DECIDING CRISIS IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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The history of library and information science is strewn with events and changes that at the time and/or later are referred to as crises. These crises in the profession may have seemed or been characterized as crises at the time, but looking back we might be a bit bemused. What’s the difference between what we called a crisis then and a similar event that happens 20 or 30 years later? The opposite is also true. Sometimes serious things happen that either we handle adeptly or that we underestimate, and thus do not consider or name them crises at all, even though, all things considered, they may represent one. The etymology of the word crisis itself appropriately provides a key to what a crisis is and the action that is required. The word is derived from the Greek word krinein, meaning “to decide,” and is used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with very specific meanings in the fields of medicine and astrology. But the first known recorded use with a more general meaning is in 1659: “This is the Crisis of Parliaments; we shall know by this if Parliaments live or die” (referring to the third, and final, of England’s Cromwellian Protectorate Parliaments).1 A crisis is a change that is occurring, or a circumstance that drives change, and makes a decision necessary.

Academic libraries are vulnerable to crises not only because of their own management or action, but also due to the multilayered environment in which they operate. The simplest and most obvious of these connections is that academic libraries are part of a university—a university that is, in the Canadian context, funded mostly by the host province. Note the word funded: as in most other human endeavours, money is a significant factor, and many of the crises to which academic libraries have been subjected are related to money in one way or another.

What is now called the “serials crisis” was one of those. The rising cost of journals, starting in the 1980s, had an impact on libraries’ budgets, given that a large portion of most libraries’ acquisition funds were dedicated to journals.

This is an example of a crisis in response to which libraries proactively tried to solve the problem. Many journal subscriptions were outright cancelled, with libraries acting just as a responsible individual might when confronted with a budget crunch: have a hard look at what you are purchasing, decide what you really need, and consider cutting the rest. Libraries also responded to a major change in publishing in order to help alleviate the effects of the crisis. With the advent of electronic journals starting about the mid-1990s, the concept of the ‘big deal’ was introduced: publishers began to offer subscriptions to their entire catalogue of journals, or to designated swaths of it, at a price that was often significantly lower than selective, title-by-title subscription.

The serials crisis of the 1980s spurred academic librarians to encourage a whole new movement and model in academic publishing by the end of the decade. With the simple and logical premise that since faculty members do the research and writing, and now have the online means to post or publish their results directly to the web, why not bypass commercial publishers altogether? Open access was born, and academic libraries have played a key role in promoting the concept on their campuses. There are compelling arguments not only for faculty members but also for those who oversee budgets: “University administrators often complain that they are paying twice to acquire publications: once for the salary of their faculty members who did the research, and a second time to buy their scholarly products back from the publishers.”

Some open access journals charge no publishing fees to authors and/or subscription fees to readers, and so they save money overall in the system. For those that do charge fees, it is arguable that the cost is simply being transferred from library acquisition funds to university research funds. Open access continues as a strong movement, although for many reasons it has by no means supplanted commercial academic journal publishing and most academic libraries still spend enormous sums of money, year after year, on e-journals.

Libraries have also been proactive during the more recent financial crisis. In addition, the decline in the value of the Canadian dollar against the American dollar over the past couple of years especially has come at a time when there are many other pressures on the buying power that academic libraries have in acquiring collections for their universities—for example, inflationary increases from the vendors and cuts by universities to collections budgets. It is interesting to see that this time the ‘big deals’ are again a factor in the reaction by academic libraries, but now the other way around: some

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libraries are cancelling publishers’ bundled subscriptions in favour of title-by-title selections. Brock University’s library caused quite a stir on its campus when it cancelled the entire package of Wiley-Blackwell journals,\(^3\) just as the Université de Montréal had done the previous year.\(^4\) The big deal, as has been predicted for about the past ten years, may be dying.

There have been other crises that academic libraries have not handled so directly, with the result being that they have had to adapt to a changed environment that their inaction has helped to create. I am thinking here of the issues around searching for and finding information not only in libraries but also beyond, as Google and the Internet came to prominence in the early twenty-first century. Here there were two primary aspects of libraries’ concern. One was that the online catalogue was being supplanted as the chief search tool for finding information, and the other was the broader and more threatening extrapolation of this: that libraries themselves would be relegated to secondary status at best—and irrelevant at worst—as Google and other search engines provided better interfaces and better results. A famous observation from the era was that “isn’t it true that only librarians like to search? Everyone else likes to find.”\(^5\)

To be fair, there likely was little that academic libraries could (or should) have done to stop or slow down what was happening, and in the end they did what the best of evolutionary survivors do: adapt. In the early 1990s the way to find information was in the library’s catalogue, but the modern academic library offers that as just one search tool among many. Carleton University Library’s website is typical. The main tool, called Summon, searches everything in the library catalogue plus almost every other database to which the library provides access, all via a single search box. But there is also a direct link to the traditional catalogue, as well as individual links to all those other databases (including Google Scholar and Google Books) to which the library facilitates access.


Academic libraries, and libraries generally, are amongst the most respected cultural institutions in the world, and they have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to adapt—not just over the past three decades, but over centuries. Nevertheless, an academic library cannot sit back comfortably and assume that society (or its university administration) will support it no matter what. Vigilance is essential: sometimes we must act boldly, and sometimes we must adapt smartly to whatever crisis happens. A cultural institution such as an academic library needs to call on its basic values as it makes changes, with the goal always of preserving those values at the same time that practices and policies may be subtly or radically modified. Change does not have to be a betrayal of fundamental values, but those who want to resist change for various reasons tend to couch their inaction or resistance in those terms, conflating (sometimes intentionally) progress toward a better future with rejection of the past. Change can be a part of an ongoing process of improvement, and is, yes, often instigated by crisis.