Never waste a good crisis

A “good” crisis

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Abstract

Purpose – COVID-19 is no different. It presents us with opportunities to accelerate some changes we may already have in play, to either challenge some long-held assumptions or to think more creatively about new ways of working.

Design/methodology/approach – Crises almost always bring to light not only threats but also opportunities, including a chance to reflect and learn. The author of this study is never the one to waste the opportunity that externally driven change creates to learn from what she has been witnessing and to accelerate change that she was already planning, to stop some things and start others which more effectively align with the vision of the organisation.

Findings – This paper charts a course through some of the author's thinking and actions in the digital information world over the last 30 years. Partly it is a story of “the more things change the more they stay the same” and partly a story of “overnight change which has been decades in the making”. It ends with the author's thoughts on two opportunities that she believes we cannot afford to ignore.

Originality/value – This paper charts a course through some of the author's thinking and actions in the digital information world over the last 30 years. Its premise is that COVID-19 creates a fertile ground for library and information professionals to grasp the opportunities before them to realise aspirations which have been long held.

Keywords Change, Open access, Workforce, Crisis, COVID-19, FAIR

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Introduction

Crises almost always bring to light not only threats but also opportunities, including a chance to reflect and learn. I am never the one to waste the opportunity that externally driven change creates to learn from what I am witnessing and to accelerate change I was already planning, to stop some things and start others which more effectively align with the vision of the organisation. COVID-19 is no different. It presents us with opportunities to accelerate some changes we may already have in play to either challenge some long-held assumptions or to think more creatively about new ways of working.

This paper charts a course through some of my thinking and actions in the digital information world over the last 30 years. Partly it is a story of “the more things change the more they stay the same” and partly a story of “overnight change which has been decades in the making”. It ends with my thoughts on two opportunities that I believe we cannot afford to ignore.

Background

In 1990, I spoke at the first Biennial ALIA Conference on a topic I cared deeply about: “Creating an organisational culture which is responsive to change and innovative[sic] is essential if libraries are to meet the challenges of the 90's” (O'Brien, 1990, p. 636). Little did I realise that change, sometimes dramatic and disruptive, but always constant, would be a hallmark of my career in the world of universities and their libraries.

At the time, I was witnessing the birth of Australia's Academic and Research Network (AARNet). I was exceptionally excited by the potential for networked digital technologies to re-shape the world of libraries and of scholarly communication more broadly. Was this our opportunity to revolutionise the traditional role of the library and the ways in which we exercised our stewardship of knowledge to bring information to people who most need it,

This paper in this Special Issue was specifically invited because of the expertise of the author to respond to the issues raised in the Editorial at <https://doi.org/10.1108/LM-04-2020-143>. The paper is part of the Issue of the Worst Case Scenarios and the Virus. Each paper has been formally reviewed and the author has responded to the comments in the customary manner.

when they most need it, and to create positive change in themselves, others or the world around them? Yet, as a wise colleague once told me several years later, universities, as long-lived institutions, are remarkably change resistant. Also, little did I then appreciate the power of the existing policy and business norms of the scholarly information system to reframe the digital opportunities before us.

The fundamental premise of my presentation was that in a changing world we must create change to thrive, not simply cope with change or capitalise on change but be proactive in shaping the future we wish to see (Barrett, 1985). I talked of the critical role of a leader and the examples they set through their actions, of the need to have a vision which focuses on the future and a responsibility for creating it and of valuing openness and a commitment to innovation, flexibility and adaptability. “Structure, leadership and culture work together to empower individuals and encourage problem-solving and enterprising skills and risk taking” (O’Brien, 1990, p. 633).

Several years later, I had the privilege of working with three other colleagues on a report for the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) to “assist university librarians to address issues involving the rapidly emerging computer networking technology and its likely effects on the library sector” (Mays *et al.*, 1993, p. 3). Our first recommendation was that universities implement open information policies to ensure we do not create “information havens” and “information have nots”. We noted that “the information creation, validation, access and use process has changed, yet there has been little recognition of the significance of this new electronic information environment in the policy process at an international, national and campus level” (p. 9). It proposed that access to information is a basic individual right, only qualified by other people’s rights to privacy.

So perhaps unsurprisingly, I took an interest in both how we might advance open and F.A.I.R. (Findable, Accessible, interoperable and Reusable) access to research outputs and to data collected by government agencies, by leveraging the power of the digital. In 2015, I worked with some inspiring colleagues from business and industry to form the Open Data Institute Queensland (ODIQ), as a node of ODI UK. Its purpose was to assist government agencies to understand the value of the data they hold; how it might support research, innovation, impact and improved policy-making and to encourage them to put in place the policy, skills and infrastructure to realise this opportunity.

A year later, under the auspices of the Universities Australia Deputy Vice Chancellors (Research) Committee, I chaired a cross sector working group, through my role as Chair of the CAUL Research Committee, to develop an Australian policy statement on access to research outputs. At the time, we found that whilst we had seen the digital information world flourish, scholarly communication had seen a shift to licensing contracts and pay walls. . . .digital havens and digital have nots. There was growing international pressure to develop a sustainable approach to ensure rapid open access to the world’s research outputs, recognising the contribution this makes to future research and to innovation. Research outputs, whether data, software, methods or publications, are critical inputs to future research and underpin innovation. Yet the financial flows (Lawson *et al.*, 2015) underpinning scholarly publishing were complex and opaque. As journal subscriptions continued to rise in cost, we had simultaneously seen a growth in demand for article processing charges (APCs) to make publications open and a growing publisher interest in publishing accompanying data. At the same time, institutions were seeking to maintain open access repositories of their researchers’ work.

ODIQ served its purpose. It assisted in elevating the awareness and maturity of the open data conversation, not only within Queensland but also nationally. Queensland adopted an open data policy, and we are now on the cusp of enacting federal data sharing and transparency legislation. Unfortunately, whilst the F.A.I.R. working group managed to develop the Policy Statement on F.A.I.R. Access to Australian Research Outputs [1], the sector was dealing with major national university policy change (which still continues apace!), so this work created little real impact with key influencers and decision-makers in the world of Australian higher education.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a real-life and real-time example of the need to drive research into impact and innovation as rapidly as is feasible. In doing so, it has illuminated both how far and how little we have progressed in transforming scholarly communication and how well we have, or have not, preserved the right of citizens to have access to information. Will it prove to be the catalyst that accelerates some of the changes we have been seeking but have yet to see come to fruition? Can we use this crisis to help shape the future we wish to see?

There is little doubt that the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies, breaking down real or perceived barriers to adoption and burying scared cows. Few would doubt that some of these changes are now here to stay [2].

For many librarians, “digital first” has been our mantra for some time as we sought to maximise access to scholarly resources for our students and researchers whilst our budgets shrank. So, it was with a wry smile that I heard the leader of one of our oldest and most esteemed global libraries say that COVID-19 provided a catalyst for a “digital first” [3] approach and for the need to be innovative [4].

The research community, and those engaged in scholarly communication, were not only impacted but also they rose to the challenge, leveraging systems and processes, which have been put in place over many years and accelerating others.

New research can take months if not years to be published, if it is published at all. As Barbour (2020) notes, we have seen overnight changes which have been decades in the making. Barbour explains that during the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS CoV) outbreak in 2003, only 8% of the articles written about SARS were accepted for publication and only about 7% published before the crisis was over. During COVID-19, researchers quickly re-oriented their research to meet public health needs with more than 42,703 scholarly articles, 3,105 clinical trials, 422 datasets, 272 patents and 757 policy document and 156 grants appearing by 1st June 2020 (Science *et al.*, 2020). We have never witnessed a topic accelerating so rapidly as an area of research outputs.

The research has moved faster than anyone would have thought possible with a problem focus driving many scholarly publishers to make articles available instantly via open access, at least temporarily. By July, there had been almost 7000 COVID-19 papers published on two preprint sites with millions of downloads.

Data have also rapidly been shared with initiatives such as the formation of the COVID-19 Open Research Dataset (CORD-19) [5], the Research Data Alliance accelerating development of the RDA COVID-19 recommendations and guidelines for data sharing [6] and the Open Data Institute establishing a COVID-19 research stream project [7]. In countries where anti-scientific approaches are in play and collection and access to COVID-19 related data have been discouraged, we are seeing the stark impact of those decisions.

Whilst rapid publishing has the potential to compromise research integrity without adequate peer review, in reality we have seen the importance of openness as a counterpoint for mitigating this risk and encouraging more immediate peer scrutiny. A study on the efficacy of hydroxychloroquine published in the Lancet in May was rapidly retracted as more than 180 researchers questioned inconsistencies and demanded access to the full dataset. A second paper based on data from the same company was similarly retracted (Davey, 2020). This reaffirms the value of making data open as part of the research process if we are to promote reproducibility and research integrity.

Yet it has not all been good news. With the closure of many libraries, the internet archive established a temporary National Emergency Library to give researchers and students access to books which were inaccessible. They immediately found themselves being sued by major publishing houses for infringement of copyright. This surely must cause us to question

the fitness for purpose of our legal frameworks surrounding intellectual property, copyright and fair use (Rimmer, 2020).

I believe the real opportunities arising from COVID-19 are twofold. The first is to re-invigorate the push for open and F.A.I.R. access to research outputs. As Barbour (2020) notes, “the tools are in place, and this pandemic has made a compelling case for open publishing. Though there are initiatives across the globe, there is still a lack of coordinated, long-term, high-level commitment and investment, especially by governments, to support key open policies and infrastructure”. Lucy Montgomery (2020) notes two major milestones we have achieved this year that provide hope for systemic change. The first is the consortium of research funders involved with Plan S announced that researchers would be required to retain copyright in their work with all work open immediately upon publication. Second, 53% of DOI-assigned articles published last year were open access.

Surely given what we have witnessed during COVID-19, now is the time to reinvigorate the push for open and F.A.I.R. access to research outputs.

The second opportunity is a chance for us to refresh and reinvigorate our profession. COVID-19 has rapidly accelerated the shift to digital ways of working, another overnight change that has been decades in the making. Suddenly online consultations, seminars and meetings have become the norm. Sacred cows were buried. The World Economic Forum has recently released its Future of Job Report 2020 (World Economic Forum, 2020), which notes that digital change will remain unabated and potentially accelerate, that automation coupled with COVID-19 will create a “double-disruption” scenario for workers and that the window of opportunity to reskill and upskill workers has become shorter. The need for skills in critical thinking, analysis, problem-solving and self-management: active learning, stress tolerance and flexibility, will rise in prominence.

Universities globally are feeling the financial impact of COVID-19 with each day stories of redundancies and voluntary separations to manage the budget shortfall. Now, perhaps more than ever before, we need to grasp the opportunity to accelerate the shift to a library and information profession that sees change as an opportunity, that values innovation, creativity and active learning and that evidences flexibility, adaptability and resilience.

Conclusion

I hold great optimism that COVID-19 will create a fertile ground for library and information professionals to grasp the opportunities before them to realise aspirations, which have been long held. If we genuinely believe that access to information is a basic individual right, only qualified by other people’s rights to privacy; if we are committed for ensuring our profession maximises its value to research and scholarship by being future focused, responsive to change, innovative, flexible and adaptable, then now is the time to grasp the opportunities before us.

Notes

1. <https://www.F.A.I.R.-access.net.au/F.A.I.R.-statement>
2. See for example Davies (2020)
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gn6axaPu1zM>
4. <https://cord19.aws/>
5. <https://www.rd-alliance.org/group/rda-COVID-19-rda-COVID-19-omics-rda-covid-19-epidemiology-rda-COVID-19-clinical-rda-COVID-19-0>
6. <https://theodi.org/topic/covid-19/>
7. See for example Pilkington (2020).

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