Information workers in the academy: The case of librarians and archivists at the University of Western Ontario

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abstract

Think you don't go to libraries anymore? Far from it! As the library goes online, the labour of librarians and archivists is becoming increasingly invisible – and inflexible.

In 2004 I joined the highly lauded profession of academic librarianship with a newly minted Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) in hand and a great deal of energy and enthusiasm. My inaugural appointment at one of the Canada's largest, most well regarded research institutions was quite simply a perfect fit for me, and I was very excited to begin my career. In my mid-twenties and straight out of graduate school, my focus at the time was so squarely fixed the role I had been hired to fill that I gave the broader organizational culture, and in particular the proportion of teaching, research and service responsibilities allotted to academic librarians at The University of Western Ontario (Western), little more than a second thought. It had been my understanding that I was joining the university community primarily to support the work of the academy, not necessarily to engage in it myself. Upon entering the profession, however, my perspective soon changed. I learned that academic librarians and archivists not only support research, but actively pursue their own research agendas. Not only do they partner with teaching faculty to embed information literacy into the curriculum, they independently design and deliver for-credit courses in colleges and universities. So how was it that I had missed this message during my MLIS studies?

When I began at Western, the predominant organizational culture for information workers was that of the practitioner. Librarians and archivists staffed public service points, provided one-on-one research assistance to students and faculty, delivered in-class and online library instruction, and catalogued and administered the university's library and archives research collections. While the nature of this work in and of itself was not unusual – librarians and archivists elsewhere engage in these, or similar professional activities – the overall scope of the work was. Such activities typically constitute only a portion of workload for most academic librarians, and yet at Western they constituted the entire workload. Unlike their counterparts at other academic

institutions, Western's information workers did not have workload allocations, which mirrored those held by members of the academic community at large, with responsibilities in each of the areas of teaching, research and service.

It soon became apparent to me and to many of my colleagues that those who retained the full rights and privileges that most faculty, librarians and archivists enjoy – namely, academic status and workloads which include some ratio of teaching, research and service – were employed at colleges and universities where academic staff are organized. It did not take long for the librarian and archivist community at Western to recognize the value in aligning with their faculty colleagues, and in turn for faculty to acknowledge the largely untapped potential for their academic librarian and archivist allies to contribute more fully to the teaching, research and service mandate of the University. Born out of this collective awakening, a successful union drive and shortly thereafter an inaugural Collective Agreement for The University of Western Ontario Faculty Association – Librarians and Archivists (UWOFA-LA), ratified by the University's Board of Governors in September 2006.

The proceeding three years are best characterized as a period of adjustment, where librarians, archivists, faculty and university administration all began the transition toward a new organizational culture at Western. Though it has taken significant time and effort to initiate the change, slowly but surely the culture is shifting.

Over and above the evolution underway within our local organization, the broader cultures of higher education and of academic librarianship are changing too. Just as teaching and research have been forever altered by innovations in communications and technology, so too has the very nature of information work. No longer does the work of the academic librarian or archivist occupy the long-held stereotype of the eccentric recluse with their nose buried in a book. Rather the work of today's information worker is dynamic, and in ever increasing proportions, digital. To be certain, much of the work that occurs in academic and research libraries today bears at least some resemblance to the work of our bibliographer, cataloguer and reference librarian predecessors. For example, many of us still evaluate, select and acquire research materials for our libraries. The tools that we use to accomplish this work and the very resources that we acquire and provide access to, however, are by and large online. In an effort to illustrate the breadth and depth of the digital labour in which many information workers in the academic sector are engaged, and also to highlight a few of the key challenges our profession faces, let us further explore the working example of collection development in research libraries.

Selection, acquisition, access provision and collection administration comprise four key elements of the work traditionally characterized as 'collection development' in library practice. While each continues to play a role for those academic librarians whose workload includes responsibility for some level of collection development, the nature and scope of the work is changing dramatically as a result of the broader digital landscape. For much of the history of the profession, the selection of materials for academic research collections often comprised a significant investment of time and intellectual energy on the part of a library subject specialist. Through the careful evaluation of published research materials, academic librarians selected those resources

they deemed to be the most relevant to the research mandate of their local institution, and in doing so, developed the highly specialized research collections that our colleges and universities so prize today. This was a time when universities routinely invested significant resources, both human and financial, in the selection of library materials, and when subject specialists with advanced degrees were sought after and hired as library selectors whose core contribution to the academy was to build and maintain high level research collections.

While this approach may still be in place at some institutions, the broader trend across academic libraries today is to automate the selection process. Third party book and serial vendors offer services that profile the library's collection mandate, identify and apply appropriate subject and non-subject parameters to target published materials that match the profile, and subsequently select resources for the library. While few would argue about the immediate efficiencies gained by automating materials selection, the long term implications for the very nature and quality of academic library research collections has yet to be fully realized. Will it be possible to maintain the legacy of research collections that our library selector predecessors cultivated so carefully when academic librarians are relegated to play ever decreasing roles in the selection of research materials for our institutions?

The nature of library acquisitions is also evolving as a result of digital innovation. Pricing, copyright and licensing, as well as the provision of access, serve as only a few examples of acquisitions work that has become increasingly complex as a result of the push to 'go digital'. Whereas the labour of acquiring a printed work is relatively straightforward – a book is selected, purchased, and shipped to the library and remains accessible so long as the library retains the work in its collection – the very same process is made much more complex if the resource being acquired happens to be digital. First, pricing for the very same content is often set at an exorbitantly higher rate, as publishers posit that providing digital access to information cuts into their print profit margins. As a result, the wider the access secured (i.e. the more people licensed to view or download content simultaneously), the more costly the digital acquisition. Questions regarding platform stability, the availability of both ongoing and archival access to content, and off-campus or remote access must also be addressed – all before even so much as a link appears in the library catalogue.

Challenges in digital access provision and collection administration often continue well after the decision to acquire online access is made. These constitute yet another aspect of information workers' digital labour – one that remains, by and large, invisible. As new electronic publishers are born and traditional presses supplement their print publications with digital access, or even migrate entirely to online content, a library's institutional subscriptions must be renegotiated and subsequently, difficult decisions must be made. Most libraries can ill afford paying twice, thrice or yet even higher subscription rates to provide both print and digital access to the same content; as a result many elect to cancel print subscriptions in lieu of e-access.

In Ontario, colleges and universities have worked collaboratively in an effort to stretch their acquisitions dollars as far as possible, negotiating consortial package pricing with publishers. Though the benefits of such collaborative acquisitions are great,

disadvantages do exist. Local control over the provision, maintenance and preservation of stable electronic access is largely relinquished when content is acquired consortially, which may result in confusion when access is disrupted, or still worse, content withdrawn. Given the sheer magnitude of content in question, front-line information workers are seldom aware of access issues until they are reported by students or faculty, and even at this juncture are often precluded from resolving the issue locally. Rectifying even the most simple of issues, such as a broken link, can prove a monumental task in the digital library. Paradoxically, the more fluid and intuitive an information search and retrieval experience we facilitate, the less visible the contributions of information professionals become. As a result, communicating the nature of our expertise and the contributions that we make to the provision and preservation of digital access to research resources on our campuses is most certainly a challenge, but one that is most critical to address, and soon.

Even though academic librarians have been engaged in various kinds of digital labour for many years now, far too often those outside the immediate community of the academic library neither recognize nor respect our contributions to the academy. In September 2009, when commenting on the changing nature of education and learning in his inaugural address to University Senate, Western's incoming president remarked that he had given up going to the library, as his research needs are met by subscribing to electronic services. In his worlds, 'Life has changed – I don't have to go to libraries anymore'. Though the statement may not seem all that provocative in and of itself, for Western's librarians and archivists (who at the time had been working without a contract for several months), it demonstrated a lack of appreciation for and understanding of the role of the information worker on campus.

A failure on the part of university administrations to recognize the meaningful contributions of its academic librarians and archivists on campus can also be a failure on the part information workers' ability to clearly and succinctly communicate their value, a lesson we were fortunate to learn quickly at Western. When contract negotiations seemed near an impasse in the fall of 2009, librarians and archivists began talking about their role on campus with very students, faculty and staff with whom and for whom they work so diligently. In the weeks that followed, UWOFA-LA Members received a strong showing of support from academic and library communities at the local, provincial and national levels. This, along with the incredible dedication and resolve of a talented negotiating team, resulted in a narrowly averted strike in late October 2009.

So what lessons have I learned in my short tenure as an information worker in the academy thus far? I have learned that librarians and archivists have much to contribute to the digital labour dialogue. As active members of the academic community who are fully engaged in the digital information and knowledge economies, our perspective will only serve to broaden and enrich the discussion. By continuing to contribute to our academic communities beyond the parameters of our professional practice through participation in forums such as the Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens conference, through active participation in the union, and by engaging our academic colleagues and administrative leaders in open and honest dialogue about the nature and role of the information worker on campus, we can begin to close that gap that exists

between the perceived roles of librarians and archivists on the one hand, and our many actual contributions on the other.

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