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Librarians as Research Partners: Their Contribution to the Scholarly Endeavour Beyond Library and Information Science

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ABSTRACT

Academic libraries are increasingly called upon to demonstrate their value to their home institutions. Research collaboration with faculty resulting in the co-authorship of scholarly output is one possible way to demonstrate the alignment of the library with the institutional mission. Involvement in research also improves librarians' skills in offering research support services. This study explores the contribution of librarians to scholarly journals in fields other than Library and Information Science (LIS) as well as their collaboration practices with researchers in those fields. Results show an increasing number of papers published by library-affiliated authors in non-LIS journals between 2006 and 2015. The papers fall broadly into four areas: articles on topics related to LIS published in non-LIS journals; higher education and information literacy; systematic reviews and meta-analysis; and research collaboration in the faculty's areas of expertise. The study is limited by the difficulty in properly retrieving the scholarly output of librarians from bibliographic databases and the difficulty in ascertaining their contributions to published articles.

Introduction

Academic libraries have an increasing need to demonstrate their contribution to the institutional mission. In 2009, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) requested a comprehensive review of best practices for demonstrating the value of academic libraries. The resulting report (Oakleaf, 2010) offered a set of recommendations for librarians who wished to demonstrate value, one of them being to “track and increase library contribution to faculty research productivity” (p. 15). One possible path toward achieving this goal is to collaborate in research projects conducted by faculty. Such collaboration may ideally culminate in co-authorship of the resulting publications. Some academic libraries “are applying the embedded librarian model in working directly with the faculty they serve as collaborators on research projects or as an integral part of a research team” (Carlson & Kneale, 2011, p. 167). Similarly, a recent blog post (Ekstrøm, Elbaek, Erdmann, & Grigorov, 2016) described the research librarian of the future as a “co-investigator” and Brandenburg et al. (2017, p. 272–273) observed “an increasing emphasis on librarians as partners within research collaborations” in a paper discussing three projects that were “examples of contributions to research that redefine librarian roles and help rewrite librarian stereotypes”. In a similar fashion, Bedi and Walde (2017, p. 314) described the evolution of the role of the academic librarian toward that of a “research partner”, partly because researchers aim to diversify their research teams to achieve greater success in grant

competitions.

Conducting research benefits librarians in several ways. Research in Library and Information Science (LIS) is necessary to build new knowledge and contribute to the development of the profession. At the same time, conducting research improves librarians' problem-solving and decision-making skills and makes them critical consumers of academic literature. In some cases, carrying out research and publishing are compulsory for librarians to advance on a tenure track in their professional career.

In addition to conducting research in their own professional discipline, carrying out research in partnership with faculty offers librarians the opportunity to gain valuable experience in how research operates. This knowledge is useful for providing better library research support services. In the words of Powell, Baker, and Mika (2002), conducting research “better equip[s] librarians to provide optimal information services to researchers in other fields.”

Beyond benefits to librarians' professional careers, research collaboration with academics may also help to improve the image of library services. Faculty will probably feel greater appreciation for the services librarians provide if they view them as contributors to knowledge creation, beyond their traditional tasks in disseminating information. Librarians' skills can be helpful not only in solving researchers' information needs, but also in improving faculty research practices by creatively contributing to research designs, adding to the knowledge base or supporting data analysis.

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This study leaves aside the contribution of faculty and practitioners to library issues, in order to explore the contribution of librarians to the scholarly output published in non-LIS journals as well as their collaboration practices with faculty that result in the co-authorship of academic publications. To date, numerous studies have analysed the publication patterns of librarians, but they have mostly focused on their contribution to LIS literature, frequently propelled by tenure and promotion requirements, especially in the United States. Specifically, longitudinal data collected during the past 20 years suggest a decline in the volume of publications by academic librarians (Blecic et al., 2017). The reasons for the trend are not clear, but the authors suggest that it might be attributed to staffing reductions and the aging of the library workforce, resulting in fewer untenured librarians, who are the ones with the most incentive to publish. Other studies have explored collaboration patterns between librarians and faculty but focusing on the partnership between librarians and LIS academics. These studies have observed a widening gap, resulting in a low level of joint authorship between practitioners and academics (Ardanuy & Urbano, 2017).

Very few studies have explored the collaboration patterns between librarians and scholars on research topics other than LIS. The nature of these partnerships has hardly been explored, with the possible exception of the medical literature, where librarians have frequently been involved in the preparation and publication of systematic reviews (Fouch, 2016). In fact, librarian and information specialist authorship has been associated with better-reported systematic review search quality and reproducibility (Rethlefsen, Farrell, Trzasko, & Brigham, 2015). Desmeules, Campbell, and Dorgan (2016) also observed an increasing demand for academic health librarians in Canada to be involved in systematic reviews. However, little consensus was observed in relation to how their work was recognised, ranging from being co-authors of the resulting publications to being acknowledged to receiving no formal recognition at all.

Beyond the medical literature, Folk (2014) explored the visibility of librarians as authors in scholarly teaching and learning journals. She suggested that publication in these venues could be a way for librarians to make themselves more visible in higher education and to demonstrate a commitment to the values and priorities of higher education institutions. Her results showed that librarians, especially those based at research universities, were likely to publish articles about information literacy that were usually more theoretical than empirical.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the contribution of librarians to scholarly journals in fields other than LIS and the nature of their partnerships with researchers resulting in co-authored publications. The study is underpinned by two research questions:

1. What is the amount of research published by library-affiliated authors in fields other than LIS?
2. What types of scholarly output do librarians co-author with researchers in non-LIS journals?

Methods

We searched Scopus in February 2017 for documents with the string *librar** in the “affiliation name” field. The search was limited to articles and reviews published between 2006 and 2015. Throughout this article, we use the term “papers” to refer generally to the above set of articles and reviews.

In order to distinguish the output in LIS from that in other fields, we considered the discipline of the journal in which the paper appeared. The 26,761 retrieved papers appeared in 4283 journals. Scopus' *CiteScore Metrics* 2015 edition (Elsevier, 2017) listed 194 journals in the field of “Library and Information Sciences”. Our sample included papers published in 158 of the listed LIS journals. Additionally, we manually checked the 150 journals with 10 or more retrieved papers and classified 32 of them as LIS (Table 1). Most of these journals were missing from the *CiteScore Metrics* 2015 edition because Scopus no longer

covered them or because they had changed their titles. As a result, 190 journals were classified as LIS for the purposes of this study.

The second stage of the study consisted of a detailed analysis of the affiliation data for the papers published in 2015. The purpose of the analysis was twofold: a) to investigate the extent to which the methodological procedure employed to answer the first research question was correct and whether the papers retrieved when searching for the string *librar** really corresponded to the output produced by authors affiliated with libraries; and b) to provide an exploratory answer to the second research question on the collaboration patterns between librarians and scholars in non-LIS journals.

For each paper, the number of authors and affiliations was recorded. The affiliations that included the string *librar** were classified as “professional” when corresponding to library services or as “academic” in the case of schools and departments of “library” science. Finally, the records were inductively classified in four categories: a) papers on topics related to LIS published in non-LIS journals; b) higher education and information literacy; c) systematic reviews and meta-analysis; and d) research collaboration in other areas.

Results

Longitudinal evolution of the papers published by library-affiliated authors

The number of papers signed by authors including the string *librar** in their affiliation increased from 2238 in 2006 to 2877 in 2015 (Fig. 1). The rise is to be expected since the coverage of the Scopus database also increased over the same period, rising from 1.39 million papers indexed in 2006 to 2.03 million papers in 2015.

Scopus classified the retrieved records in 27 fields of knowledge by journal subject, using the “All Science Journal Classification (ASJC)”. Journals in “Library and Information Sciences” are classified under the general category of “Social Sciences”. In the decade analysed, the number of papers including the string *librar** in the affiliation name rose in nearly all fields of knowledge, but the rise was especially significant in fields outside “Social Sciences” (Table 2). Thus, in 2006, the 1516 papers classified in “Social Sciences” represented 68% of the 2238 retrieved records. Ten years later, in 2015, the 1662 papers classified in “Social Sciences” accounted for just 58% of the 2877 retrieved records.

Beyond “Social Sciences”, six disciplines featured more than 100 papers published in 2015 (Table 2): Medicine (770 articles, +167% compared to 2006), Computer Science (559 articles, +63%), Biochemistry, Genetics and Molecular Biology (261 articles, +101%), Arts and Humanities (222 articles, +71%), Agricultural and Biological Sciences (183 articles, +266%) and Engineering (132 articles, +91%).

Fig. 2 compares the evolution in the number of papers published in LIS (190 journals) and non-LIS titles (4093 journals). Whereas the number of papers appearing in LIS journals remained stable during the decade analysed, the output in non-LIS journals nearly doubled over the same period.

Papers in non-LIS journals

Setting aside the output published in LIS journals, 1385 papers appeared in non-LIS journals in 2015. An analysis of the features of this set of papers (Table 3) shows that some were not relevant for the purposes of the study. Specifically, 9% were “false matches”, i.e. papers including affiliations such as “Library Road”, “Old library building” or “Public Library of Science”. Additionally, 11% of the papers were authored not by librarians, but by academics affiliated with schools or departments of “library” science. Lastly, authors affiliated with the US National Library of Medicine signed 13% of the papers. This case illustrates the difficulties in properly retrieving the scholarly output of librarians. The US National Library of Medicine is organised in divisions, some of which have a strict scientific orientation with staff that are professional scientists, not librarians. While a portion of their

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