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Conversations

Open Access and the Changing Landscape for Library Acquisitions – Interview with Gregory T. Eow

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Abstract: In this installment of "Conversations," Gregory T. Eow, associate director for collections at MIT Libraries, shares his perspective on the changing landscape of library acquisitions.

In recent conversations with colleagues, both librarians and vendors, there is a growing sense that we are in the midst of momentous change in how academic libraries will acquire resources. The spring 2019 decision by the University of California to cancel their Elsevier contract is but one more development indicating change to the status quo. For this interview, I spoke with Gregory T. Eow, associate director of collections at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Libraries about these changes, and what we might expect in the future.

Eow has a masters of library and information science (MLIS) from the University of Pittsburgh and a doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) in history from Rice University. He has worked as the Kaplanoff Librarian for American History at Yale University Library and the Charles Warren Bibliographer for American History at Harvard Library. In 2015, Eow moved into library administration at MIT Libraries. As associate director for collections at MIT Libraries, Eow oversees acquisitions and appraisal, digital preservation, institute archives and special collections, metadata and digital collections services, and scholarly communications and collections strategy. He also serves on the Editorial Board of the MIT Press and the MIT Museum Collections Committee.

Scott Vieira (SV): From our early conversations about this interview, it was evident that we both see the possibility of big changes coming our way regarding academic library collections. Would you describe what changes you see coming?

Gregory T. Eow (GE): Absolutely. We are now several decades into a digital revolution, which has initiated transformative changes in the ways that knowledge is generated, shared, discovered, and preserved. It is likely not an exaggeration to say that we have not seen this degree of change in the knowledge ecosystem since the print revolution of the 15th and 16th centuries.

The nature and scale of change presents existential challenges—and existential opportunities—to libraries. The question right now is how can we best project library and archival values into the emerging digital knowledge ecosystem—that is, into conversations on open knowledge, open science, and open data.

For decades, libraries have had at their core the purchasing, lending, and caring of book and journal collections—and often in analog formats. In many ways, our library brand, professional identity, organizational structures, and systems still map to a book and journal environment.

However, the knowledge ecosystem has greatly changed. The shift we face now is not so much how to map print books and print journals into a licensed e-resources environment, a format shift that dates to the mid-1990s; the question now, I think, is how can books and journals be situated among a larger constellation of vehicles for knowledge sharing. For instance, how do books and journals sit alongside data and code within the knowledge ecosystem?

SV: How do you see these changes playing out in academic libraries? In acquisitions?

GE: The major shift in academic libraries I see is a shift from consumption to creation.

There are a number of ways to think about this shift. At MIT Libraries, our library director Chris Bourg talks about the shift in libraries as having three phases: a shift from library as a "place" (e.g., browsable print collections), to library as a "service" (e.g., licensed e-resources), to library as a "platform" (e.g. interactive and open content, open to computational uses).

Another conceptual model I like is Lorcan Dempsey's "outside-in, inside-out" framework. This model maps out how libraries are not only purchasing agents of collections on behalf of local patrons, but also stewards of the digital assets that our local users produce. In a traditional framework, we understand how libraries purchase content, whether books or journals, and make them available to our local users (i.e., outside-in collections). Now, the shift is to more heavily invest in helping users be creators of content, and our collections are increasingly comprised of local research outputs and related content that we gather locally and then push out to users beyond our local contexts (i.e., inside-out collections). The inside-out collections space includes

open access (OA) collections, data and digital assets, and institutional repository services and content. And archives, of course, have always been in the inside-out space!

How do these shifts play out in acquisitions? For me, I think it means augmenting the traditional procurement work that acquisitions librarians are so expert at—the procurement of the materials that we purchase, by directing more attention to designing workflows to address the challenge of acquiring "inside-out collections."

Last year, at MIT Libraries, we reorganized our acquisitions department by making this conceptual and strategic shift, and renamed the department acquisitions and appraisal, using "appraisal" in the archival sense of lifecycle management. We recently hired our first "acquisitions and appraisal librarian" position. Here is language from the job posting for that position, which captures some of the shifts we are preparing for in acquisitions:

"Together we will advance a broad approach to this work, as we redefine acquisitions work in academic libraries and help shape the future of scholarly communications. Over time, we will actively augment core acquisitions support services by expanding our work in line with the wider library strategic pivot toward 'inside-out collections,' such as OA collections, data acquisitions, digital scholarship and born-digital archives." I am delighted that Kim Maxwell, a crack librarian with two decades of exceptional experience in library acquisitions is leading the new department at MIT Libraries.

SV: What do you think academic libraries need to be doing now to prepare for these changes?

GE: Given the scale of the changes we face in the knowledge ecosystem, I think we need to be reassessing our library and archives operations across all of our activities. One thing to address is the role of print in our collections and services. Although print is relatively less important than it

was in the past, relatively less important does not equate with unimportant. Each library will have to determine how best to right-size print collections in their local operations—and be open to the idea that while print operations will likely continue to trend downward, there will come a point where investments in print remain—and should remain—stable. Print is far from dead as a communication technology, and the best book I have read on this subject is *The Myth of the paperless office* (Sellen and Harper, 2001).

In addition to defining and rightsizing the role of print in their operations, I think academic libraries need to be looking at four distinct areas: professional development, organizational design, budget structures, and assessment.

I am a strong believer in the learning organization approach to organizational culture and leadership, and the crucial element of the learning organization approach is an organizational commitment to learning. Relatedly, I am a big proponent of building incentive structures to encourage staff to be highly intentional—even curatorial—about how they approach their professional development activities. So, speaking for myself, it is a red flag for me if I start to detect that I am falling into a pattern of attending the same conference or event year after year. I encourage my staff to constantly seek out learning opportunities beyond their usual networks. For instance, if you are a librarian who has never attended the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, why not attend one year? Or attend conferences held by the Future of Research Communication and e-Scholarship (FORCE 11) (https://www.force11.org/), the Digital Library Foundation (DLF) (https://www.diglib.org/), or the Association of University Presses (AUPresses) (http://www.aupresses.org/) if you have not done so before. Additionally, if funding is limited, come up with a personal reading list for your own professional development. You could also pick one of the many books that academic librarians and archivists could profit from

reading, say Safiya Nobles' *Algorithms of oppression* or Brynjolfsson and McAfee's *Machine, platform, crowd*, and start a discussion group in your local institutional context. Effective professional development does not have to involve travel or be expensive.

Organizational design is, to me, one of the most underleveraged opportunities for academic libraries to advance OA and open scholarship. I have found over my career that too often we have to work against the organizational charts rather than having organizational structures facilitate emerging work. To help get around this problem at MIT Libraries in regard to OA, we combined our scholarly communications and publishing program with the unit that stewards the collections budget, in order to explicitly place the management of the collections budget under the strategic and operational umbrella of our scholarly communications mission. This organizational shift has greatly facilitated our scholarly communications teams and organizational priority. And I have already discussed how we have reconfigured acquisitions to position it on a growth trajectory.

Similar to organizational design, structuring budgets and assessment programs to align with emerging digital spaces is crucial. Are their budget lines for OA, data, and digital asset management? Are these budgets in the integrated library system (ILS) and incorporated into selector workflows? Are archives, digital collections, and institutional repository operations included in library-wide assessment and reporting?

In a big picture way, I have seen library organizational design, budgets, and assessment programs to be heavily weighted to procurement activities—based on the conceptual framing, or fallacy you might say, that collections are limited to what we purchase (i.e., "outside-in collections"). I think redesigning organizational charts, budgets, and assessment programs to advance open knowledge is the next step forward for academic libraries.

SV: Does the type of academic library matter—whether a research university library or community college library—in how they prepare for these changes?

GE: I have worked in a number of different libraries, and what I have found is that every library is unique. Even among the Research 1 Carnegie classification academic libraries for which I have worked, there has been a great deal of variety in local priorities, cultures, and capacity. Undoubtedly, there are distinctions in mission, focus, and resources among different types of libraries. What I can say is this: every library has a role to play in projecting the values of libraries and archives into the emerging knowledge ecosystem. Libraries and librarians in multiple and wide-ranging contexts are, I think, committed to a set of professional values: democratic access to information, privacy, responsible stewardship, diversity, and equity.

We can all learn from each other. Here is an example: I recently attended the Digital Initiatives Symposium, which Dr. Theresa Byrd (university librarian, University of San Diego) hosts annually at the University of San Diego. This event brings together representatives from consortia, large academic libraries, mid-sized state libraries, museums, federal agencies, and community colleges. I was struck at how generative the conversations were when librarians from multiple contexts came together to explore ideas from multiple vantage points.

For instance, I think the Oberlin Group of liberal arts colleges have advanced, in the creation of the Lever Press, one of the most exciting OA initiatives in recent years. Our colleagues in community college contexts play a vital role—and do so at scale—of providing education to extraordinarily diverse student populations. Public libraries are experts in community engagement. Despite the differences across libraries, I see incredible potential when the library community comes together—across library types—to collaborate and project shared library

values into the larger world. This is so important that I actively seek out opportunities to listen and learn from librarians working in different organizational contexts.

SV: Stepping outside of libraries for a moment, how do you see these changes affecting scholarly communications as a whole?

GE: Those of us who work in libraries often talk about the digital revolution and think about how we can transition our mission and values into digital spaces. But I think it is helpful to think about the digital shift with more granularity than simply a move to digital spaces. In his recent book *Sharing: Crime against capitalism* (2017), Matthew David writes: "Two digital revolutions do in fact coexist, one enabling the technical locking down of access to and distribution of content, the other allowing the breakdown of these barriers. This double digital revolution can be seen in the recent history of libraries, as well as the wider domain of online information selling and sharing" (p.12).

I like the framing of a dual digital revolution—as I think it captures the Janus-faced nature of some of our work in libraries, and in particular acquisitions. For instance, acquisitions departments are deeply engaged in workflows related to "locking down" and controlling access to information, which is, basically, all of the workflows around licensed e-resources management, from procurement to authentication. But we are also engaged in acquiring and promoting open content, including our OA collections, institutional repositories, data, web-archiving, and so forth.

When I look at the scholarly communications landscape as a whole through the frame of the double digital revolution, the opportunity I see is for those of us working in non-commercial spaces—including libraries, archives, scholarly societies, museums, and university publishers—

to work far more closely together to realize our shared values and mission to advance knowledge creation and information sharing. Too often, stakeholders in the non-commercial knowledge ecosystem work in silos from each other and are thereby not optimally positioned to advance our missions, either individually or collectively. When I look across the scholarly communications landscape, I see tremendous opportunities for libraries to work much more closely with our colleagues in cognate fields, particularly university presses. It would be terrific to have more librarians attend the AUPresses annual meeting, for instance.

SV: MIT Libraries has been recognized for its "groundbreaking license agreement" with the Royal Society of Chemistry (MIT Libraries, 2018). What did you learn from these license negotiations?

GE: I think one of the main lessons we learned is the degree to which OA conversations are now mainstream. We have a negotiations team, which handles our major procurement negotiations, and in the past, these conversations would focus on topics such as price, authentication, perpetual access rights—the usual set of issues that are part of e-resource procurement. Now, however, we are looking for ways to incorporate our values of openness and OA into license negotiations. This requires expertise in new areas: for instance, having familiarity with the pros and cons of article processing charges (APC)based OA models, and the ability to generate metrics on faculty-produced research.

Another lesson from these negotiations is the degree to which non-profit organizations committed to research—for instance, libraries, scholarly societies, and university presses—can and should experiment together to find sustainable business models to advance open research.

SV: Any last comments that you would like to share with the readers of *Serials Review*?

GE: It is a great time to be working in libraries and archives, and it is a great time to be working in acquisitions. Indeed, acquisitions librarians can play a critical role in shaping scholarly communications—and I believe the way they can do this is by incorporating archival methods and work into acquisitions and appraisal work and building the capacity for digital asset management and OA workflows.

SV: Thank you for taking the time to discuss this important topic.

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