UKSG

A quiet culture war in research libraries – and what it means for librarians, researchers and publishers

Based on a paper presented at the 38th UKSG Annual Conference, Glasgow, April 2015

There is a growing rift between those who believe the library's most fundamental purpose is to support and advance the goals of its host institution and those who believe the library's most important role is as an agent of progress and reform in the larger world of scholarly communication. Although these two areas of endeavor are not mutually exclusive, they are in competition for scarce resources and the choices made between them have serious implications at both the micro level (for the patrons and institutions served by each library) and the macro level (for members of the larger academic community). The tension between these two worldviews is creating friction within librarianship itself: as tightening budgets increasingly force us to choose between worthy programs and projects, there is growing conflict between those whose choices reflect one worldview and those who hold to the other. How this conflict plays out over the next few years may have significant implications for the scholars who depend on libraries for access to research content and for the publishers and other vendors for whom libraries are a core customer base.

I would like to begin by giving away the ending. The culture war that I believe is currently brewing in research libraries is between two general schools of thought: the first sees the research library's most fundamental and important mission as serving the scholarly needs of its institution's students, scholars and researchers; the second sees the research library's most fundamental and important mission as changing the world of scholarly communication for the better.

It is important to bear in mind that these two endeavors are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they are not even in conflict with each other *in principle*. In practice, however, conflict between them is inevitable, because the programs and projects they represent are in competition for the same pool of strictly limited resources –and that conflict is already in evidence both within and between our institutions.

Now, having given away the ending, I would like to back up and start at the beginning.

I will do so with what I realize may sound like a rather odd statement: I believe that the conflict within libraries to which my title refers is rooted primarily in the various disruptions that have been caused by the information ecology's nearly wholesale move out of the print and into the online realm. The conflict arises not from the greater complexity of our new information environment, or from the greater pressure being put on our strictly limited resources, or from the changing expectations of our students, faculty and researchers, but rather from the fact that where once we had no choice but to focus primarily on the local and immediate needs of that constituency, we are now faced with very difficult choices about where our primary focus

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should be, and the very fact that this variety of choices is now available to us is what gives rise to the conflict.

The multi-dimensional complexities of the shift from print to online

When the scholarly information world moved dramatically out of the realm of physical objects and into that of a digital network, it made possible changes in perspective and function that have been quite dramatic for research libraries. These include:

A shift from object-gathering to access brokerage. The primary function of the library up until the mid-1990s was to gather, curate and preserve physical objects onto which information had been printed. During this period, we were far less likely than we are now to question the viability or justice of the distribution system – it was what it was and we did the best we could with it. Since 1995 our function has been, increasingly, to secure for our patrons the collective right to access and use digital documents that are housed and cared for elsewhere. In this context, with many more access options available, it is easier (and more fruitful) to ask difficult questions about the justice and equity of the existing system.

A shift from institutional to global. Access to a printed book or journal issue is not scalable; no more than one or two people can use any physical document at any one time. Access to an e-book or e-journal, however, is (in functional terms) almost infinitely scalable. For this reason, libraries have recently found themselves able, for the first time in their history, to think in terms of providing access to constituencies far beyond the borders of their host institutions – a fact that sets us up for very difficult discussions about the appropriate use of local institutional resources.

A shift from simple issues to complex ones. When information was tied to physical objects, most of the issues we had to deal with when acquiring those objects were relatively simple – not necessarily *easy*, but relatively *simple* compared to the issues we deal with in an information environment characterized by licensed access to externally hosted content provided within the context of rights-management systems.

A shift from toll access to open access. All of the shifts discussed above are, of course, what have made possible the emergence of an access system (or, more accurately, a complex of systems, models and platforms) that makes both access to and unlimited reuse of scholarly information freely available to all who have access to the digital network.

These issues can, I believe, be boiled down to the following general categories of divisive issue at play in our environment:

- access

- cost

- rights

- funding.

In our new information environment these issues are, first of all, no longer as clear-cut as before; second, each of our libraries is now in a position (technologically, at least) to address them on a global stage as well as a local one; third, our budgets are, in most cases, shrinking rather than growing. At the same time, we see demand for some of what we used to consider core functions of librarianship dropping and, in some cases, dropping precipitously. This situation creates ambiguity, which of course leads to fear, which in turn leads to conflict – though it is important to acknowledge that not all of the conflict I will describe arises from fear. Much of it arises from deep and genuine philosophical disagreement and from various parties in the system being deeply invested in mutually exclusive goals.

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Local responsibilities vs. global responsibilities

In this context of increasing complexity, expanding opportunities and constricting resources, the big question that I believe is becoming increasingly fraught in our research libraries is this one: how should each of our libraries balance its responsibility to the needs of its host institution with its responsibility to do good and effect change in the larger world?

Again, we do not have to choose *entirely* between these two orientations; however, we do have to acknowledge that they are in tension with each other, for the simple reason that our resources are strictly limited and that every hour of time or dollar of budget allocation we spend on one thing is an hour or dollar that we cannot spend on something else.

The conflict that arises from this simple economic reality plays out in different ways in different contexts. For example:

The 'big deal'. There is a strong argument to be made that every time a library enters into a big deal package arrangement with a large and powerful publisher, it contributes to the perpetuation of an unsustainable and broadly harmful system, one that ties up large chunks of libraries' budgets and supports the publication of low-quality, low-demand journals. On the other hand, it may also be true that for a particular library, the big deal (despite all of its manifold downsides) is the most cost-effective way to provide its patrons with access to the content they need in order to do their work.

Open access (OA) program memberships. A growing number of OA schemes are emerging that rely for their funding, in whole or in part, on paid library memberships. Very often these schemes provide little if any direct, local and concrete benefit to the member library or its patrons; instead, they offer a mechanism by which the library may actively support broader and more open access to scholarship for the general public. Libraries that join up are simultaneously making a difference in the larger world and redirecting local funds away from the satisfaction of immediate and local needs.

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Article processing charge (APC) subventions. Many libraries are experimenting with setting aside funds to underwrite APCs on behalf of local scholars and scientists who wish to publish in gold OA venues that impose author-side charges. This approach amounts to a redirection of funds very similar to that represented by paying for membership in an OA program. Money that could have been used to make a large number of articles available to the limited local community is instead used to make a small number of articles available to the general public.

OA mandates. Libraries that succeed at establishing local OA mandates, or that urge such mandates on the faculty in their institutions, are (to the degree that they succeed in establishing them) contributing to a greater openness of scholarship and enabling global access to that scholarship, while at the same time creating structures that reduce the amount of control local researchers and faculty have over the disposition of their own work.

Inter-library loan vs. short-term loan. When a patron needs a book or article that is not held by his or her library, it is often faster, cheaper and more efficient to purchase short-term access to an online version of that article or book than to borrow a copy from another library. However, many librarians object to this practice on the grounds that it may undermine the library's traditional rights under fair use, fair dealing, or first sale doctrines. By spending more on the traditional inter-library loan approach, the library supports a global program at the expense of supporting local needs.

Soldiers and revolutionaries

The tension between local and global orientations that inevitably arises in an environment of strictly limited resources in turn gives rise, it seems to me, to two general categories of orientation among librarians. I call these the 'soldier' and the 'revolutionary' orientations.

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The soldier can be thought of as generally operating under 'marching orders', which he takes from his institution's mission and strategic goals, and tends to focus mainly on local needs, the impact of library services on current patrons, and the library's alignment with its institutional mission. Those with a predominantly soldier mindset will tend to think of the library primarily as a service and support program for its host institution. In particular, those with a predominantly soldier orientation will tend to:

- define stakeholders locally in both space and time: the library's central responsibility is to those patrons who are *here*, *now*

- see compromise as an essential part of getting things done

- tend to focus on solving problems that are *local*, *tangible* and *immediate*

- see the library primarily as an agent of its sponsoring institution

- focus on responding to patrons' demonstrated behavior and desires

- be willing to enter into commercial partnerships if doing so will help to solve immediate local problems

- be oriented towards concrete tasks and outputs

- always be looking at the fiscal 'bottom line' and watching for opportunities to strengthen it.

The revolutionary mindset thinks less in terms of marching orders than in terms of global vision. A librarian with a predominantly revolutionary mindset will tend to think more about the library's effect on the global scholarly community, its potential role in solving global and systemic problems, and the long-term impact of its collections and services in that context. The revolutionary will tend to think of the library less as a service than as a leader and educator on campus. In particular, those with a more revolutionary mindset will tend to:

- define stakeholders universally in both space and time: the library is responsible not only to patrons *here* and *now*, but also (and maybe more importantly) to knowledge-seekers *everywhere*, both *now* and *in the future*

- often see compromise as a betrayal of fundamental values

- tend to focus on issues that are *universal*, *abstract* and *future-oriented*

- see the library primarily as a contributor to the larger world of scholarship

- focus on educating and changing the behavior of patrons and on giving them what they should want (rather than what they may want)

- see co-operation with commercial entities as fundamentally morally suspect

- be oriented towards broad social change

- see discussion of the 'bottom line' as an encroachment of commercial thinking into a realm where it does not belong.

As a potential tool to help us think about this dynamic, I have published elsewhere[1] a discussion of what I call the issue of 'depth perception' in libraries, which I suggest can be measured along two dimensions: one is spatial (defining a spectrum from local to global) and the other is temporal (defining a spectrum from short-term to long-term). The two-dimensional model shown in Figure 1 defines four quadrants of orientation.
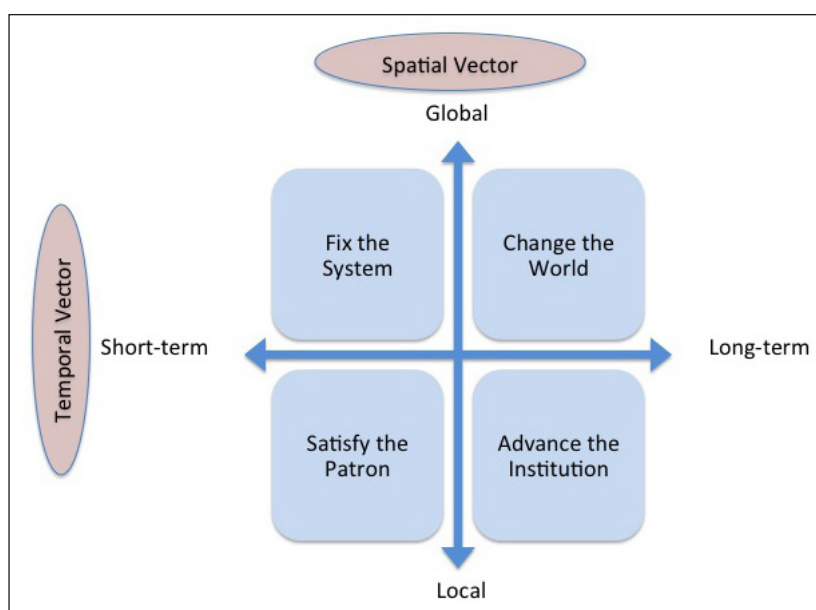
Figure 1. The four quadrants of orientation

Overlaying the 'soldier' and 'revolutionary' orientations on this matrix yields a model as shown in Figure 2.
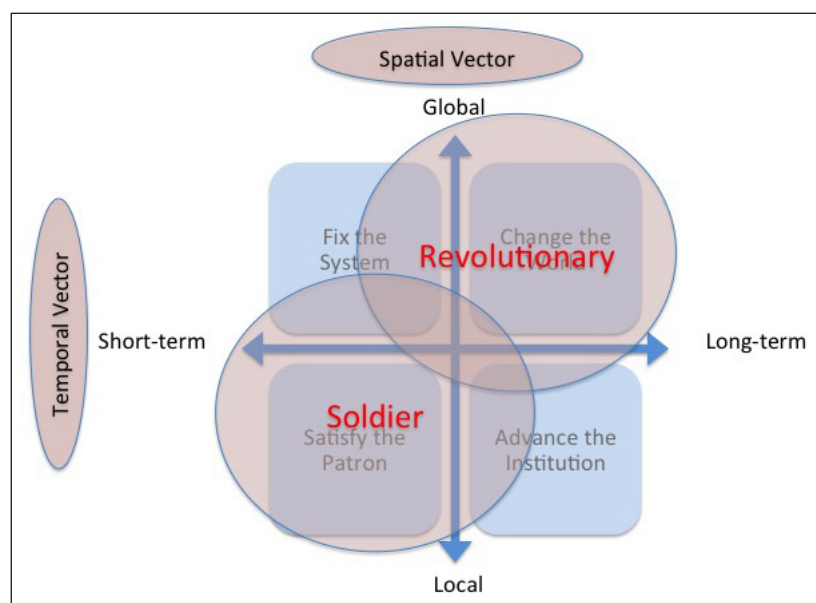
Figure 2. The four quadrants of orientation overlaid with the 'soldier' and 'revolutionary' orientations

Three things about these categories should be clear:

1. Hardly any individual librarian can be characterized as either a pure soldier or a pure revolutionary. This model is intended to characterize mindsets and orientations, not individuals, and if it is useful at all, it will be to help us think about the balance of these two orientations in ourselves and our libraries (as expressed by policies and practices).

2. Soldier and revolutionary orientations are spectrum values, not binary ones. One's mindset is likely to lean more in one direction or another, but the likelihood of any individual librarian caring exclusively for the local patron or exclusively for the global system is very low.

3. At any point on the soldier-to-revolutionary spectrum, a given position will present both strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, a given position may be more or less 'right' in context depending on the issue at hand.

What do these ideas imply for library leadership?

Although there are relatively few librarians whose orientations can fairly be described as either exclusively that of the soldier or the revolutionary, most of us lean in one direction or the other. Furthermore, every library's culture (as defined and created both by its leadership and by the totality of its employee orientations) will likely reflect an overall leaning in one direction or the other. To the degree that there is internal disagreement over what that orientation should be, there will be conflict within the library; to the degree that there is disagreement between the library and its sponsoring institution over what the library's orientation should be, there will be conflict between the library and its host.

How can such conflict be managed and dealt with? I propose the following stepwise approach:

1. *Surface the issue.* Start with an assessment of the library's internal culture, by openly discussing the question of local vs. global orientation and bringing to the surface both the prevailing orientation within the library and any areas of significant disagreement that exist among library staff and/or between staff and leadership.

2. *Resolve (or at least identify) internal inconsistencies.* The library should have a sense of where it generally stands, as an organization, on the spectrum of orientations between soldier and revolutionary. This stance may be expressed in a mission statement, a strategic plan, or (less effectively) as the sum total of the library's policies and practices.

3. *Assess institutional alignment.* To what degree does the library's general orientation align with the mission and goals of the library's host institution?

4. *Address disparities with campus administration.* To the degree that there is daylight between the library's orientation and the institution's mission and goals, this disparity should be discussed by the library director and the provost, vice president, or other administrator to whom he reports. The disparity may be of greater or lesser concern to the campus administration, but letting it continue without being addressed is both strategically unwise and, arguably, ethically questionable.

5. *Consider opportunities to influence institutional mission and culture.* A disconnect between the library's orientation and that of its host institution does not always have to be resolved by movement on the library's part. The library, as a centrally important component of the institution, has a role in helping to influence and define institutional directions. This is particularly true where librarians have faculty status. Where the library is in a position to influence the culture, mission and goals of the larger institution, it should do so.

6. *Where such influence is impossible or ineffective, realign the library.* This can be the most difficult step in the process. Ultimately, after the library (and all other campus stakeholders) have given their input and done their best to influence the institution's goals and orientation, final decisions will be made by those charged with determining those goals and that orientation. On most campuses, such decisions rest with some combination of the university president, vice presidents, chancellor and board of trustees. If the final decision is to set the institution on a path that does not align well with the library's orientation, it is up to the library to reorient itself.

This brings us to the final, and perhaps most difficult, point I wish to make.

Soldiers are employees; revolutionaries are freelance

It is a painful fact, but a fact nonetheless, that any library hosted by a larger institution – be it a university, a hospital, a research foundation, a corporation, or any other type of organization – does not have full independence of action and orientation. It is an organ of its host, and, I believe, it is ethically obligated to support the mission of its host. It is true that on many campuses, librarians have faculty status, and that faculty status confers upon those

librarians a tremendous amount of independence of thought and action in their function as employees. Faculty members have great discretion within the scope of their positions: they have the right to define the content of their courses, to decide how they will teach, and to pursue their intellectual interests without constraint. However, just as the teaching faculty do not generally decide (as individuals) whether and how much they will teach, and just as the faculty (collectively) do not generally make the final decisions as to how many faculty the university will hire, or which programs will receive more or less funding, the library will not have the unilateral ability to determine its host institution's mission and strategic directions.

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This fact has serious implications for the ultimate outcome of the culture war that I believe is currently brewing in the research library community. We are now working in an information environment that makes it possible for each library to exert a global influence in unprecedented ways. The desire to do so is both praiseworthy and solidly in keeping with many of what most of us would consider core values of librarianship. However, even as we experience varying levels of agreement amongst ourselves as to the proper distribution of our time and resources in pursuit of these two different orientations, virtually all of us continue to be supported entirely by funds that come from institutions that expect us to use those funds to support local needs and an institutionally defined mission. As long as it remains impossible to spend the same dollar twice, we will have no way to avoid choosing between programs that support local needs and those that support global ones and, as long as we depend on local resources to do so, we will have an ultimate obligation to act more like soldiers than like revolutionaries. Libraries that fail to do so will inevitably lose their institutional support – and with good reason.

'it remains impossible to spend the same dollar twice'

Competing interests: The author has declared no competing interests.

Reference

1. Anderson, R, Local and Global, Now and Forever: A Matrix Model of 'Depth Perception' in Library Work, *Against the Grain*, 2014, 26(5), 78–79.

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