

Five librarians discuss the future of the academic book

Christina Kamposiori reports on what librarians are thinking



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In the spirit of the second Academic Book Week taking place in January 2017, Research Libraries UK (RLUK) decided to conduct interviews with academic librarians holding different positions in the library, in order to find out about their expert views on the future of the academic book.

The professionals who very kindly contributed their time and expertise for the purposes of this article were: (1) Liz Waller, Head of Library and Archives, and leader of a team of senior managers delivering Library and Archives services

to the academic, student and wider community at the University of York; (2) Beth Clark, Head of Digital Scholarship and Innovation at LSE Library; (3) Stuart Sharp, Joint Head of Acquisitions and Access, a large department purchasing the content and managing electronic availability of the content in the Library of the University of Glasgow; (4) Rozz Evans, Head of Collection Strategy for UCL Library Services and leader of the Collection Development Services team at the UCL Institute of Education; and (5) Dr Jessica Gardner, Director of Library Services and University Librarian, University of Bristol.

After each interviewee briefly described their role in the library, they discussed issues around the format, purpose and use of the future academic book, as well as the way in which they expect that these will be shaped by their community's needs. Moreover, we invited them to express their opinion on how they see the role of libraries and librarians developing as a result, and how this will differ from that of other stakeholders, such as authors, publishers, and booksellers. Finally, we asked

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them to outline the skills that librarians need to develop in order to respond efficiently to any challenges that the future academic book may bring.

According to the librarians' perspective, the future of the academic book looks increasingly digital and dynamic, while its content is easily accessible. Although print will still continue to exist because of the trust that academics have developed in it, authors and readers will probably be offered a variety of formats, shorter or longer, to choose from. So, even though dissemination of knowledge will remain as the main purpose and use of the academic book, its format will adapt to the researchers' and students' evolving needs. Improving impact will also constitute one of the concerns of the stakeholders of the future academic book; employing complementary dissemination strategies or moving to the 'mainstream' public reading realm can be two potential avenues for increasing impact. Our professionals argued:

I believe there will be an increase in born digital 'books' which will offer new ways of engaging with the content, and new ways of presenting ideas. Whilst the idea of the book as the output for a sustained period of research will still hold good, I believe that the purpose of the book – the communication of ideas – will remain, but may manifest itself in different ways – perhaps offering a platform for the presentation of ongoing research and academic debate. (*interviewee 1*)

Readers will be offered a wider choice of formats, with long-form print still playing an important role. However, we will also see more 'fragmented' books with content repackaged into other outputs, e.g. course materials. (*2*)

A relatively small number of titles will cross into more mainstream public reading, and I suspect that, to improve 'impact', publishers and academics will expand this. (*3*)

Access needs to be simpler and more consistent, and ebooks need to be much more flexible in terms of sharing, downloading and manipulating content. (*4*)

We are seeing publishers and academics with marketing and engagement strategies that move beyond the book to include ways of pushing ideas through social media, with blogs, video etc. (*5*)

Academics' changing publishing practices, often driven by the Research Excellence Framework (REF), funding and career requirements will be one of the main factors impacting on the future of the academic book.

On the other hand, students' needs for increased access to context across devices and platforms will influence the development and future of textbooks. Yet, personal reading habits and differences in publishing behaviour and needs across academic disciplines are additional issues that will contribute to the shaping of the future academic book.

The way in which academics share their work is beginning to change, with new technologies and methodologies being embraced by a minority, but this will become more prevalent as the richness of this transmission is acknowledged and further developed. (1)

The future academic book will continue to be shaped by drivers such as the REF, research funder requirements, academic promotion procedures, and the established norms for publication in certain fields. (2)

I could see open access e-textbooks, if successfully developed, challenging some standard textbook publishing in some subjects, but the models are challenging and the effects will be limited. I think the biggest move will be towards ebook-only academic books, purchased, as is increasingly the case with SHEDL [Scottish Higher Education Digital Library] in Scotland, through evidence-based or subscription deals, with limited DRM [Digital Rights Management]. (3)

The drivers for 'any time, any place, any device' are powerful ones, particularly for students to access content wherever they are in the world, and for content to be re-used and re-purposed in different contexts. The needs of students in this regard will continue to drive up digital innovation in the future of the academic book. But it is a balance. We shouldn't ignore the fact that for many of us – including students – print remains a preferred format for reading long-form, and that in the arts, humanities and social sciences the long-form academic book is a reflection of discipline craft, of deep analysis and thinking formed into a long argument or discourse. (5)

Considering the impact that these changes will have on libraries, the professionals interviewed told us that new models of publishing and collaboration are likely to emerge. Libraries will have an active role in the design of resources and content, while strongly influencing the deals with publishers over content and resource subscriptions. As part of this more dynamic role, the role of libraries as open access publishers may expand, with existing successful initiatives, such as UCL Press and White Rose University Press, leading the way.

Already libraries are supporting open access publishing in their institutions, e.g. UCL Press and White Rose University Press, and with new formats the potential for the library to become involved in supporting 'publishing' increases. The library should be well placed to partner with the academic community in exploring new dissemination outlets. (1)

Increasingly we see librarians providing support for authors during the whole research cycle, providing advice on systematic reviews, RDM [Research Data Management], open access publishing, bibliometrics, managing research outputs, and minting DOIs [Digital Object Identifiers]. In future, librarians are likely to develop this support role for authors, providing advice on publication, funding and licensing options, liaising with publishers and booksellers, and in some cases actively developing a publishing role themselves, providing open access platforms and supporting university presses. (2)

The libraries' role will be to facilitate the content on the 'big deals' with publishers, and less time, effort and resources will need to be spent on the development of new print collections. (3)

Librarians need to continue to advocate robustly (and collectively) on behalf of their users in terms of establishing what is and is not acceptable in terms of the purchase of/ subscription to this content. (4)

Libraries are not simply 'consumers' of information resources, but increasingly involved in influencing how they are designed (for instance to help improve accessibility and licensing for ebooks), and in content (for instance in collaborative design of multimedia educational resources). We are also seeing models where libraries are becoming publishers, working to innovate and enable open access monographs as the academy works to take back some control over research dissemination. (5)

Based on the above comments, librarians' role will also expand and include the provision of support to scholars throughout the research life-cycle; from advice on funding resources to open access publishing support. However, in order to meet the demands and responsibilities of this new role, collaboration is crucial. According to the professionals that took part in the interviews, boundaries between stakeholders have become blurred, opening up new opportunities for partnerships.

The lines between author, publisher, bookseller and librarian may become blurred as we explore the potential for new and innovative partnerships. (1)

I believe the HE library profession needs to come together collaboratively to ensure that academics, who are the producers of this academic book content, are fully informed when it comes to making publishing decisions. (4)

I think we will see academic librarians working in closer partnership with authors and publishers, particularly with the growth in university press initiatives. (5)

Libraries will have an active role in the design of resources and content.

As a result, the skills that library professionals need to develop – according to these five librarians – range from a deeper understanding of the research and publishing process, to technical, communication, negotiation and marketing skills. Actually, collaboration and communication are key, not only for forming strong partnerships



English Faculty Library shelves, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. PHOTO: K.T. BRUCE.

across institutions and industry partners, but also for building a robust internal community of professionals who have an active role in the library and a unique set of skills. Beth Clark, Stuart Sharp, Rozz Evans and Liz Waller outline the skills that librarians need in order to tackle the challenges associated with the future academic book efficiently:

Continued development of scholarly communications skills (bibliometrics, RDM, open access etc.), plus enhanced metadata, discovery and digital preservation to ensure long-term access to multi-format content. Advising authors on licensing content for accessibility and reuse e.g. text and data mining. Supporting new publication models either financially or practically, providing platforms to support innovative publishing, and developing technical skills to support this. (2)

We need to be able to utilise improved use of analytics to evaluate the value of content, the skills to ensure that the content is easily discoverable to our users, and improved negotiating skills when up against publishers with experienced sales staff. We need to improve marketing skills to ensure that the content purchased is known and explained to the relevant users. (3)

Greater understanding of publishing for all librarians, not just those working in acquisitions teams, a proactive

approach to explaining how this works to academics and students, and a willingness to articulate problems across the sector and in dialogue with publishers. Ability to work with academics in terms of what content is published and how, and more involvement in course planning. Selection of books for courses will, of course, remain the domain of academic staff, but they need to be in a position to make well-informed decisions and there is a role there for librarians. (4)

Librarians supporting academic publishing will need a deeper understanding of the research process and of academic practice and thinking, a knowledge of publishing processes and of new platforms and technologies which might be exploited. New publishing formats will require us to think about how we support discovery and potentially curation and preservation challenges presented by fluid, digital formats. It will be an exciting new world in which librarians can utilise existing skills sets in new ways, and embrace new skills, knowledge and understanding. (5)

Indeed, the future of the academic book may entail new challenges for libraries and their professionals, in terms of infrastructure, skills and resources. Yet, it also promises to open up new opportunities for co-operation across sectors, as well as new types of engagement with their audience, making the academic library a lively and innovative space for creating and sharing knowledge. ■