The lights are on but nobody's home: the future of academic libraries?

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The 10th anniversary of *Partnership* is an excellent opportunity to reflect on the past decade, and to make some projections about the future of libraries. This anniversary also coincides with the 11th anniversary of a work that I co-edited with Su Cleyle entitled *Last one out, turn off the lights: Is this the future of Canadian and American Libraries?* (2005), where we asked some innovative librarians to reflect on a number of issues facing our institutions and our profession. Challenges facing us at the time were many. Our world was changing rapidly: "the ground underneath libraries is shifting...we need to act and we need to act now" (Cleyle & McGillis, 2005, p. xix). However, our conclusion was optimistic: that we had the resources and willingness to move into this brave new world. The question, ten years later, is *how did we do?* I would argue that our somewhat optimistic outlook appears a great deal less rosy a decade later, especially for academic libraries.

Innovation in academic libraries is evident, especially in relation to physical spaces. Access and support issues have been addressed very successfully with the development of the information commons, the creation of new and inviting study spaces, and the expansion of service hours. However, a review of the literature reveals that many of the challenges facing academic libraries in the early 2000s are the same ones the profession is struggling with today. *C&RL News* (2002) identified leadership and librarian re-education, relevance to the academy, technological impact, chaos in scholarly communications, digitization, support for new kinds of learners and researchers and funding as the top issues facing academic libraries (Hisle, 2002, para. 1). While a few new challenges have been added to the more recent lists, those outlined by *C&RL News* in 2002 are ever-present.

Why have we made such little progress on issues that have been facing us for so long? I would argue that we are challenged by our traditional values. We continue to do work and provide services that "we" believe are important. These services may not match user needs or expectations but continue to be offered. We believe we know what the user needs, and we act accordingly. Our inability to provide users with a search interface that meets their needs is a good example. We have dedicated a tremendous amount of time and effort on federated search solutions while our users move *en masse* to Google. In a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the author noted that

only 20% of faculty start research using the online library catalogue. One of the librarians, conducting research on faculty use of discovery tools for the article, confessed his preference for Google Scholar (Parry, 2014). The numbers are even more disconcerting when it comes to students: an OCLC study conducted in 2010 found that not one student started their research with the library website (Crump, 2012, p. 2).

Another challenge is the preservation of traditional work practices. Despite having moved from print to a predominately digital-based environment, our workflows remain entrenched in the former. According to the 2013 ACRL *Environmental Scan*, "most library technical services operations…have so far only actually moved to the transitional phase: that is continuing fairly traditional operations but doing them differently" (p. 17). Work is often structured in discreet departments, each responsible for their distinct contributions and each with a unique set of practices and standards, making substantial change even more difficult. Efforts to remodel and rename departments have not been effective in breaking down library silos. While the silo model may be useful for structuring work in an organization, it is also a model that stifles innovative practice because groups of people are working in isolation.

Academic libraries are also challenged by organizational culture. The infusion of new professionals is welcomed into the academy with the hope that their enthusiasm and knowledge will spark innovation. However, what usually happens is the opposite. Instead of absorbing new ideas, the existing culture dominates and explanations of why innovation can't work are thoughtfully reasoned out and articulated. Rudy Leon (2014) writes,

> I call any library group of more than 5 folks who have worked together for over 15 years "a wall." Often excellent and innovative colleagues individually, put in a room together, they magically become an impenetrable object of "why we do things this way". (para. 15)

The challenges facing us and the severity of our situation is real. As B.P. Le (2015) warns, "The academic library…is facing an existential crisis. Its very existence is being threatened" (p. 312). The question, of course, is *what do we do?* The answer is that we need to develop a new and radical approach to academic librarianship, and to do this we need visionary leaders who embrace innovation, collaboration, and engagement. Academic libraries need exceptional leaders who recognize that in order to thrive we must focus on building relationships with our users. Crump (2012) writes: "librarians need to step-up the pace, quit floundering and start building sustainable relationships with the faculty and students we so want to serve" (p. 6).

In his 2010 book, *Where Good Ideas Come From,* Steven Johnson introduces the concept of liquid networks. He argues that ideas are not the result of a single person having a flash of genius. Most ideas flow out of networks, and the broader, bigger, and more fluid the network the greater the opportunity for innovation. He writes "when the first market towns emerged in Italy, they didn't magically create some higher-level group consciousness. They simply widened the pool of minds that could come up with and

share good ideas" (p. 58). We must move away from our vertical networks (silos) and develop horizontal networks between the departments in the library, in the academy, and in local, national, and international communities. Developing meaningful relationships will more fully integrate librarians into the teaching, research, and engagement priorities of the academy. By creating an environment where people feel encouraged to share ideas and communicate, and where individuals are positioned to connect with a broad range of people, innovation is much more likely to happen.

Networks allow for the development of real and meaningful collaboration and engagement. What does this mean for the academic librarian? It means moving away from the traditional collections-based model, letting go of inefficient processes and practices and focusing instead on relationship-building and innovation. ACRL's *Environmental Scan* (2013) has an entire section focused on what it calls "radical collaboration." The term *radical* collaboration recognizes the rich history of teamwork, but "challenges libraries to go beyond standard library collaborative initiatives; to experiment and be daring" (p. 16).

A good example of the power of network-building can be found in the work of the Three Rivers College Library in Poplar Bluff, Missouri. When tasked with revamping the operations of their library, the management team recognized the need to focus on "providing support and opportunities for collaboration" (Halaychik, 2014, p. 2). Their efforts to work collaboratively inside the library and throughout the campus resulted in increased resources, increased use of services, facilities, and collections, and, most importantly, the library realized the administration's goal and became the "nucleus of campus activity" (Halaychik, 2014, p. 1).

Librarians focused on collaboration have the potential for greater impact in the academy. Diaz (2014) reinvents the academic librarians as teacher, consultant, storyteller, builder, partner, and visionary. In this new world, there is no time for the "machine-like approach to librarianship"; instead the engaged librarian "researches problems and engineer solutions" (p. 232). The article includes a number of examples of how librarians at Ohio State University have embraced these roles and are working more collaboratively with librarians and faculty on campus. Diaz (2014) writes about a course support partnership between a librarian and a faculty member that included developing learning outcomes, innovative course design, and even helping prepare students for the overseas component of the course (p. 227). Engagement and innovation are not about jumping at every new trend: they are about doing things in new and meaningful ways.

The only way that these fundamental changes can take hold in the academic library is through leadership that believes in this vision and possesses the qualities required to make it happen.   Recent literature on leadership highlights collaboration and team-building as key traits required in 21st century leaders (ACRL, 2013; Le, 2015; Schwartz, 2016). One way to focus on collaboration is through servant leadership. The concept is not new, but is receiving more attention as institutions look for meaningful ways to engage and motivate workers. The model was developed in the 1970s by Robert

Greenleaf, who wanted to develop a management style that focused on leaders who serve to bring out the best in their employees (Katopol, 2014). The model was expanded under Larry Spears to include the following characteristics: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, and stewardship (Katopol, 2014, p.3-4). Katopol thinks the model is well-suited for libraries where a sense of service is a rich component of the culture and one that can be extended to staff: "Managers in information organizations conceptualize staff as persons to whom service is owed as well" (Katopol, 2014, p. 6).

Servant leadership has the potential to provide library leadership with a path to re-energize the workplace. The leaders at the college library in Missouri adopted a servant leadership approach that focused on self-evaluation, communication, collaboration, support, accountability, and valuing to guide their restructuring process (Halaychik, 2014, p. 2). Their engagement with staff during the process and their collaboration with campus departments were significant factors in implementing so much positive change in a two-year period. Anzalone (2007) discusses approaches to introducing a new service and working with a library employee reluctant to change using the components of the servant leadership model. Innovation can be large-scale as in the Missouri example, or small and incremental as in Anzalone's examples. What is important to remember is that innovation happens on many levels, and is as much about how we do things as what we do.

The impact of these collaborations show evidence of the library's value to the academy. The literature is clear that academic library leaders need political and advocacy skills, and they must use these skills to demonstrate the library's value. In this new model, administrators will be able to point to successful collaboration and engagement to demonstrate tangible and valuable contributions. The focus is no longer on telling the academy that we are important, but on showing them *how* we are important. According to Diaz (2014), "success is measured by expertise, impact, value and farsightedness" (p. 226). Even more important is that our collaborators—our faculty, staff, and students—will speak to the value of our contributions.

Academic libraries are overdue for radical change. While it is evident that we are responding to the changes around us and doing new things, a great deal more is required of us if we want to have a meaningful role in these challenging times. If change does not occur, academic libraries will become study spaces with comfy chairs and computers to access Google: the place where "the lights are on but nobody is home."

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