faculty and researchers in an organization through effective communication and organization and presentation of library resources. Public services librarians know that the library extends out onto the open web. Integrating open access into the mindsets of public services librarians requires only awareness and education, not expenditure of any funding.

2. Integrating Open Access into Reference Work

Reference librarians get their training, whether they work in the virtual or traditional environment through their graduate school training, through professional development in their institutions and organizations, and from “shadowing” or working with more experienced reference librarians. Training, whether in LIS programs or in the current library environment depends on the availability of librarian expertise in scholarly communication trends, and that includes full knowledge of search and discovery of relevant open access materials. Institutions, with continued economic pressures, are unable to subscribe to all needed content, and many individuals do not have affiliations that would allow access to even a minutia of available scholarly output in a particular research area. In both situations, librarians can offer open access materials alongside whatever subscription materials might be available. Today, library users still consider the library a source of scholarly, credible information and approach their search for materials in a variety of ways. The challenge for both librarian and user in the current environment is to distill the vast array of resource choices down to an appropriate, targeted, and manageable grouping for a particular information need. Excellent reference librarians are able to see across a vast landscape of available materials, and without overwhelming the researcher, set a strategy and a path for the user to follow in gathering material, organizing it, and eventually incorporating it into current work. The unmet realization of open access is not solely the responsibility of those librarians who teach and work in public service reference roles, but certainly these “frontline” librarians have every ability and opportunity to explain the added value to the library of materials that are freely accessible to the reader. Individual libraries will be able to determine how open access materials fit into their lists of resources, and how to prioritize or specifically showcase these materials.

Public services librarians will have to grapple with the way students make use of the library, whether starting with Wikipedia or other open access work and linking to new articles through references found there, or by starting with Google or Google Scholar. Librarians must be open to assisting students with a discussion of the variety of paths used to reach scholarly materials, whether open or subscribed. Pushing usage of subscribed materials is now a desire of many in the institution, but open access materials may be used in a complementary fashion. Justifying institutional expenditure on expensive databases or journals may be a reason that librarians direct users first toward subscription materials in reference encounters or in instruction sessions. Further research can determine how librarians decide what to offer the use in terms of integration of open access materials. Recent studies have begun to analyze librarian attitudes toward open access (Palmer, Dill and Christie 2009), but other research looking specifically at public services librarians’ behavior in terms of the integration of open access materials will be necessary.

For those libraries deploying institutional repositories, making them a silo, and not an integral part of any library search will not expose the contents adequately. If the purpose of the repository is twofold; to gather together the
products of institutional scholarship and research, and to make those materials available to the wider community, then the librarian could include a search of repository contents in reference encounters with users. Without an institutional repository, or in fields where there exists a robust disciplinary repository, that source must be considered to be like any other disciplinary source of scholarly full text, and shown to users. Some disciplinary repositories hold vast stores of scholarly materials and are established parts of the information chain in particular fields. Examples would be arXiv for the physics community, or dList and E-LIS for aggregation of library and information science material.

Public services librarians need to continue to stay abreast with trends in dealing with “versioning” of materials in repositories. Repository materials might be in unfamiliar formats such as preprints or postprints, and users may be reticent to use such materials as citable objects in bibliographies. Newer style guides are incorporating some of these versions and providing guidance for citation. Consulting with users on author rights might be a serendipitous result of offering these versions as acceptable substitutes for the branded publisher PDF in research. Where postprint versions contain biomedical data or other sensitive material, the librarian might expect to hear some understandable concern from the patron wanting to only cite the fully branded publisher PDF. Seeing and using such versions might provide extra impetus for faculty authors to deposit their own materials in the institutional or disciplinary repository (or both). Researchers may see the value of these versions for readers, even if they don’t consider them citable.

One of the primary occurrences in reference interviews or encounters is the listing of appropriate scholarly indexes and databases for a particular subject search. The librarian may be consulted for a list of appropriate indexes. Librarians who wish to maximize the scholarly result will need to consider free indexes that expose appropriate open access material. Indexes and databases that make up a library’s suite of products need to include open access indexes and databases such as Google Scholar, Open J-Gate, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), and others. These indexes have a variety of searching options and limits, and may really be valuable to researchers in terms of discovery of open access materials. Google Scholar, in particular, even with its problems regarding transparency in terms of what it covers, has been added to the indexes and databases lists of many academic library members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). (Hartman and Mullen, 2008). Library catalogs or ILSs can benefit from a wide variety of added free open access content, whether from book digitization efforts or the inclusion of free open access journal links that have been vetted for quality either by subject specialists in the library or because of their inclusion in traditional indexes and databases like PsycINFO, Web of Science, Scopus, or others. Reference and instruction librarians are instrumental in suggesting the inclusion of various types of open access material into library collections. Libraries’ collections benefit from including open access materials.

Many libraries add their institutional repository contents to federated or integrated search products, or the newer discovery services. A prominent place on the library website as well as catchy branding can draw further attention to the repository as a place for institutional scholarship and collaboration. Reference librarians are in a position to at least mention the repository in reference encounters. Further studies on librarian behavior with respect to open access advocacy may provide information on whether reference librarians actually feel comfortable suggesting repository materials to patrons at the desk or in the virtual reference space. This is a training issue for reference librarians,
and further study will show where the issues surrounding open access and scholarly communication fall in LIS programs training future librarians. All future librarians dealing with public service roles must be conversant in issues surrounding open access to materials. Library administration will need to determine the individual library’s attitude about open access advocacy from public services librarians. There must be a consistency in terms of “best practices” surrounding open access and reference.

No longer is the open access conversation only of interest to science libraries and librarians, but it is crossing boundaries into other areas such as open access books initiatives in the humanities. However, science researchers will certainly be more amenable to using open access journal materials due to the ubiquitousness of both the conversation and the materials. Most scientists have probably, by this point, encountered author charges for open access journals, have had some involvement in conversations about open access legislation and mandates, or have some familiarity with the branding on some of the open access alternatives from popular publishers such as Public Library of Science (PloS), Springer/BMC, Hindawi and others. Science researchers have undoubtedly heard of repositories such as arXiv. They may be less familiar with more independently created free to author, free to reader open access journals in their fields. If promotion and tenure, or research assessment exercises allow, the reference librarian may be able to promote some of these newer, niche, open access journals. This is especially advantageous in the public relations efforts that assist a library published open access journal or open textbook project. A discussion of open access in a single encounter can lead to further discussion of issues of peer review, research impact, or the availability of new types of scholarly publications. Library users, used to linking seamlessly to subscription materials, may not even realize that there is a cost to information, or that the library is making certain online content available. Mentioning this in instruction sessions can raise some awareness. Talking about scholarly communication issues in reference and instruction roles can also raise awareness of the added value of librarians to an institution.

Public services librarians responsible for content on library websites and portals such as subject research guides or LibGuides have an opportunity to extend the reaches of the local collection by gathering together sources of open access materials and highlighting them in a variety of ways. Librarians will still need to vet open access indexes, book sources, and individual journals for scholarly quality before including them alongside toll products on the library website and in the catalog. The role of the public service librarian or subject specialist librarian will be to organize and recommend these free resources alongside any others. Popular subject indexes such as PsycINFO also include open access materials if deemed of scholarly value by the publishers of the database. Public services librarians, while attending the virtual or in person training sessions of the index producers, may want to ask them whether the source includes open access materials. Indexing open access materials provides added value to the reference or instruction encounter, making more scholarship available at the point of search. The indexes can help with the organization of open access materials so they do not exist simply as disparate digital object on the web. Free and subscription indexes may be listed together by subject or other category. Library users starting with the library website will find quality materials, regardless of business model, organized together. LibGuides and other research guides can include all important scholarly disciplinary materials side by side, regardless of business model.
3. Instruction and Information Literacy with Open Access

Library instruction and information literacy efforts which only include subscription materials miss the opportunity to provide awareness of and access to open materials. Many librarians teach as they have always taught; starting with the library website and focusing on subscription materials accessed through the institutional connections. Even at institutions with robust collections, library users can be taught to pull in appropriate free resources from many web sources. Researchers do not need to focus on business model, but will benefit from some discussion of trends in scholarly communication. For basic classes, students will need to know how to evaluate research material, and to understand peer review as a value. This type of conversation with students allows them to feel free to use scholarly open access materials in their papers and classes. Advanced researchers will be interested in the conventions of the disciplines in terms of promotion and tenure, impact and other metric analyses available for evaluation, and a might require a more international scope to the discussion. Instruction session can include the open access conversation at an appropriate level of complexity.

Information literacy standards, such as those available for some disciplines through the ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries), or by accreditation groups could begin to incorporate more fully important discipline-specific scholarly communication issues, and lead to enhanced discussion of open access topics. In discipline-specific classes, especially those taught at the graduate level, or sessions targeting faculty and other researchers, librarians can offer discipline-specific information about metrics, impact, copyright, data issues, author rights, open access journals, disciplinary repositories, and any other issues affecting the field’s journals, publishers, or vendors. Instruction at this disciplinary level can also incorporate discussion of the economics of publishing. Disciplines and even subfields vary distinctly in their uptake of various types of open access, whether repository uptake, open access journals, author pays models, and availability of the open corpus of the specific book literature. Many scholars will welcome these discussions, and the conversation can be opened in instruction sessions or reference encounters. It may be a steep learning curve for reference and general instruction librarians to be able to discuss these issues with all categories of library patrons, but it is a responsibility if the library is serious about participating in, or even leading the discussion of scholarly communication issues such as open access. Librarians in public services roles have the opportunity to be leaders in specific scholarly communication efforts not only in the home institution, but in national and international organizations. Looking at open access from a public service perspective would round out the conversation.

Continuous education for instructors, and collaborations and conversation with departmental faculty will make it easy to integrate open access and changing publication paradigms into disciplinary conversations. Librarians may want to gather together by discipline in physical or virtual conferences for discussion of scholarly communication topics. Library instruction should not just continue year to year in the same manner with little credence given to enormous changes taking place in the publication and information industry, and new opportunities for participation in a conversation about evolving methods of scholarship. Starting with defining the concepts around more open models in basic classes, and scaffolding to more complicated discussions in the higher levels of the disciplines will provide a wider conversation that will benefit disciplinary scholarship. It is also possible to reach particular classes or groups...
by putting resources directly into courseware. Faculty may choose reserve materials for students from open access materials found on the web, or consider use of open textbooks, thus highlighting the scholarly nature of many non-traditional materials. Discussions of open textbook initiatives might be an area where all librarians can focus on critical needs of students while giving the library added relevance to that group.

Open access advocacy with students and others in the library can be promoted through use of brochures, posters, and other visuals in the library. Students may respond to some of the SPARC initiatives, such as activities for Open Access Week, and become engaged in new conversations. A targeted focus during this one week of worldwide advocacy may garner interest alongside a more diffuse discussion throughout the institution. Librarians promoting open advocacy may be doing the most work with the faculty and researchers, but need to remember that the students are the readers and information consumers of the future. Outside of marketing efforts involving the physical library building, the library website can feature any library efforts that focus on open access issues by promotion of initiatives in news items or short communications. If the library is to create a culture where the promotion of efforts to ensure that the maximum amount of scholarly information is available for all readers, all librarians will have to incorporate the conversation into their reference and instruction work. Many public services librarians will want to discuss best practices for actually integrating more open access materials and behaviours into daily work.

4. Conclusions

Future research may include the study of the teaching of open access and newer trends in scholarly communication in LIS graduate programs, and the study of all modes of reference and instruction training for librarians and the extent to which open access has been integrated into the practical business of public services in the academic library. Another issue surrounds the consistency of the message, and whether academic librarians are “on board” with the strident advocacy messages that filter through academic library circles. The discussion may be best promulgated by crosspollination of teams where public services librarians discuss best practices with those working on the collections being pushed out to users through public service channels.

Surveys of science faculty and understanding the various pressures pushing researcher behaviour, such as need to demonstrate personal impact when seeking promotion, tenure, or continuing appointment, or to use traditional materials with demonstrated impact factor, may be helpful. Sometimes controversial, the adage that open access increases research impact may motivate certain researchers to consult with reference librarians for issues of traditional and newer metrics, or to discuss different business models used by journals. It may be a steep learning curve for both new and experienced reference librarians to keep up with these issues. An academic library may have a scholarly communication librarian or other specialist who may take on the role of coordinating continuous education for librarians. Without open advocacy efforts actually filtering down to librarians on the “front lines” of reference and instruction, little is likely to change in the library. Library leaders recognized for their expertise in public services areas will need to discuss this topic and set expectations for librarian behaviour.

Libraries demonstrating a commitment to open access in reference and instruction roles will undoubtedly be held up as examples of those who serve researchers well while advancing what has come to be a basic tenet of academic librarianship; the need to make research literature, especially the product of
taxpayer funding, available to all on a global scale. Opening up the actual data will likely follow, and will provide another opportunity for reference and instruction librarians to add value to the library experience for the researcher. Promotion of open access resources and development of new scholarly communication expertise is an exciting area for public services in the academic library. Direct contact with library users, whether virtually or in person gives the public services librarian a unique vantage point to influence uptake of new ways of looking at scholarly search and discovery.

Public services librarians, with their many lists, online fora, and dedicated organizations may need to decide what their place is in the open access conversation. Thus far, it has not been very robust. After more than 15 years of open access advocacy by library groups, the LIS literature seems sadly lacking in treatments of interest written for and by front line public services librarians. LIS education programs provide the place for learning information on “new” reference and information literacy practices, and will determine whether there will be any wholesale change toward using interaction with users (either physically or virtually) as a means of advancing the open access agenda. Library users will approach librarians with the expectation of accessing an appropriate suite of choices for use in their research. The public services librarian role of teaching today’s students to properly evaluate materials for scholarliness will not preclude the gathering together of materials produced by many different methods, but having in common free accessibility. Librarians will realize the benefits of offering open access materials to library users, and over time, these materials may not be set apart in any separate category. At that time, there may be a fuller realization of the impact of open access to the collective researcher community. Open access materials will be accessed on mobile devices and in classrooms and serve the widest audience. Reference and instruction librarians can offer the best of the available scholarship to the user, and that can and should include all appropriate open access materials.

References


