

Who Do They Think We Are? Addressing Library Identity Perception In The Academy

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Abstract

The library's evolving role on campus generates debate within the library literature and beyond. Librarians conduct numerous satisfaction surveys, talk about re-conceptualizing the library, and try to rebrand by changing the titles of our jobs, our professional associations, and even our industry. Libraries and librarians have been consistently focused on public perception because our stakeholders' opinions are essential to our very existence. Input from outside our insular community can help librarians rethink where the library fits in today's modern world. To that end, the authors used content analysis methods to evaluate comments from a sampling of library-related articles from two U.S. higher education publications: *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*.

Introduction

The authors became interested in the phenomenon of online commenting culture. The ability for people to respond to articles either anonymously or using their names in a public forum has become ubiquitous, and discussions can veer wildly from banal to thought-provoking to vitriol. The authors wanted to apply this interest in online commenting to their profession and analyze comments about libraries and librarians. Librarians have long been interested in how they are perceived by those outside the profession. To this end, the authors decided to analyze comments made on articles about libraries or librarians in higher education periodicals. They formulated their research question as: What are academics writing in online higher education forums about libraries and librarians? Using content analysis methods, the authors read articles and the corresponding comments, then analyzed and coded both the articles and the comments.

Literature Review

Oakleaf's 2010 *Value of Academic Libraries* report provides a framework for libraries to demonstrate the value they bring to their institutions. The authors used this report as a springboard for ideas on learning about users' perceptions of library value and how to leverage that knowledge. Although the current study focuses on perceived value, Oakleaf emphasizes that "the demonstration of value is not about *looking* valuable; it's about *being* valuable" (p. 140).

The current study seeks to identify the strengths and weaknesses of library perception in academia as a whole--beyond single institutions--and to identify trends and themes in unsolicited comments made by faculty and others in academia. The authors also intend that this analysis will further the research on library value by beginning to identify where the library's voice is missing

from academic conversations altogether. Additional reports have found that the perception of libraries has shifted over time. The most recent Ithaka *Faculty Survey* (Housewright, Schonfeld & Wulfson, 2013) identified a common perception by faculty that libraries primarily serve as purchasing agent for scholarly material on their behalf.

The current study is not the first use of content analysis to evaluate postings by academics on *The Chronicle of Higher Education* website. Meyer and McNeal (2011) analyzed 40 online discussions hosted in the “Forums” discussion board section of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* website, and found that “like so many others, these academics like to discuss their jobs, their research, and professional lives and are especially interested in the institutions where they work” (p. 119).

One common drawback to the discourse available in general online commenting forums is the “online disinhibition effect” described by Suler in 2004: “Everyday users on the Internet—as well as clinicians and researchers—have noted how people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn’t ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world” (p. 321). Some contributors to online commenting platforms take these behaviors to the extreme through the practice of trolling, which is “behaving in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose” (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014). This “online incivility...can polarize online users” (Anderson et al., 2013, p. 11) and negatively impact readers’ comprehension and opinions regarding the content of corresponding articles. In some situations, detractive trolling can outweigh the productive discourse on a site, and publishers may choose to shut down comment platforms altogether, as in the case of *Popular Science* (LeBarre, 2013).

Fortunately, the authors did not come across a great deal of trolling behavior or spam in the course of their evaluation. This is most likely due to the commenting policies of the respective periodicals, which are both moderated, albeit to different degrees. However, the authors did read more than one reference to administrators utilizing “Stasi” tactics. Even in moderated discussions in higher education, Godwin’s Law (“As an online debate increases in length, it becomes inevitable that someone will eventually compare someone or something to Adolf Hitler or the Nazis,” 2012) occasionally surfaces. Although a relatively high level of civility was maintained in the greater portion of the comment data set, there was enough “snark” (as the authors coded it) to warrant its own category during analysis.

Methods

To determine which publications to analyze, the authors referred to EBSCO’s *Serials Directory* category for higher education. They researched the publications listed to determine which met their specific criteria. These criteria included that the publication be publicly available online, allow commenting on articles, and publish articles relating to libraries or librarians. Two publications fit the bill: *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Next, the authors developed a search strategy to identify articles for analysis. They used the following criteria: the articles had to be about libraries or librarians, have comments attached, be published between 2011-2013, and be freely available. This last criterion offered articles with the most comments, and was only a limiting factor for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Some articles are available only to subscribers of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, but all articles on the *Inside Higher Ed* website are freely available.

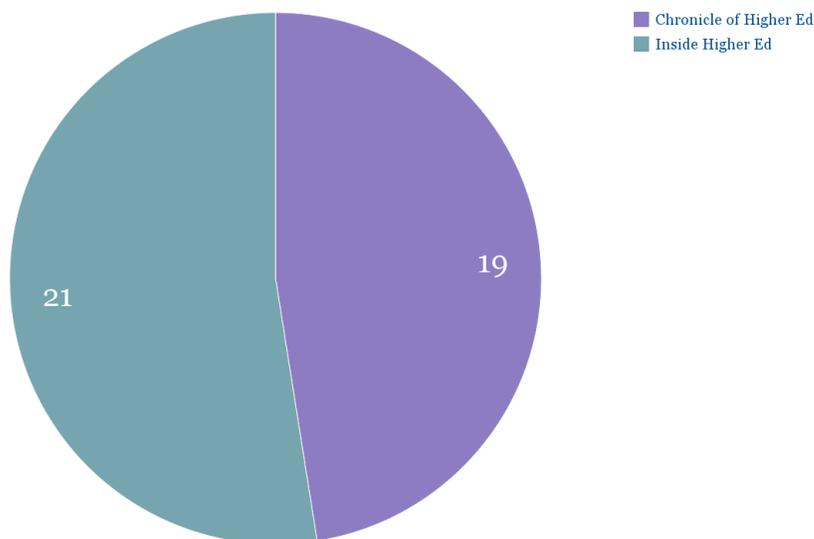
The authors searched each publication website for articles that met these criteria. For *Inside Higher Ed*, the authors used the search box to search for [library]. Then, they used facets to focus the results further, selecting the tag “Libraries”, the years, and the content type “articles.” Please note that the “Libraries” tag was employed on the website only for the year 2012-2013. For 2011, the articles were reviewed manually for relevance to this project. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* was searched in a similar way. The only difference was that the “Libraries” tag on the *Chronicle* website existed in 2011-2012, and 2013 articles had to be reviewed manually for relevance.

The authors utilized content analysis as a framework for their research. Babbie (2007) defines content analysis as “the study of recorded human communications” (p. 320). Content analysis methods helped the authors develop a strategy for coding two separate units of analysis: articles and comments. To create the article coding system, the authors both read each article and determined a coding schema together. This ensured consistency for coding the articles. Once the articles were coded, then the authors began coding the comments. The authors read and coded the first one hundred comments together to ensure inter-rater reliability. Next, the articles were split and the authors independently coded the remaining comments. At times throughout the coding process, they discussed adding new categories or modifying existing categories to accommodate new ideas raised in later analyzed comments. In these instances, they reviewed earlier coded comments to determine the applicability of new or modified categories.

Results and Discussion

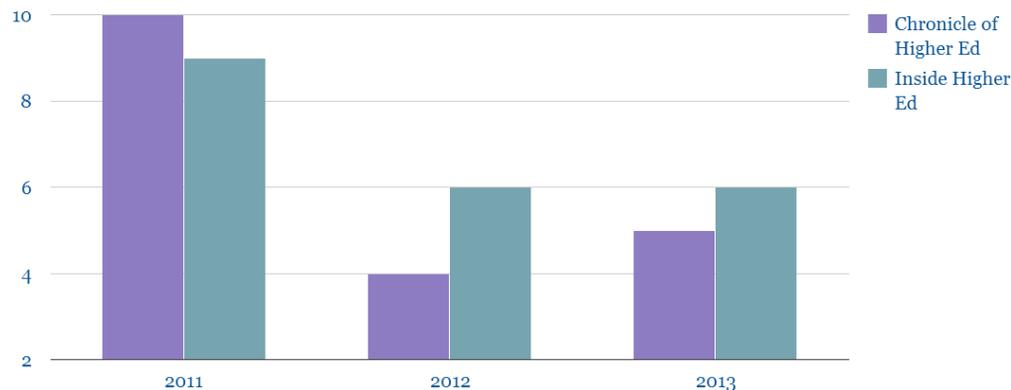
The authors analyzed 40 articles that met the criteria listed above. These articles covered library topics between 2011-2013 in *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 21 of these articles are from *Inside Higher Ed*, and 19 are from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (see Figure 1).

Number of Articles by Publication



As shown in Figure 2, 19 of the articles are from 2011 (ten from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, nine from *Inside Higher Ed*), 10 articles are from 2012 (four from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, six from *Inside Higher Ed*), and 11 are from 2013 (five from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, six from *Inside Higher Ed*). The authors were not able to identify factors that account for the higher rate of library-related articles in 2011.

Articles by Year and Publication



Using the content analysis methods mentioned above, the authors coded articles with 12 distinct topics. Some articles were coded with more than one topic. The three most frequently occurring topics are: Lawsuit (ten articles), Collection Development (nine articles), and Copyright (eight articles). As shown in Figure 3, additional topics include: Digitization/Preservation (seven articles), Scholarly Communication (seven articles), Changing Library Mission/Future of Libraries (six articles), Changing Library Space (six articles), Responsiveness to Patron Needs (six articles), Budget (five articles), Assessment (four articles), Off Site Storage (four articles), and Staffing (four articles).

Topics of Library-related articles

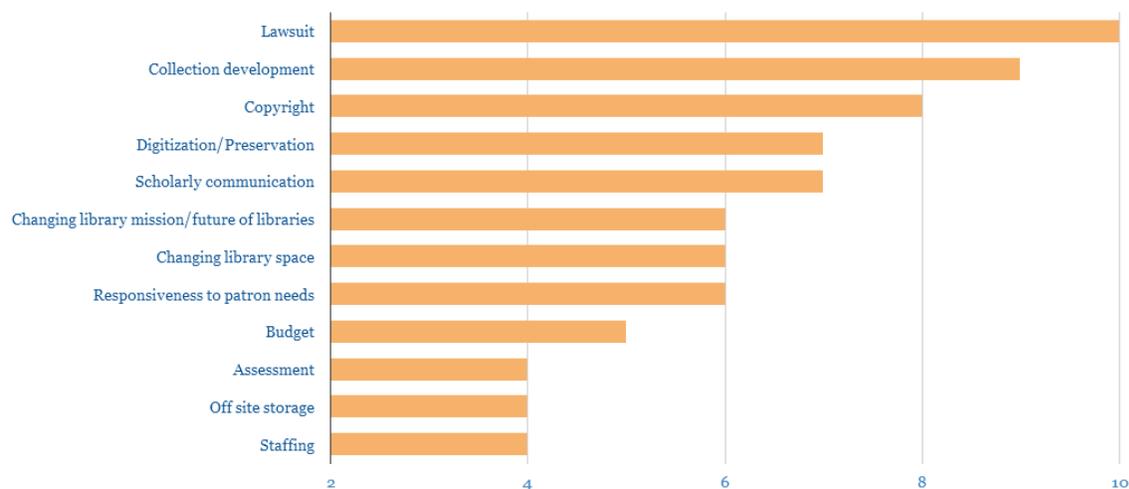


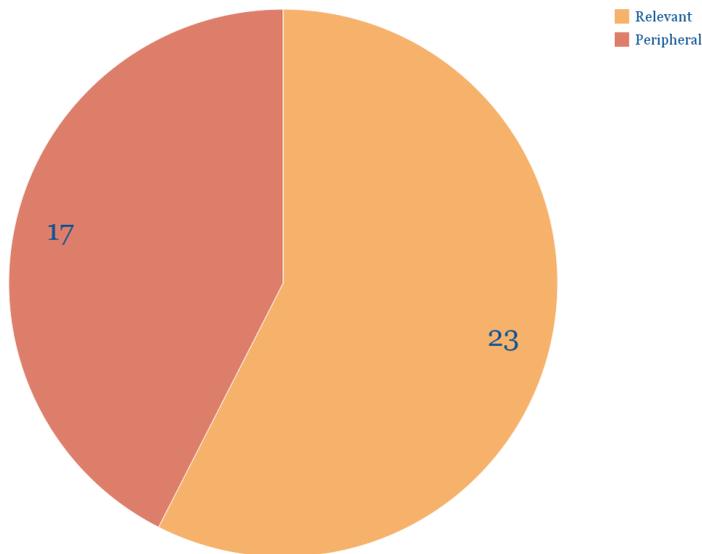
Table 1 demonstrates some sample titles from each of these topics to illustrate the ideas behind each of the topics.

Table 1: Sample Titles Illustrating Article Topics

Topic	Sample Title	Publication
Lawsuit	Price Of A Bad Review: Academic Press Sues Librarian	<i>Inside Higher Ed</i>
Collection Development	On Mistakenly Shredding A Prized Collection	<i>The Chronicle Of Higher Education</i>
Copyright	Out Of Fear, Colleges Lock Books And Images Away From Scholars	<i>The Chronicle Of Higher Education</i>
Digitization/Preservation	Giving Digital Preservation A Backbone	<i>Inside Higher Ed</i>
Scholarly Communication	Citation By Citation, New Maps Chart Hot Research And Scholarship's Hidden Terrain	<i>The Chronicle Of Higher Education</i>
Changing Library Mission/ Future Of Libraries	Librarians Or Baristas?	<i>Inside Higher Ed</i>
Changing Library Space	At Libraries, Quiet Makes A Comeback	<i>The Chronicle Of Higher Education</i>
Responsiveness To Patron Needs	The Customer Is Always Right: Marymount Enlists Students To Mystery Shop	<i>Inside Higher Ed</i>
Budget	Research Libraries Increase Spending On Digital Materials	<i>The Chronicle Of Higher Education</i>
Assessment	College Librarians Look At Better Ways To Measure The Value Of Their Services	<i>The Chronicle Of Higher Education</i>
Off Site Storage	A Hole Lot Of Books	<i>Inside Higher Ed</i>
Staffing	To Library, Or Not To Library	<i>Inside Higher Ed</i>

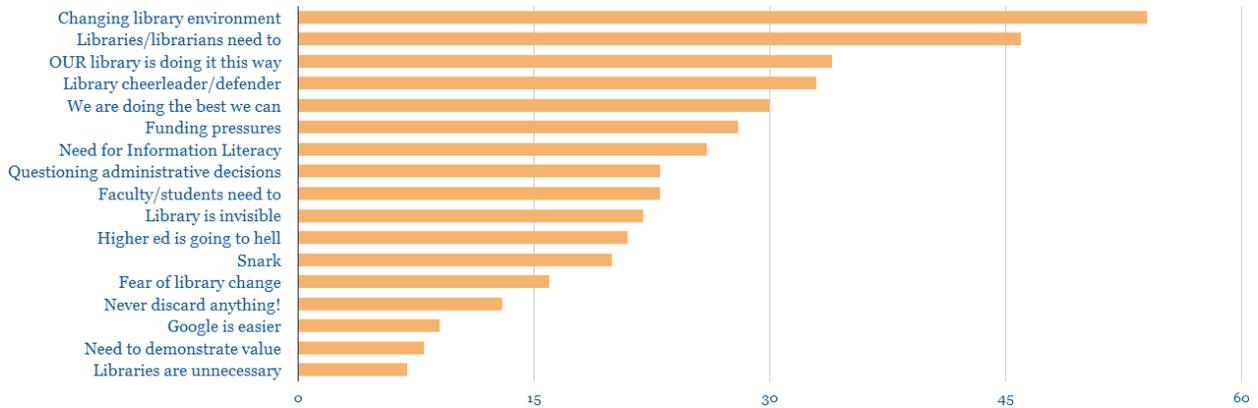
17 of the 40 articles covered topics which yielded comments peripheral to libraries or librarians. Some example of these topics include copyright cases such as Georgia State, or pending lawsuits related to digitization projects by Hathi Trust and Google. The authors were somewhat surprised by the invisibility of the library in these comments since the articles discuss issues that are central to libraries. The remaining 23 articles yielded comments relevant to libraries or librarians (see Figure 4).

Relevant & Peripheral Articles



A total of 303 comments were coded from the 23 articles that yielded comments relevant to libraries or librarians. The authors placed the comments into one or more of the 17 categories that they identified (see Figure 5). The category with the most comments assigned was labeled Changing Library Environment (54 comments). Comments that discussed changes in library spaces, services, and collections were assigned this category. For example, one comment placed in this category discussed the researcher's experience moving from a print environment to an online environment, and browsing with hyperlinks instead of on the shelf. The second most used category was Libraries/Librarians Need To...(46 comments), in which commenters offered suggestions for what libraries or librarians should be doing either in addition to or instead of what we do now. Some of these were helpful suggestions, and others had a more negative complaining or demanding tone. The third most used category was OUR Library is Doing it This Way (34 comments), in which commenters described how their library had solved problems. The authors coded 79 of the comments as Non-Sequitur/Not Applicable.

Topics of coded article comments



Although the study sought input from beyond librarians, the authors found that only a portion of the comments were from readers who self-identified as faculty, staff, or students. Online commenters are a self-selected group, which is a limitation of the current study. Not all readers of articles choose to comment publicly. Those who publish comments to articles may be a small portion of readership and might not be a representative sample of readers. Thus, the opinions that they expressed may not be representative of the opinions of all the general readership.

Conclusion

The authors found this project to be a very interesting undertaking. Seeing snapshots of the variety of viewpoints that our academic colleagues hold about libraries and librarians was fascinating. Many see librarians and libraries as critical to their teaching and research. Others wonder why the library still is necessary. Surprisingly, most comments were not really related to libraries or librarians at all. This last finding was unexpected. Because the viewpoints ran the gamut, presenting a take-away or providing suggestions for engaging colleagues on college campuses is difficult. However, the fact the conversation veered away from libraries is telling, and librarians may want to think about trying to insert themselves more visibly into conversations on their campuses.

The authors have several suggestions for further research. First, expanding the time period of articles would provide a larger pool of data and clearer themes might emerge. Additionally, analyzing the quantity of comments that library articles receive compared to non-library articles in the same periodicals could be an interesting area to explore. If it were possible to get comment datasets from Disqus, the platform that both publications use for their commenting forums, the content analysis process could easily expand to searching for comments about libraries and librarians on non-library related articles. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see if one could determine to what degree librarians are inserting themselves into commenting conversations of articles not related to libraries/librarians. One attendee of the authors' presentation suggested that librarians should be strongly encouraged to comment on all articles in these publications to raise librarians' profile in the academic discourse. There are a few librarians who have columns in these publications, and contacting them for their perspectives on online commenting may provide an interesting context for this research. Another way to expand

the research would be to analyze comments about libraries and librarians on other forms of social media. And finally, enlarging the focus to include articles on public libraries may provide insight into the perspective of the general public on libraries and librarians.

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