



KEEPING CURRENT

Reviews and Analysis of Special Reports

This column provides an overview and analysis of recently issued white papers, research studies, articles, presentations, and special reports that the editor feels would be of greatest interest to academic librarians. This is a highly selective compilation, and the editor welcomes suggestions from readers. Leslie_Stebbins@post.harvard.edu.

“Leveraging the Liaison Model: From Defining 21st Century Research Libraries to Implementing 21st Century Research Universities,” by Anne R. Kenney. March 2014. Ithaca S + R. Available: <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/blog-individual/leveraging-liaison-model>.

Overview

This report provides a review of the liaison model currently in place at many university libraries and contains suggestions on ways to broaden future liaison work. Moving forward, Kenney suggests models that go beyond the traditional one-to-one library service and instead connect liaison work to the larger university mission. If the academic library is to succeed in the coming decades we need to clearly prove our ability to contribute to academic productivity and the larger institutional mission.

Key Points

- Over the past few years liaison models have gradually expanded to include support for online learning tools, fundraising, data curation, researcher profiles, digital scholarship workflows, new forms of scholarly publishing, impact measures, semantic web development, federal funding mandates and more.
- New liaison models are shifting the focus from the work of libraries to that of scholars, and there is growing recognition that the current models lack formal definition, funding, explicit training, and assessment. Part of this shift in focus should include support for systems to help researchers with data management, publication, and other tools and templates to facilitate their work.
- Librarians may want to focus on key indicators motivating the university as a whole and less on strictly library goals. Partnering with those who collect and assess data can help inform library goals.
- Concretizing liaison activities and quantifying goals where possible will help validate new roles.

Analysis

This report emphasizes outcome measures by focusing on the larger university goals and extrapolating the library role from those goals. A clearer definition of the activities that liaisons need to be engaged in will help inform outcome measures for new liaison programs. Breaking

down goals in terms of research, teaching, and learning goals, and mapping out the connections and expectations between liaisons and specific departments is a good first step.

While the report touches on the issue of developing separate goals for different departments, this point needs to be emphasized. When we take nuanced work and try to quantify it we sometimes run the risk of overly focusing on tally marks and not taking into account diverse departmental needs. What makes sense for the math department in terms of Open Access, for example, may not make sense for the English Department. The temptation to overly focus on statistical measures needs to be balanced with the distinct needs of different members of the community.

The author provides a useful template, similar to a teaching rubric, that identifies goals and defines gradations of success. For example, if focusing on increasing use and access to an institutional repository (IR), the rubric could include clear statements on what a base level goal attainment would look like as well as definitions of “good” and “better” so that liaisons could work toward improvement. This more nuanced approach could then be combined with statistical measurements such as an upward trend in faculty deposits and usage numbers of the IR.

Increased librarian integration into departmental activities could further bolster the library’s future place on campus. Participating on faculty search committees, meeting with new hires, connecting with graduate students, and generally having boots on the ground within each department will help individual librarians better understand the needs of their constituents and this information can be fed back into goal setting for the library as a whole.

“Peer Review: An Introduction and Guide,” by Mark Ware. 2013. Paper. Publishing Research Consortium. Available: <http://tinyurl.com/lcbtop8>.

Overview

This report serves as an excellent introduction to the peer review process for the new librarian or faculty member, and also provides a useful update and report on new approaches for pre-publication peer review and post-publication review and article level metrics. It also provides information about different types of peer review and the issue of misconduct and the work of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Key Points

- Peer review serves to assess the quality of research and also enhances how research is communicated.
- The role of the journal includes more than communication, it includes registration, certification, dissemination, archiving, and rewarding.

- The number of journals published is overwhelming, even to the individual specialized researcher. The filtering of articles by journals that are focused on specific topics, and the stratifying by quality, and the significance of findings provide important tools to prevent researchers from feeling overwhelmed.
- Peer review improves the quality of published papers by setting high standards and providing feedback for the author. It also provides a seal of approval validating the research.
- Peer review has been criticized as invalid, ineffective, inefficient, and unfair. The most significant shortcoming is that there is a lack of evidence that peer review actually leads to a higher quality of research.
- How peer review is carried out differs greatly by discipline.
- The number of article retractions has increased substantially in recent years, but it is unclear if this is due to increased misconduct, improvements in detection, or a rise in ethical standards.

Analysis

There has been an increase in unhappiness with peer review and an increase in the development of possible alternatives. Criticisms of peer review include issues of bias, delay, inefficiency, and a lack of transparency contributing to challenges with reproducibility. In addition, some argue that peer review is failing in its mission to provide a filtering mechanism by publishing more significant articles in higher impact journals.

Recent alternative efforts by Open Access publishers such as PLOS and Biomed Central use a model of “soundness not significance” in order to speed up the peer review process. These newer publications have reviewers focus only on the technical soundness of submitted papers, and they do not judge the significance of a particular piece of research. The original hope was that the more significant work could be surfaced using comments and ratings attached at the article level and other social media signals such as altmetrics. At present these ways of filtering out less important research have proved insufficient. In addition, fee based, portable, and cascading peer review pilots have yet to experience significant success. Various efforts being tried on a small scale by individual journals are still in the early stages.

Post-publication review using article-level comments and ratings has been explored as a technique for filtering journal articles and it is sometimes used in combination with usage data and citation data. The quality has been low and authors often ignore online criticism though they might be more responsive if the criticism came from their peer community.

Another post-publication technique that has more promise is altmetrics. Altmetrics involves combining different signals into a broader measure. These signals include mentions in blog posts and tweets, news stories, social bookmarking tools, as well as journal hosted comments, ratings, downloads and views. Several recent services are now available from newer players including Altmetrics, ImpactStory, Plum Analytics, and Google Scholar. Though issues of gaming are not discussed in the report, opening up peer review to broader social media influences would need to also monitor any attempts at manipulating the system for personal or institutional gain.

“**Keeping Up With... Altmetrics**,” by Robin Chin Roemer and Rachel Borhardt. January 2014. Association of College and Research Libraries. Available: http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with_altmetrics.

Overview

This brief article provides an overview and citations to key articles in the growing area of Altmetrics. Altmetrics stands for “alternative metrics” that provide alternatives to more traditional bibliometric measurements based on citation-based calculations of article and journal

influence and other traditional ranking algorithms used to evaluate and rank journals.

Key Points

- Altmetrics is a system that uses data such as article page view, number of downloads, social media, article sharing data combined with more traditional citation based metrics to filter research quality and significance.
- With the rise of Open Access and open data movements there has been an increase in the use of altmetrics.
- As altmetrics are increasing in popularity the National Information Standards Organization (NISO) has started an initiative to review and support the use of altmetrics.
- Various companies are emerging that provide altmetric data at varying levels of sophistication.
- Altmetrics have generated a great deal of enthusiasm and criticism.

Analysis

There are a number of significant issues with altmetrics: they may not provide a meaningful and deep measure of scholarly impact in the way that scholarly citations and journal impact factors can provide, and they can easily be gamed or manipulated. On the other hand, traditional measurements do not work well for new forms of publication, especially pre-publication and open access publishing.

Currently there exists a broken system for identifying important scholarship at a time when we are all inundated with information. Journal article production continues to climb exponentially, and the number of publishing options for researchers continues to multiply. To further complicate things, what we need is not one solution but many. We need different solutions for different disciplines: humanities research bears little resemblance to science and social science research. We also need different solutions for different types of publications. For high impact factor journals we need to recognize that humans are intricately involved in the vetting process, and this should still carry some weight while not completely denigrating the idea that there are other ways to measure impact and usage.

For the majority of scholars working in narrow fields of specialty their personal input into best measures for filtering out extraneous research should be investigated and solutions developed based on particular subfields. At the same time, developing alternative metrics can be useful for those outside of a discipline who need some measure, however inexact, of research significance and merit.

Librarians, as independent observers, are in a good place to keep their constituents up to speed on ongoing developments in bibliometrics and altmetrics. We could also serve on the listening end to interview faculty about what filters they use and what additional filters are needed for them to effectively stay abreast of important research in their subspecialties.

“**Opening the Textbook: New Opportunities for Libraries and Publishers**,” by Nancy L. Maron. Ithaca S + R Report. Available: http://www.sr.ithaca.org/sites/default/files/files/SR_BriefingPaper_Textbook_20140306.pdf.

Overview

This report investigates the possible models that are surfacing, and the role that libraries and publishers might play, in the changing college textbook market. Lower priced corporate versions, embedded open platform models, or solutions from within higher education are possibilities. The new models emerging will need to be affordable, useful for faculty, and have a revenue stream that can support development. Librarians could play an important supporting role in helping new open textbook initiatives.

Key Points

- Faculty tend to choose the best textbook for their course, but often not the most affordable one.
- Textbooks are becoming more than just books or ebooks, they often include ancillary online support materials such as assessments, question banks, and multi-media supports for learning. Pearson and McGraw-Hill are focusing on adaptive learning, with the textbook serving as only one piece of their collection of tools designed to support learning.
- University presses and libraries have steered clear of the competitive textbook market that requires significant outlays for development and marketing.
- Open educational resources and open textbooks are starting to gain traction with faculty and students, but these models also have a number of obstacles including findability, lack of comprehensive solutions, and uneven quality.
- Many universities are experimenting with new models and running pilots that encourage faculty to develop OER materials or use content developed by others.
- Two startups — Flatworld Knowledge and Boundless — as well as the non-profit initiative OpenStax, have moved into this market and are developing textbooks and ancillary materials. Though initially hoping to provide free resources, all three now charge fees, though the fees are much lower than those for traditional textbooks.
- Libraries are entering the market with new models such as the Open Course Library in Washington State and Temple's Alternative Textbook Program. They are meeting with some success and the affordability issue outweighs the preference by the majority of students for print textbooks

Analysis

This article provides a useful discussion of the obstacles to providing low cost alternatives to the traditional textbooks model. It also discusses possible solutions to these challenges. Some experienced textbook authors at colleges and universities are clinging to the traditional model because it is financially rewarding for them. In addition,

textbook costs are high, but so are the costs of developing new materials that can compete with the highly valued current offerings. Many people would like to make textbooks more affordable, but there is concern that lower cost alternatives may lack quality and comprehensiveness.

New publishers and libraries that enter this marketplace will need to invest substantially in editorial development. There is a steep learning curve involved in writing accessible content. Findability is also a significant challenge in the mass of OER collections where it is difficult to evaluate quality and peer review systems are limited. Convenience is also a big factor: faculty find the current comprehensive textbooks and ancillary materials easy to adapt to their courses, and OER collections often need to be selected piecemeal and vary in format.

At minimum, some librarians are starting to assist faculty and students in locating high quality peer reviewed open content. Librarians have also become involved in providing incentives for faculty to encourage them to use more affordable content. Research has shown that significant numbers of students do not purchase textbooks for their courses and this has an impact on their ability to successfully complete courses and graduate.

Many librarians lack expertise in developing and distributing textbooks beyond the immediate needs of their own community. University presses, while having more publishing expertise, have been reluctant to enter this highly competitive market. There are many unknowns related to developing viable alternative publishing schemes to make textbooks more affordable. There is also a lack of knowledge about what faculty really prefer in terms of formats and ancillary materials, and how to solve the need for frequent updates and revisions. More collaboration between institutions and funding to develop large-scale products that many institutions could benefit from might be one way to compete with the larger commercial options.

Leslie Stebbins

E-mail address: Leslie_Stebbins@post.harvard.edu.