

Conferring—and Revoking—Scholarly Legitimacy

Dorothea Salo
Digital Repository Librarian
University of Wisconsin

A distinguished-looking white-haired gentleman raised his hand politely after my talk. "Libraries," he said, in a grave and judicious voice, "are known and valued for their commitment to high-quality, authoritative information. Are we not damaging our reputation when we take anything and everything into institutional repositories?"

I can't remember what I answered (I probably stuttered something inane) but the question troubles me to this day. Sorting out what libraries' value and reputation *should be* in a world of information "satisficers"—a world, moreover, that increasingly seems disinclined to accept librarian judgment as a useful filter—looms as a worrying concern for librarianship.

At the same time, the academy wrestles with its own questioning of traditional measures of authority. Peer review has been proven biased, its judgments demonstrated to be hardly more than random. As producers of scholarly publications in print wane and perish, the humanities are forced to confront their instinctive distaste for all things digital. Supposedly reputable journal publishers have lent their good name (and worse, that of researchers they purport to serve) to false journals paid for by industry in hopes of fooling practitioners into drumming up sales.

We can help, we academic librarians. We do not help only by judging the legitimacy of already-packaged products: we help by *conferring* legitimacy on products and practices that we believe will lead to a stronger, clearer, more vital, and more equitable scholarly-information environment.

We have done this before. We have helped legitimize entire scholarly disciplines, notably during the

culture-studies ferment of the 1970s, by collecting in them and creating library spaces and staff devoted to them. And what is the first thing a new department requests from the institution, if not a targeted library collection? We have more influence than we know. How should we use it?

We have market power, too. What scholarly publisher or press reliant on sales and subscriptions could survive without our dollars? We have not always used our power wisely, as the decline in university presses attests; we have favored short-term service needs—"keeping the customer satisfied"—over the long-term sustainability of the scholarly enterprise. Now that our backs are against the wall, now that *no more money* can be thrown down the serials abyss, what will we do?

Perhaps we stop legitimizing extortionate prices for dubious-quality journals by refusing to collect them, and patronizing their publishers as little as we possibly may. Perhaps we put our money where our mouths have been and divert collection budgets to worthy open-access publishers, granting them the legitimacy of our attention and support. Perhaps we assert prestige for the materials we collect into institutional repositories.

Perhaps we open our hearts and minds to the intellectual and methodological ferment happening outside traditional publishing channels; in so doing we entwine ourselves throughout the entire research process, rather than merely serving as its endpoint. Perhaps we legitimize excellent scholarly weblogs by offering them publishing platforms, or by preserving them. Perhaps we help researchers share their painstakingly compiled data, as they have never before been able to do, share it in well-described, well-preserved, web-accessible form. Perhaps we ourselves design the citation formats, data standards, and review processes that will help make data and their collection as obviously legitimate a contribution to scholarship as peer-reviewed publication.

Perhaps we raise the profile of our institutions and their researchers by using our depth of bibliographic access to add up-to-date publication lists to researchers' web presences. At the same time we will aid their search for interdisciplinary collaborators across campus and across the world. Perhaps we ourselves become

publishers, or absorb them, taking on the responsible and cost-effective stewardship of the scholarly record that too much of the scholarly-publishing world has abandoned in venal pursuit of profit.

Will these changes cause short-term consternation and disruption? Quite certainly. Is disruption not, however, exactly what is needed if we are to escape the unsupportable status quo?

Whatever roads we choose in the next decade, we must remember that we librarians are a vital wellspring of authority and trust in the academic world. Add to that our broad, long-term perspective, and we can move mountains ... with luck, the very mountains that most need to move.