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Leveraging Librarian Liaison Expertise in a New Consultancy Role

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of an advisory role that librarians successfully developed with faculty editors to increase the visibility and readership of an open access scholarly publication. The study represents an example of how expertise among liaison librarians and other library service professionals can be leveraged in new consultancy roles in support of evolving library service models. It also depicts local application of a hybrid model for librarianship that combines the functional specialist and subject librarian liaison roles in implementing advisory activities and recommendations. The liaison librarians successfully used their knowledge of scholarly communications and applied innovative bibliometric analysis to help enhance the discoverability and user experience of an online journal publication. The librarians made specific recommendations for optimizing journal website content organization, search functionality, metadata standards and marketing opportunities that were subsequently implemented by the editors and platform managers. The faculty editor places a high value on these recommendations, and the librarian advisory role continues to develop. Our study also outlines many of the essential considerations that scholar-editors and librarian advisors can use to help implement open access scholarly publishing projects successfully.

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INTRODUCTION/LITERATURE REVIEW

The prevalence of electronic scholarly content provided by traditional publishing vendors and, increasingly, by open access content providers, continues to be among the main factors driving transformative changes in academic library spaces, services and overall institutional presence (Council on Library and Information Resources, 2008). These and other trends have had a dramatic effect in incentivizing libraries to continually assess and modify their collection and service offerings, scan for new partnership opportunities, optimize their internal organizational structures and workflows, and craft strategic goals that fit well with those of the parent institution. Among the strategies for reinventing and diversifying library service capabilities for teaching and research, librarians increasingly are leveraging their expert knowledge of trends in scholarly communication, journal performance analytics, and management of the research lifecycle in order to create new and highly valued advisory roles and services (Bruxvoort & Fruin, 2014; Partnerships and New Roles in 21st-Century Academic Libraries: Collaborating, Embedding, and Cross-Training for the Future, 2015; Kenney, 2014).

The modern environment in academic libraries is in fact replete with opportunities to expand service, demonstrate institutional relevance, and successfully navigate the ongoing transition to the academic library

of the 21st century. The scholarly communication crisis, for example, has provided libraries with the opportunity to offer critical guidance on open access and other alternative publication venues, and to develop new support services around the many inherent and unique considerations for copyright, licensing, digitization, and content curation in these venues. Libraries also now partner directly with scholars in the process of content creation and library-based publication (Case, 2008). The capacity of libraries to offer such services is nevertheless governed by local campus priorities, library budgets and staffing, and expertise among functional specialists that may or may not be available in-house. As a result, liaison librarians who provide direct research support to academic departments and programs play an increasingly expanded role in facilitating the scholarly communication and publication process (Hansson & Johannesson, 2013).

To support new and unique user needs, library professionals are moving beyond their traditional roles, responsibilities, and subject specialties to the extent that the “liaison subject specialist” and “functional specialist” service models are increasingly being merged (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Miller & Pressley, 2015). Strategic planning initiatives now may call for liaison librarians to serve as functional specialists themselves in a particular area of expertise, and also to marshal additional specialized expertise among colleagues, through professional networks, across subject specializations, and within the confines of current library staffing and budgets, in order to meet new service goals (Karasmanis & Murphy, 2014). The present case study describes how two librarian colleagues applied this hybrid library liaison service

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model to support the scholar-editors of a locally published open access journal. Liaison librarians at the main campus library had previously been tasked with becoming in-house experts on topics of interest in the campus community, collaborating more thoroughly within and across library service teams, and leveraging expertise in and outside the library in order to provide support for newly identified user needs.

The librarians in this case created a new and unique advisory role for a Sociology faculty member and his scholar-editor associates that was also in keeping with library-wide strategic initiatives. The development of this role stemmed in part from each librarian's professional background and interests, as well as from previously established service relationships with faculty at the home institution. The liaison librarian to the Department of Sociology utilized graduate training in social science and the humanities, years of experience with supporting several other social and behavioral sciences programs, and an established network of faculty and graduate student relationships in the department, to effectively support curriculum, research, and grant writing projects. The liaison librarian had also previously helped the Sociology faculty-editor with these department-wide initiatives, and with vetting journal publications for his own research article submissions. The liaison librarian co-author in the present study served as the library's resident expert in bibliometrics and open access scholarly communication trends. For the advisory collaboration, this librarian also drew from professional experience in engineering librarianship, a longstanding passion for bibliometrics and scholarship metrics as applied to faculty promotion and tenure activities, as well as direct experience with significant differences in access to scholarly resources across several world regions, both before and after the advent of open access journal publishing in 2002.

Together the two librarians applied and successfully leveraged their combined knowledge of local publishing initiatives, broad trends in scholarly communication, user experience research, and bibliometrics, to help advance the discoverability, usability, quality and overall prestige of a locally published academic journal edited and managed by the Sociology Department faculty member. Recommendations for optimizing website content organization, search functionality, metadata standards and marketing opportunities were subsequently implemented by the editors and platform managers who came to place a high value on librarian expertise and knowledge. The librarians also conducted analyses of journal content data in order to explore new and innovative strategies for marketing this open access publication. Data visualizations and a description of the new advisory role were also presented in a poster session at a state-wide library professional conference [*names redacted].

This study extends the discussion presented in the conference poster session and demonstrates how professional expertise and collaboration among library staff can be leveraged effectively to forge the kind of new consultancy roles now vital for success in the modern academic library environment. Our experience suggests that scholar-publishers who are new to journal platform and content management may not be fully aware of best practices for successfully launching and marketing an open access journal publication. Librarians can provide critical support in helping scholar-publishers navigate the process, and in implementing changes that contribute significantly to the fulfillment of publication mission and goals. This was especially important in the present case where the scholar-editors aspire not only to establish the journal publication as a venue for high quality research, but also to extend the core function of a scholarly publication in becoming a genuine vehicle for public good.

STUDY CASE

In early 2014 the subject librarian liaison to the Department of Sociology was contacted by a faculty member in the department regarding an open access academic society publication. The faculty member indicated that he would soon begin co-editing the publication according to newly revised goals and mission that entailed a significant expansion in

scholarly communication and international outreach capabilities to engage new and diverse research communities, many of which lacked sufficient online access to published research. *Societies Without Borders* (herein referred to as SWB), the international journal of the Sociologists Without Borders association, had previously been hosted by an academic publisher using an electronic journal platform with standard features. Although the publisher had provided highly valued service to the association, the need for greater flexibility in journal content access, marketing and distribution required a fundamental change in the journal's online platform and venue, the editors decided to discontinue their relationship with the publisher after the first two years and migrate the journal content to a blog platform, because they were not yet familiar with other options. In the ensuing years, the blog format proved to be inadequate as a publication venue for an academic journal. Therefore, the faculty member sought guidance from the librarian on how best to migrate journal content data to an open source journal management platform, one that would host the journal website and streamline article submission workflows. The faculty member and his managing editors had no prior experience with online journal management platforms and also faced limited options for securing an open access platform provider. After consulting with the liaison librarian, it was determined that a third party journal management platform provided for the research community by the home institution (but not directly by the library) was the best venue for faculty editor needs.

In August of 2014 the editors began the journal content migration and website redesign process with the help of platform provider representatives and librarian advisors. The subject liaison librarian had by this time enlisted a librarian colleague with considerable knowledge of open access publication practices and bibliometrics to join the process and contribute recommendations. In reviewing possible strategies for increasing journal readership, the librarians agreed that the success of an open access journal depends foremost on raising content discoverability, increasing article quality, and adopting best practices in journal publication and management. Recognizing the vital connection between readership and quality of authorship in a journal publication, the librarians expanded the "journal as a service provider to authors" model outlined by Björk & Öorni (Björk & Öorni, 2009) to include readers as well. The librarians used the four categories in the model - infrastructure, readership, prestige, and performance - to identify actionable elements within each category that could be added or improved to increase reader interest in the journal. The expanded model has been effective in determining how the librarians' knowledge and expertise can best be applied in advising the editors and supporting the shared goal of maximizing reader interest in the publication. The diagram below (Fig. 1) represents the librarians' application of the expanded service provider model to their advisory planning process.

Drawing in particular upon their combined knowledge of scholarly communication, user experience, and bibliometrics, the librarians determined that they could advise the editors effectively in all four categories of the service provider model. First, they addressed the readership category with recommendations for website layout and appearance, content discoverability and marketing opportunities. Second, with regard to the importance of solid journal infrastructure in attracting contributors, the librarians suggested modifications to further streamline the author/contributor submission workflow and match the level of service considered standard in the industry. Third, they introduced the editors to several publication management practices that support the quality, prestige and overall performance of a journal. Fourth, the librarians have begun to plan strategies for performance analysis that will be conducted in the coming months. The current lack of a Journal Impact Factor (JIF) for SWB could present a challenge, as journals not indexed in the *Web of Science*, the database that provides and has proprietary ownership of JIFs, may face a competitive disadvantage in attracting prestigious author/contributors. Alternative performance indicators and metrics sources are currently being assessed by the librarians for their effectiveness in demonstrating SWB impact.

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