

Liberating Knowledge: A Librarian's Manifesto for Change

by Barbara Fister

Libraries are an interesting instance of the radical transformations that higher education is experiencing. The neoliberal turn that has led to the commodification of what scholars do—teach and create knowledge—has had a profound effect on the academic library. But the political economy of the transformed library is invisible to many if not most faculty. The current financial problems libraries face—escalating cost of subscriptions to journals and databases, a shrinking budget, and cuts in both professional staff and student employment hours that lead to locking the doors early (in at least one case leading students to set up their own outdoor study area during finals in front of a closed library in protest)—are a natural outcome of the trend to treat students as consumers, the faculty as individuals contracted to teach courses but to leave the management of the university to a growing cadre of administrators, and knowledge as intellectual property to be monetized.

Though students flock to libraries as places to socialize, study, and work on research, and librarians are doing their best to meet their needs and the needs of scholars working in their labs, offices, and (who knows?) their cars as they commute from one officeless work assignment to another, the identity of the library as an intellectual commons, an enlightened and morally uncompromised public sphere where ideas mingle and give rise to new knowledge, is endangered. According to the most recent study of faculty attitudes conducted by Ithaca, the

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non-profit organization that brings scholars digital networked resources such as JSTOR, faculty increasingly value the library primarily as a purchaser of the information they need.¹ They put less emphasis than in previous annual surveys on the library as a gateway to knowledge or an institution that will preserve it for the greater good.

In many ways, libraries have brought this identity shift upon themselves. Librarians are good at finding ways to share information even when their budgets are in free fall, and they are technologically savvy enough to make it possible for their communities to access much of the information the library pays for without

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setting foot in the library. This is all to the good. Unfortunately, librarians are not nearly so adept at agitating for their core values: the defense of intellectual freedom, equality of access to information, and privacy that ensures inquiry unfettered by fear of possible consequences. Those values have been compromised as libraries license information from corporations and from scholarly societies that act like corporations—and by scholars who play the game without considering the consequences.

Coupled with this emerging identity for the library as purchasing agent rather than cultural institution, the survey showed that faculty have a decidedly conservative view of how scholars should share the knowledge they produce. It's much more important to publish in the right journals or get book contracts with the right presses than to worry about whether that published information is widely available. After all, being published is the only thing that matters when it's time to get a grant or to go up for tenure, and scholars trust the imprimatur of authority conferred by traditional publication. Access to knowledge—that's somebody else's problem. This uninformed indifference is laying the groundwork for a new tragedy of the commons: a world in which knowledge is turned into intellectual property, monetized, and made artificially scarce.

These days, a huge percentage of any academic library's budget goes toward temporary rental of information. Every year, academic libraries pay corporations and scholarly societies billions of dollars for access to databases and full-text journals. If the library has a bad year and can't afford to pay for a subscription, that material disappears. All of it, instantly. There are some exceptions to this; JSTOR contents are technically owned, not licensed. So are some immensely expensive archival collections such as Early English Books Online. If a library could find a way to host that content on its own servers, it could legally continue to provide

access to it. But a large portion of the library's virtual stacks could be emptied out at the flick of a switch, a sudden and absolute repossession of cultural materials if the rent isn't paid.

Access to this material is only available to those currently affiliated with an institution that can afford it. Once our students graduate, most of the research material they had access to is closed to them. And independent scholars are out of luck, too. In one case, a scholar I know wanted to subscribe to a digital version of early church documents, ones that have been in the public domain for centuries and were carefully indexed by scholars in the 19th century. The company that cre-

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ated the useful digital archive will not make it available to individuals at any price. That might harm the market for library subscriptions. Libraries have to pay tens of thousands of dollars for this database, which is likely used by only a handful of scholars at their institution. I can't quote an exact figure for the subscription price because the cost of databases is negotiated in secret and is considered by publishers to be proprietary information.

Public libraries are thriving democratic institutions that are heavily used, with visits, circulation per capita, and internet use all soaring in recent years.² Many public libraries provide access to a number of databases, often through state government subsidies, but few can afford specialized databases and expensive journals that scholars depend on. As an indicator of the costs involved, a library subscription to the journal *Science* in print costs over \$900 annually, and an electronic subscription costs many thousands of dollars for just one journal, based on the size of the community. Few public libraries have been able to afford even the most basic scholarly journals, and funding for public libraries is shaky, threatened by deep budget cuts.³

As I write this, I can pluck any number of mindboggling paradoxes from the daily news of my profession. Here's one example: when researchers who wanted to analyze the cost of "big deals"—package deal subscriptions in which libraries have to subscribe to content they don't want in order to have access to the journals they do—Elsevier went to court to stop them from obtaining price information through Freedom of Information Act requests, arguing that the public interest would be harmed if the public could learn how much they spend on these databases. Fortunately, the judge disagreed.⁴

Here's another example: as I write, Congress is holding hearings on a bill that

would require researchers whose work is federally funded to provide the results to the public within a year of publication.⁵ That sounds reasonable enough. After all, the work was paid for by taxpayers. But publishers argue that free access will be the ruination of rigorous research. They declare that there's nothing wrong with the status quo. They claim it is their corporations that provide peer review (when in fact, peer review is done by scholars voluntarily and is just as rigorously conducted in open access journals; besides, many of these publishers create third- and fourth- tier journals expressly to publish research that failed the peer review of more selective journals.) One publishing spokesperson claimed that they obtain rights for authors (when actually authors are required clear rights and pay any permission charges themselves).⁶ According to one publisher, any law created "to solve a problem that didn't exist is threatening job creation, economic growth, and scientific innovation in our country."⁷

What's really troubling is that this logic-defying argument was made not by a corporate baron beholden to shareholders who only care about profits, but by a representative of the American Psychological Association, which made over \$79 million on publications and databases according to its most recent (2008) IRS filing; the filing also indicates that the CEO of the association earned over a half million dollars in annual compensation.⁸

One member of Congress worried aloud that making research available would allow foreign entities to benefit from our intellectual property. The legislator apparently is confused about the fact that most of the property rights under the current system are owned by publishers, many of them foreign, eager to sell it to



anyone who's willing to pay. Greed has no borders. But the publishing industry has created this fear by raising the specter of foreigners having access to American research in their publicity materials opposing the passage of this bill.⁹

And here's another example: library organizations are not immune from corporate greed. When Michigan State University, facing painful budget cuts, tried to contract for cheaper cataloging services than those offered by OCLC, a large non-profit library cooperative, OCLC responded by raising the rate the university would have to pay to contribute to the massive union catalog WorldCat, a rate increase designed explicitly to erase any savings. OCLC argued it had to play hard

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ball to protect its "business model."¹⁰ OCLC's CEO also makes over a million dollars annually in compensation.

The problem with scholarly publishing is that the business model it has adopted generates so much income that it has to be protected against the danger posed by scholarship being shared freely. The only way the business model can survive is for information to be scarce, an expensive commodity available only to those who can afford it.

Meanwhile, out of desperation, libraries that can no longer afford expensive "big deal" databases are contracting with commercial publishers such as Elsevier to allow faculty to access a publisher's database and place orders directly for the articles they want to read, articles that may cost between thirty and fifty dollars apiece. What does the library and its host institution get out of this arrangement? Nothing but the bill. Last year, as universities laid off workers, students scrambled to pay higher tuitions, and libraries slashed subscriptions, Elsevier reported profits of over \$1 billion, with a profit margin of 35 percent.¹¹

How do commercial publishers get away with this commodification of knowledge? It's simple. Academics have outsourced the evaluation of faculty value to publishers. Faculty committees don't need to read and evaluate scholarship anymore to confer grants or promotions, they just do the numbers. And because scholars realize how incredibly lucky they are if they land a secure job, they're not about to rock the boat. They're in survival mode. They're begging corporations to exploit their work by turning it into publishers' intellectual property, and frequently pay page charges for the privilege, assuming their library will ransom it back for them if they ever need it. Instead of learning how to contribute to knowledge for the greater good, graduate students are coached in how to play the game

and compete successfully. This kind of individualism is now so thoroughly ingrained in the daily practice of scholars' lives, they don't even question it. They're too busy trying to land the next grant or add another line to their CV, because that's how productivity is defined, and productivity is everything.

At the risk of sounding like an old-fashioned Marxist, there's no reason to keep doing things this idiotic way. Scholars can own their own means of production. As Elinor Ostrom, a Nobel laureate in economics, wrote with coauthor Charlotte Hess, "collective action and new institutional design play as large a part in the shaping of scholarly information as do legal restrictions and market

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forces."¹² We can change the system if we work together and roundly reject the individualistic competition for productivity that has so badly undermined our institutions of higher learning. We need to tear down the fences erected by corporations around the knowledge we produce and reclaim our own scholarship as a commonly held trust.

The library is conceptually the commons of the university. In recent years, it has been enclosed and exploited by corporations, and individual scholars have been schooled to be grateful to those corporations for claiming the copyright over their work in exchange for career advancement. But we don't have to do it this way.

Yes, I realize it costs money to organize the freely donated work of scholars and for the back-office processes (the copyediting, the layout, the server space, the administrative tracking of manuscripts in process) that the publication process requires. But currently it costs us all a lot more to purchase access to it, one library at a time, than it would if we collectively paid for that work up front and set it free. Currently we're not just funding publication, we're also funding glossy marketing campaigns, cadres of sales personnel, and the salaries of lobbyists in Washington who try to persuade our legislators that the corporate ownership of publicly funded research is good for us. We're funding huge CEO salaries and staggering profit margins built on the artificial scarcity of the knowledge that we produce.

Not long ago I borrowed a leaf from Liberation Theology to create my own manifesto for change, something I whimsically call Liberation Bibliography.¹³ So long as I'm dreaming, I may as well dream big. Here's my manifesto for change:

- Liberation bibliography arises out of outrage at the injustice of the current system. It's not about saving money, it's about the empowering nature of knowledge and the belief that it shouldn't be a luxury good for the few.

- Liberation bibliography must emerge out of a sense of solidarity with communities struggling for liberation. It's not just a matter of a few academics and librarians tinkering under the hood of the scholarly communication system to improve conditions for scholars; it's about action for the public good.
- Liberation bibliography recognizes that the world is not separated into the scholarly and the ordinary. If knowledge matters, it must matter beyond the boundaries of our campuses, and beyond the conference halls of our scholarly societies.
- Liberation bibliography recognizes that we are implicated in systems that personally benefit us, even when we recognize those systems to be unjust. Whenever we publish in a journal that will resell our work for a profit and withhold it from those who can't pay, we have put our self-interest before social justice.
- Liberation bibliography takes seriously the slogan, so often inscribed on academic buildings of a certain age, that the truth shall set us free—and that means freedom should extend to all of us, not just to a select class of employed academics and currently enrolled tuition-paying students.
- Liberation bibliography recognizes that the liberal learning we promote must be beneficial to all people. As a consequence, our libraries should not simply serve our institutions' immediate needs but rather their higher ideals. Toward that end, libraries and scholars need to remind our institutions of those ideals which still form the material for countless mission statements and taglines but are ignored in daily institutional practice. And as individuals and community members, we must act on them. 

ENDNOTES

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