Industry Leader Interview: Katina Strauch

Katina Strauch will be known to many of you for her significant contributions to academic libraries over the years. She is currently Assistant Dean for Technical Services and Collection Development at Addlestone Library, College of Charleston, editor of the publication Against the Grain and organizer of the Charleston Conference.

Katina, thank you for agreeing to this interview.

Through your industry leading publications and conferences, you have been involved in the business of academic libraries for more than 30 years. The last few years have seen tremendous change, from the availability and delivery of content to the role of the library itself. Can we first start by asking what do you see as the greatest challenge facing academic libraries in the coming years? Are libraries meeting these challenges and what impacts do you see these challenges having on libraries in the years to come?

I think the greatest challenge facing libraries is remaining viable in the 21st century networked, competitive world of information delivery. Whereas once we had a near-monopoly on information, that is no longer the case. Librarians are trying to meet the challenges through all sorts of innovations, staff restructuring, and new services. The library has always been a place for study and reflection. Now with remote access and delivery of all sorts of information, the library is still a place for study but also more of a community gathering place. This is all complicated by the fact that we are still receiving much in print as well as a tremendous amount of material in electronic formats and the staff we have to deal with it has not expanded and will not expand in the future.

The amount of content in electronic format - particularly eBooks and eTextbooks has exploded. This trend will continue to have major implications for libraries as they make this transition -- what steps would you recommend libraries take in order to efficiently adapt?

Libraries must continue to operate in both the print and electronic environments. They cannot ignore either format. But the focus in the past has been on print resources. I think this focus has to shift. We should continue to process print materials, but less time and energy should be spent on these materials. Electronic formats must be evaluated and acquired or leased, unique legacy collections must be digitized, and metadata indexing is more and more essential in locating needed materials in the virtual environment.

Individual eBook and eTextbook acquisition or leasing is still a seriously problematic area. Perhaps the key issue deals with ownership versus leasing of eBooks. If the eBook does not reside on the library’s platform, the library cannot control the stability of the content of the eBook or guarantee its archival protection. I know that publishers can
remove eBooks or change content or editions as they wish. With aggregated eBooks from hundreds of publishers, the aggregator’s licensing of content is crucial and the library community has been kept in the dark about the particulars of these individual agreements. This is not good for the industry or for the stability of electronic content.

Librarians have been and must continue to be vocal, indeed adamant, with publishers about changes/issues in need of solutions. I am happy to see that many publishers, aggregators, and the like are implementing advisory boards as, together, librarians and publishers, aggregators, etc., can cooperate toward the mutual benefit of our users. But I think we need more transparency regarding agreements with publishers. I also think that librarians should partner with more end user groups or faculty groups in order to demonstrate the fact that this is not just a library issue; it is an issue for the good of us all. The bigger the group protesting or discussing these issues, the better.

At the same time, publishers are producing databases of multimedia content, such as image banks, protocols, video and audio files. What do you think the future is for these resources? Will libraries want to buy them? How do you think they complement eBooks and other resources the library holds?

I am amazed at all the new types of products – databases, books, journals -- both electronic and print – and new types of innovative resources like image banks, protocols, data banks, video and audio files, etc., etc., that are entering the market daily, and I could almost say hourly. It truly is an exciting time to be in the industry! Yes, I think that libraries will buy many of these innovative resources. Because materials budgets are getting cut in many cases or not increased, I think that usage statistics on resources that libraries are already paying for will be scrutinized more and more heavily. In order to remain innovative, libraries are going to have to let some of the lesser-used resources go by the wayside. We have been seeing a downturn in book purchasing for several decades and this will continue, perhaps to be replaced by patron-driven acquisitions or even leasing of books for short-term use or even book chapter purchasing. On the serials side, there is a movement for more customization of journals and books in specific databases. I think that publishers and aggregators will have to bow to this desire, if not in the short term, in the long term. I also think that the Consortial “deal” will have to morph as well as budgets become stretched to the limit. Perhaps we will have “customized deals” or pay-for-use services or specific (perhaps increased) charges for Interlibrary Loans?

What impacts do you think Open Access is having on libraries, for example, with regards to collection development and integration into workflows and systems? And what economic implications, if any, do you think Open Access may have on Journal purchase models for libraries?

I think that Open Access is a great concept, but I think it ignores economic facts. It costs someone or some government or corporate body money to disseminate information.
It’s a matter of how to shift the money around. Making something Open Access means that somewhere someone has to pay the expenses.

What I would submit that OA has done is, frankly, to muddy the waters as to what is accurate information. We have several versions of the same article and it is often difficult to know what is the final version. This may not make that much of a difference in some disciplines but it does in others, and I have to say as a librarian that I find this very untidy and unsettling for future generations. In addition, OA materials may advertise that they are OA but frequently they are only partially OA. My staff has even advocated removing some OA titles from our catalog because the URLs are not reliable in many cases. I am not sure what will happen with OA but I think that libraries run the risk of being disenfranchised as financial agents if they give up the purchase of information.

*Given these and other innovations in content delivery, what strategies would you recommend to libraries to communicate the availability and accessibility of these new online resources? How should publishers help the library to adapt?*

Marketing of the library’s resources and facilitating discovery of those resources are the new elephants in the room. Public services and reference librarians are trying all sorts of new approaches from social networking, chats with patrons, Twitter feeds, peer reference, and there is always some new approach to try if not today, then tomorrow. There are more and more Discovery tools – commercial and open source – out there. The issues are:

a) how sustainable will these approaches be over time?

b) will patrons/students use them? and

c) what’s the next “new new thing” going to be?

I know that beta testing is expensive and time-consuming, but one has to wonder if more publisher/aggregator/librarian/end user/student/faculty collaboration could be advisable. Perhaps some sort of pre-testing platform or format? Though end users can be nebulous and changeable, I would advocate involving more of them in these conversations. After all, they are who we are trying to reach. Seems like I always hear, “this is what our students want,” but I hear it from the librarian not the student.

*An article featured in Against the Grain on April 28th spoke about how Penrose Library (University of Denver) planned to return just 20% of its printed materials to its newly refurbished library. Do you think that such a move will become the norm as libraries adapt to today’s digital world? Or is this a “one off”?

I don’t think it is a “one off” because more than one library has taken this approach as print becomes less attractive in our virtual environment. But several other libraries have*
tried to do this and backed down from the decision because of objections from patrons, largely faculty. Offsite storage obviously has its own set of issues, but if the materials are deemed worth keeping, offsite storage beats deep sixing them. I think this decision will depend on many factors -- the space needs of the library or the campus, the institutional culture and mission, the faculty makeup, types of courses that are offered, availability of the material elsewhere, and, finally, how print holds up as a viable format over time, etc. One thing's for sure, nothing much becomes the “norm” in academe or in libraries these days, does it?

Do you think that there will be more use of social networking sites to deliver scholarly materials or an integration of social media into content delivery platforms? Are you seeing such trends in your own institution?

This was the subject of our research in The Charleston Observatory last year. For those who used social media tools in their research, the most popular applications involved collaborative authoring (62.7 percent), conferencing (48.3 percent), and scheduling meetings (41.0 percent). Most popular tools used in professional research settings are mainstream: Skype, GoogleDocs, Twitter and YouTube. (The Charleston Advisor, v.13#1, pp 65-66). We found that researchers by and large did not use social media to communicate scholarly information; they used it more for personal or social matters. I think there are so many more scholarly platforms that are focused on a specific subject area and are designed to bring together professionals of like interests. I think social networking is great but I do not see it entering the scholarly space any time soon.

In terms of digital content or delivery, what is the most interesting research project you have heard of recently and why should libraries take notice of it?

There is so much innovation going on that I am not sure I can single out just one project! There are all the new unique next-generation iterations of the traditional book and journal formats. I am interested to see how JoVE (Journal of Visualized Experiments), as well as it seems like countless new eTextbook and eBook models will develop. I am intrigued that a group of publishers started the ORCID (Open Researcher & Contributor ID) initiative to tackle name ambiguity in journals articles. We have written about both JoVE and ORCID in past issues of Against the Grain (www.against-the-grain.com/). I am also interested in the collaboration between JISC, the University of Oxford, OCLC, and a partnership with UNC-Charlotte on the project called the JISC Visitors and Residents: What Motivates Engagement with the Digital Information Environment? This study will explore individuals’ types of engagement with electronic technologies. http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/projects/visitorsandresidents.aspx
And finally, what books are you reading at the moment and are they in print or electronic form? If they are electronic, where did you get them? Which device are you using to read them?

I have three books that I am dabbling with right now! The first is by the retired dean of our department of English, Nan Morrison, *The History of the College of Charleston, 1936-2008*. Fascinating as I have lived through some of those years here at the College! I am finishing a delightful mystery (mysteries are my favorites) that I started when we returned from Russia called *The Winter Queen* by Boris Akunin, and today I just picked up a charming little mystery by Allen Bradley called *The Weed that Strings the Hangman’s Bag*.

I don’t like to read books on a device. I have tried it and it just doesn’t work for me. My husband, however, who is a voracious reader, loves to read on the iPad. And I do enjoy reading the *Wall Street Journal* on my iPhone – less paper to fold and mess with.