

Ethical acquisitions in academic libraries: a simple idea without a simple solution

The acquisition of content for academic libraries has traditionally focused on achieving value for money within the realities of the existing markets. However, increasingly libraries are looking beyond this to use their position to effect a transformation of academic publishing towards an open, inclusive and sustainable future. This article explores the challenges of putting these principles into practice through the lens of the University of Sheffield Library's Comprehensive Content Strategy. It argues that librarians should guard against moral superiority and complacency whilst working within colonized and marketized institutions, and advocates for considered, reflective action that appreciates the complicity of the acquisitions librarian's position. Strategies for taking action are then explored, considering the balance between pragmatic gains and the limitations of a dysfunctional, commercial marketplace. The article concludes the drive for ethical acquisitions within libraries will not have a finite destination and the solution lies partly in taking compromised, pragmatic action but mainly in the encouragement of radical and progressive initiatives outside of existing power structures.

Keywords

library acquisitions; ethical acquisitions; academic publishing; professional ethics

Introduction

At the University of Sheffield, we published our Comprehensive Content Strategy (CCS) in 2021.¹ It represents an attempt to move beyond operationally focused collection development and acquisitions policies, to think more holistically about content and to put principles at the heart of our activity. Notably, we have commitments to act ethically, sustainably and inclusively and we express a determination to transform academic publishing. Simply put, we want to move away from only thinking about what we have or what the market might let us buy, to become active players in the creation of 'a fair and equitable settlement for all scholars'.² However, many a laudable statement of ideals has been committed to paper (or html) never to be truly acted upon. So I want to explore the premise of our vision and some of the challenges of putting it into practice.

I do not presume to offer a general solution in this article. This represents my personal reflections. I was appointed Head of Content and Collections in September 2019. The major attraction of the job was the opportunity to write the CCS, at that stage a nebulous objective in the library strategic plan. I was attracted by the idea of being able to influence policy. I was also attracted by the increased salary it offered, but I was substantially interested in getting my hands on the content budget, which I saw as the major weapon libraries have in the battle to free the world's knowledge. If that sounds grandiose, it is probably because it was, and the balance of those big ideas and what might be practically achievable is what I want to explore.

Going in I had reservations as to whether we would be allowed to produce the sort of content strategy we wanted. Would my idealism inevitably be compromised by reality? Nonetheless, I am very proud of what we have produced. The credit for that goes to



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'we have commitments to act ethically, sustainably and inclusively'

2 my library colleagues who did the intellectual work in its drafting, particularly Narges Kalhorzadeh – the Project Officer, and to our library leadership who supported its implementation. It is a library document, designed to guide our work, but critically it has been ratified by our University Executive Board. We now have an endorsed set of principles and our challenge is doing something with them.

It was the intention that the CCS should not just be a high-minded statement of intent but something that enabled us to take action. Therefore, if we are explicitly saying we wish 'to allow for ethical, sustainable, open access for all'³, then by implication we are saying that we stop working with partners who block this vision. In the context of library acquisitions this means we should start to disassociate ourselves from unsympathetic publishers. That premise is simple, but as we look to put this into practice it raises further questions. I find my certainty wavering, and I want to embrace that here. I want to argue that asking these questions is not prevarication or a loss of faith, but a necessary step in recognizing complexity and moving towards practical solutions.

'we should start to disassociate ourselves from unsympathetic publishers'

Essentially, when looking at how we can put ethical principles into action for the acquisition of library content, librarians should be asking three fundamental questions:

1. Are librarians in a position to moralize?
2. How do we move beyond critique?
3. What strategies should we employ?

Are we the 'goodies'?

Fobazi Ettarh begins her description of 'vocational awe' in librarianship by rooting the idea of a vocation in its ecclesiastical origins, equating professionalism with a kind of piety.⁴ Despite the traction that the concept of vocational awe has gained, it does not appear to have penetrated the default assumption that libraries are the 'goodies'. This, particularly, is the underlying narrative of libraries' interactions with commercial suppliers. Goodies and baddies, though, is too simplistic. Simplistic thinking is uncritical – ironic considering elsewhere librarians like to teach critical thinking. Or, as Amanda Echterling puts it, 'Delegation to one voice ... is not a scholarly conversation'.⁵ I do not believe that we should begin from the position that being a 'professional' makes our actions ethical. Especially, when you consider the profound problems with representation in the profession outlined by Ettarh. Indeed, being an uncritical, 'traditional librarian' may well be a bar to inclusive and ethical action.

Furthermore, being a librarian is a job. In these jobs we are operating on behalf of our institutions. In UK higher education, these are deeply marketized institutions. Universities claim to be mission-driven organizations but it can be hard to believe this when you see the focus placed on research funding and student recruitment as markers of success in and of themselves. The focus on metrics to score well in assessment exercises (e.g. the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK) or to climb up university rankings tables has driven a largely homogenized approach. Arguably, the ongoing industrial dispute between the University and College Union (UCU) and university leaderships represents a clash between a workforce that believes in the mission-driven principles and an employer that believes in the bottom line.⁶ In our CCS we are pushing for a community-based, shared future in academic publishing but we are trying to do so from an institution that is income driven and commercial in its own way. Similarly, if we are attempting to make library content – and by extension academic publishing – more inclusive, to decolonize, to become anti-racist, then we have to accept that we are doing so from institutions that exhibit the legacies (and realities) of colonialism, racism and misogyny. None of this is to say we cannot achieve our aims from within this system, but it should cause us to question our moral authority. It is also why in the CCS we talk explicitly of communities. It is to guard against Scherlen and McAllister's fear that the voices of library administrators, and the institution, drown out the perspectives of the communities they serve.⁷

'we are pushing for a community-based, shared future in academic publishing'

3 It should be clear that I do not feel comfortable making blanket claims to moral superiority, nonetheless, I do believe we should be aiming for ethical standards beyond the realities of what the market dictates. I do not believe this is vocational awe, and I think there is a danger that vocational awe comes to be used as a catch-all critique for anybody who wants to believe in higher purposes. Here it butts up against the idea of radical librarianship. In that if we frame 'radicalism' as a moral requirement beyond the terms of a job description then it is beginning to manifest a similar problem where individuals are expected to take on the emotional burden personally. I am not sure I can describe myself as a radical, but I do believe radical change is necessary for us to meet the objectives of the CCS. However, as a manager, I am aware that when we start to look at ethical approaches to acquisitions this can mean deviating from all the market-based efficiencies we have worked towards with publishers. As well as the emotional labour, being ethical requires extra practical work and the weight of this often falls upon the least well-paid members of staff.

'we should be aiming for ethical standards beyond the realities of what the market dictates'

I have also found that the ongoing experience of working within library acquisitions affects your sense of what is achievable. The CCS was written from a position of deliberate naivety. However, the complicating experience of becoming a manager, with the compromises that has sometimes represented, has exposed the limits and consequences of adopting a radical stance. It is easy to say you will disassociate from bad players in the publishing industry, but the library's actions – your personal actions – will affect careers. People cannot always wait for structural change as their personal timetables and ambitions run quicker. Research projects fall through without the access to secondary reading, students cannot graduate without the access to some textbooks. At some point the library needs to take a stand, but on all sides you are being asked not to take it until later. So, just as librarians should not be expected to take on the emotional burden individually, the library cannot be expected to effect change alone. Especially as many of the issues are structural, economic and societal. This is why the solution has to come from across all stakeholders and a position where libraries assume either the moral burden or the moral authority will undermine this collective approach.

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Are we going to just sit here moaning?

The situation that we find ourselves in is complex. Recognizing this complexity is a necessary part of strategizing towards change. However, this complexity can become overwhelming, and a barrier to taking action. There is absolutely value in critically reflecting and looking for flaws in our thinking, but that does not represent a strategy in itself. Trying and failing is part of trying and succeeding, and I will admit to a personal frustration with some whose only tactic is to criticize those who are trying. I have doubts about whether the perfectly transformed community-owned publishing sector of my utopian fantasies may ever be possible, but I do not think that is a reason not to strive towards it. I fight against my disillusionment by looking for where I can wield my influence most effectively.

'Trying and failing is part of trying and succeeding'

Another issue that can be paralysing when trying to formulate action is attempting to define, usefully, what is meant by ethical. That has been the life's work of multiple philosophers so probably goes well beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, I think it is very important to ask if we need definitions to move forward, or if overly prescriptive definitions limit the transformative power of ideas. We need to ask that question, not necessarily settle upon an answer.

The issues we are discussing are intersectional. If we are trying to be ethical, sustainable and inclusive, if we are trying to serve multiple communities and interests, then it is possible that objectives will cut across each other. There is a legitimate criticism that the western approach to open science is a neocolonial one⁸, so that as we make gains towards our ethically driven idea of openness we are failing in our ethical commitment to inclusivity. I find myself fighting against a desire to see every action as compromised from the start, while accepting that we have to weigh up our activities for gains and losses in different areas.

4 As it stands, the supply of library content is largely in the hands of commercial organizations. The role of commercialism within the ecosystem is one of the issues we have to resolve. It is entirely legitimate to see commercialism as being a profoundly limiting factor in the ethical supply of information. It is reasonable to hope for a situation where the commercial interest is driven from education and the dissemination of research, but again we are looking at grand structural issues that are beyond the scope of our CCS. This is capitalism. We cannot practically say we will not work with any profit-driven company, to do so is to retreat to the safety of our supposed moral authority. To think of organizations, companies and individuals as beyond saving is a difficult position to work from. It gets us no closer to practical outcomes. We might want revolution, but we may only be able to get reform. How we accommodate ourselves to the market, how we influence it and what commercialism we are willing to accept are, again, not questions we need to answer but questions we need to keep asking ourselves.

'We might want revolution, but we may only be able to get reform'

Surely we can do something?

If we accept all of the above then it is fair to ask: is there anything legitimately ethical that can be achieved from within the library of a marketized university? Again, I think it is an intellectually justifiable position to answer no to that question, but I fear the logical conclusion of that answer is to admit defeat. I want to recognize the toll of trying, but I do not want to give up, and I want to recognize that there are existing strategies that might allow us to adopt a more ethical approach.

There are solutions that are proposed within the existing market. Optimism for these solutions depends upon your optimism about the market. The first of these, and the one that is advocated most by the publishers, is partnership. If the market is functioning correctly then suppliers should be producing the products that libraries require. We have seen this in the desire to produce open access book programmes, diversify archival products and create services to support open science workflows. However, naturally commercial suppliers produce new products to develop new revenue streams. This limits what partnership can achieve if you see de-commercialisation as part of the ethical drive.

'If the market is functioning correctly then suppliers should be producing the products that libraries require'

Relatedly, libraries can come up with ethical standards and use these as the determining factor in content spending. We see elsewhere market-led approaches to proactively demonstrate ethical standards to the consumer. Commercial suppliers have engaged with Cruelty Free International⁹ or the Rainforest Alliance¹⁰ because these organizations meet what their customers are demanding of them. To some extent Plan S¹¹ or the FAIR principles¹² were a library version of this until they became increasingly compulsory. Compulsion is required when there is perceived to be no commercial benefit for an organization in adopting higher ethical standards. The response from libraries needs increasingly to be the use of boycotts or cancellations of products that do not adhere to principles. So far, this has largely been used as a negotiating tactic, but, emboldened by the CCS, I would envision it becoming a greater part of our toolkit at Sheffield.

'Compulsion is required when there is perceived to be no commercial benefit for an organization'

When it comes to library acquisitions, we do not have a properly functioning market. It is a series of mini-monopolies. Libraries buy on behalf of their communities and often do not have the scope to cancel or the ability to look for alternative products. Therefore, one natural solution is to look for market regulation. The most notable example of this is the #ebooksos campaign looking at e-book (and especially e-textbook pricing).¹³ However, the success of market regulation will require sympathetic leadership in universities and government, and it is fair to doubt whether the UK has this at the moment.

The alternative to a market-based approach is a community-driven one. This is happening. We see it through community-born initiatives in publishing that begin from a place of principle and do not have to justify themselves to the profit motive. For example, Jisc's Open

5 Access Community Framework features a variety of approaches with a transparency that commercial publishers will never be able to offer.¹⁴ It is in places like this that the University of Sheffield will be looking to transfer its spending.

To fully achieve a transformation of academic publishing, libraries need to think about more than just what we spend our money on. To counter the many systemic problems we have discussed, we need also to think about cultural change. This is something many library workers are already pushing for in the conversations we have with researchers about where they choose to publish, and the way we educate our students in the politics of the knowledge they consume, create and repurpose. We also need to think about how we create the transformed culture within librarianship. I have reflected a lot on the limits of my current position, and my complicity with the establishment. Therefore, I am very grateful for groups and individuals working outside of the system who are presenting genuinely radical alternatives. The challenge for those of us in positions of influence is to support such initiatives without co-opting them into the system too early, without running them. It is possible to work within the confines of the market, and of society, as it is and take the gains that are possible there, but we have to encourage this activity outside. Making space for different voices, keeping out of their way, may be the most valid contribution that some can offer. Eventually, if we are to be successful, the radical alternative will need to be mainstreamed, until then it is acceptable to do what you can.

'We ... need to think about how we create the transformed culture within librarianship'

Conclusion

The CCS was an attempt to sneak a kind of radicalism through the front door, but simply turning it into action – without an understanding of the complexities of our context – is naive. Thinking and reflecting all the time is part of acting ethically. We need to forgive ourselves for not being able to make the progress we might hope. However, this should not turn into defeatism, or a retreat into only theoretical criticism. There are things libraries can do practically with the way they deploy their money and influence, but that is limited by commercial and structural realities. Alongside that there is a culture that we must all play a role in transforming.

'the radical alternative will need to be mainstreamed'

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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To cite this article:

Peter B, "Ethical acquisitions in academic libraries: a simple idea without a simple solution," *Insights*, 2023, 36: 2, 1–6; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.600>

Submitted on 30 June 2022

Accepted on 17 August 2022

Published on 17 January 2023

Published by UKSG in association with Ubiquity Press.