

New Avenue for Reference and Information Services When Most Content is Open Access

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Abstract:

The increased uptake of open access is having a profound impact on not only the scholarly communication lifecycle in general, but also libraries more specifically. Concurrent key forces at work within this domain, including open infrastructure, expanded definition of repositories, and reinvention of scholarly publishers, are facilitating the ability of end-users to share and discover content independently from the library. If libraries do not examine their current services, they run the risk of becoming increasingly irrelevant to their potential client base, who will bypass libraries and access content directly. However, libraries may choose to adopt a more proactive approach by engaging with users and assisting them to manage not only new sources of potentially valuable information but also their own outputs. Moreover, librarians can add value by providing input to the creation and enhancement of tools that enhance the user's engagement with open access.

Keywords: Repositories; open infrastructure; academic scholarly networking sites; information literacy, Open Access

Introduction

Unquestionably, the increased complexity of technology will continue to have profound impacts on the scholarly communication lifecycle, which will challenge all stakeholders. For example, as the world moves toward a greater uptake of open access, one can already see evidence of the major changes that this is having upon the whole process of scholarly communication; libraries, as a key stakeholder, are discussing what impacts this move will have / is currently having upon their relevance within their parent organization. Therefore, a pivotal question for reference and information services librarians is to determine which aspects of their roles will be required in future, regardless of content format and access, and which aspects will necessarily be modified.

Drivers of Open Access

The argument (Reference and information services will be less important when all content is open access) epitomizes the result of the confluence of a number of key forces at work within this domain, including open infrastructure, expanded definition of repositories, and reinvention of scholarly publishers. The formation of “Invest in Open Infrastructure (IOI)” has been designed to increase the availability and sustainability of open knowledge infrastructure (Barnes & Gati, 2019). With its focus on durable, scalable, and long lasting open scientific and scholarly infrastructure, its primary objective is to ensure that end-users are fully enabled to share, discover, and work together. Libraries are an important, but small, part of this global initiative.

Traditionally repositories have been thought of within the context of “institutional repositories” (IR), in which authors deposit their preprints and postprints. However, as research continues to demonstrate, progressively more authors are uploading their publications directly to services such as academic scholarly networking sites, e.g. ResearchGate, and then using social media to promote their research outputs (Ali & Richardson, 2017). In many cases, the associated workflow is less onerous for them than to use their own institution’s IR.

With the extensive coverage of sources indexed by Google Scholar—and indeed Google--, end-users are able to locate and link to and/or download high level content relatively easily, thereby bypassing a library’s subscribed databases. Regardless of the current fate of “black open access” sites such as Sci-Hub (Goldsmith, 2019), the future “new world” favours bold initiatives which link users directly to content without the need for intermediaries, e.g. libraries.

With the global backlash of major institutions against commercial publishers, who dominate scholarly publishing and who primarily serve the needs of their shareholders, these very same publishers are in the process of reinventing themselves (Penev, 2017). In future, they will work even more directly with authors to present their research outputs in semantically enriched ways; to use the latest technologies to integrate complex data within their publications; and to reach the widest possible audience with the least amount of effort.

The Reactive Library

If libraries choose to continue with the status quo in terms of the services that they provide, they will become increasingly irrelevant to their client base. The library will no longer be at the forefront of linking users with content by helping them to assess their information needs and then to locate and evaluate relevant sources. Instead, the library’s role will be very much

in the background, i.e. funding those entities which will work directly with end-users to provide these services... for a cost.

Ironically, as has been pointed out by many observers in the sector, the library will ultimately become a victim of its own success (Davis et al., 2018; Heller, 2016; Stone, 2016). As a result of having been such a staunch champion of open access through the years, the library will find itself even more invisible to two key stakeholders: its end-users and the management of its parent organization.

The Proactive Library

Alternatively, libraries can choose to adopt a proactive approach by rethinking how they can align their services and roles with the needs of their users in a world dominated by open access content. For example, users currently encounter a variety of open access content platforms, which can logically be expected to grow in the future. Wikipedia is a primary example of a readily available open access tool, which is highly used by students and, even, researchers (Pentzold, 2017). In a very proactive mode, Wikipedia has launched [#1Lib1Ref](#) by “inviting every librarian on Earth to participate in the online encyclopaedia project, specifically improving articles by adding citations”.

Another important category of open access is the academic scholarly networking site (ASNS), which include notable entities such as ResearchGate, Mendeley, and Academic.edu. While not open access platforms per se, they do provide the means, in several cases, for authors to make their content openly accessible to interested readers. Librarians can play an important role in educating users about the relative pros and cons of these sites. In parallel, the library also has an important role in educating users about other important open access tools, e.g. Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and Library Genesis (LibGen).

In supporting the scholarly communication lifecycle, the library will want to demonstrate to authors how they can leverage open access to their own advantage through an understanding of such valuable tools as altmetrics, e.g. Altmetric.com and PlumX. Training in this area would be incomplete without an introduction to Open Researcher and Contributor ID (ORCID).

Filling the Gaps

As Kenney (2015) has noted, potential—and even existing—users may bypass the library when seeking information for a variety of reasons. These include flow of information, e.g. information is delivered directly to the user without their having to search for it; a desire to save time; and the ready availability of the Internet... along with search engines such as Google. However, in working with the information they have found, the astute user may quickly determine that there are gaps in their knowledge. These may arise, for example, from the inability to determine the validity and/or reliability of both the information sources and the information derived from them. Ironically, the user may have to spend more time than previously because of the sheer amount of information being delivered via open access.

Librarians can help fill these gaps by proactively engaging with users before they seek information. Historically, libraries have been very active in supporting the scholarly communication lifecycle. However, rather than focusing on the discovery of and access to information, library services will shift toward information evaluation and management.

Digital literacy will receive increased attention as users require assistance in coping with the rapidly expanding and accessible content sources. As Kenney (2015) says, “So what do people want from us? They want help doing things, rather than finding things”.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the authors would argue that, while reference services will remain, both the mode and service style will change or be re-shaped. Thus, this will create an exciting opportunity for libraries and their staff.

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