Column Title: Perspectives on Public Services

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This column examines advances in public services internal and external to libraries. The focus is on how public services, such as instruction and education, programming, research consulting, and circulation, evolve and impact users. The strength of the column is its broad, international focus and contributors are encouraged to explore issues and recent advances in public services relevant to their geographical region, as well as the larger, global audience. Interested authors are invited to submit proposals and articles to the column editor at falconea1@nku.edu.

Liaison Librarianship in Shiny Packages: An Exploration of Product Ownership in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

This column investigates the emerging role of the product owner (PO) -- an individual tasked with ensuring that a specific service meets the needs of users -- in academic libraries. It explores the PO role at the intersections of functional specialization, public services, and technical services, as well as from critical perspectives on gendered labor in librarianship. By examining how our library used the PO model to address pressing problems with our library's institutional repository (IR), we demonstrate the value that the PO approach can bring to improving library products, especially when the PO is appropriately positioned to advocate for user needs. We also interrogate the overlap in responsibilities between the PO and liaison librarian and argue that the role of the product owner is a rebranding of the liaison librarianship model in an effort to make the emotional and relationship labor more masculinized. By emphasizing traditionally masculine work such as technology and innovation, the PO model allows libraries to market these

specialized liaison librarian roles in ways that are more prestigious and aligned with corporate culture, while also downplaying traditionally feminized library work, such as service.

Introduction

Librarianship is frequently divided into two halves: public services (patron-facing work) and technical services (behind-the-scenes work). While service remains at the core of what libraries do, the emergence and adoption of digital libraries -- especially digital platforms, services, and collections, whether homegrown or vended -- has created a gray area in the middle, of library workers who balance patron needs, technical services requirements, and even software development best practices to support the needs of users in the online environment. These individuals assume a variety of titles; like repository manager, digital scholarship librarian, or user experience librarian, to name a few.

This type of position can also be understood as a product owner (PO). Broadly defined as individuals who are tasked with ensuring that specific services -- primarily websites, software, and other tools -- meet the needs of users, PO's are responsible for conducting outreach and user testing, liaising with developers, and developing their product or service constantly. Because this approach to product management developed out of software development methodology, it is most readily applicable and understood in the context of digital projects, such as platform development (e.g., institutional repositories or digital collections sites). However, in-person services such as reference desk staffing or technology lending programs also benefit from the PO model, of having a strong vision, data-driven decisions, and user advocacy. The PO is critical to ensuring the service meets the needs of users, but also for serving as a conduit to internal stakeholders, such as technical teams tasked with developing and maintaining the services.

While straddling the divide between technical and public services, the PO is responsible for serving a designated liaison community, building and maintaining relationships with critical stakeholders, monitoring and advocating for user needs, and even managing the collection of content within their product (Browndorf & Seale, 2020). Despite the usefulness of this model and its implementation in a number of academic libraries, little library scholarship exists on the topic of product ownership, specifically from a critical lens. This column investigates the role of the PO and seeks to broaden the limited discussion of product ownership within the library literature to date. It explores the position of PO at the intersections of functional specialization, public services, and technical services, as well as from critical perspectives on gendered labor in librarianship.

Literature Review

The subject librarian model has long been the dominant paradigm for public services in academic libraries. A subject librarian is expected to have (or to develop) expertise in a particular academic discipline, to develop and maintain the library's collections in that discipline, and to serve patrons needing assistance in that discipline. Historically, this classic service model has been heavily focused on print collections. For at least the past twenty years, however, scholars have noted the changing nature of subject librarian work, as electronic publishing and access have disrupted libraries' traditional print-based operations (Pinfield, 2001). The changing nature of scholarship has presented a number of new problems for researchers and students, and as early as 2001 Pinfield noted that the subject librarian model needed to expand in order to ensure that the library remained "user-centered" (p. 38). Some changes Pinfield noted include a greater emphasis on instruction, advocacy, virtual reference, and e-resource collections work (p. 33).

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Besides expanding subject librarians' roles, many academic libraries have also responded by creating a new kind of liaison: the functional specialist, whose expertise is not in subject content but rather in tools, methods and practical domains that matter to our patrons. Example areas of functional specialization include text mining and analysis, geographic information systems (GIS) software, data visualization, and copyright law. These positions reflect the changing nature of the information environment and a shift to digital scholarship. At many institutions, staffing limitations do not allow for the creation of entirely new positions. Instead, subject librarians have expanded their knowledge and duties to include areas of functional specialization (either formally or informally), in what Eddy and Solomon refer to as a "hybrid library liaison service model" (2017, p. 121). Examples might include the economics librarian who also specializes in data visualization or the literature librarian who also consults on matters of text mining.

Hoodless and Pinfield (2018) explored the motivations for retaining or abandoning the subject librarian models in favor of functional specialist models among university libraries in the UK. Libraries that had moved to a primarily functional-based model had done so in order to ensure consistency of service and to make a hard break from previous, problematic subject-based models (p. 349 - 50). In many cases, the approach of piling more and more responsibilities onto subject librarians had become unsustainable, prompting a drastic shift. Conversely, libraries that had retained their subject librarian models did so because their universities' teaching faculty were happy with the existing approach; that is, where subject librarians had strong and productive relationships with their liaison departments, the model was more likely to survive (p. 351). Notably, Hoodless and Pinfield found that all their respondents' public services models included elements of both subject and functional approaches; "such a distinction," they wrote, "is in fact an over-simplification" (p. 355). These findings easily translate to the US academic library context. Libraries now have one foot firmly planted in the print environment and the other in the digital, sustaining the familiar while also innovating to keep up with patrons' evolving needs. Thus, public services work is necessarily a nuanced role, with combinations of functional and subject specialties that emphasize the needs of users.

Surrounding these shifts in libraries' public services models is a larger, profession-wide conversation about the role that crisis and crisis narratives play in shaping our work. Libraries always seem to be in a state of crisis. The concept of the "exceptional present" is a tool frequently leveraged by library administrators advocating for changes in both the type of work assigned to employees as well as how that work is accomplished (Drabinski, 2016). Browndorf and Seale (2020) observe the recent imperatives to rebrand and reinvent liaison librarianship in order to maintain relevance in a changing academic environment. Extending Drabinski's argument, they attribute this problem to the fact that liaison librarians are viewed as feminized labor, in "a model that emphasizes teaching, listening, and service—professional attributes characteristic of feminized labor" (p. 12). This is contrasted with the functional specialist, "at least those in highly valued technology-focused positions," who serve as consulting experts, "while the liaison aids the connection of the faculty to the university's priorities" (Browndorf and Seale, p. 28). In other words, there is "either big, flashy, masculine librarianship, which focuses on technology and innovation, or small, banal, sometimes invisible, and thereby unimportant librarianship, which is one step away from domestic labor. Liaison work, within this will to reimagine it, is, and can only ever be, the latter" (p. 19).

This feminization and consequent devaluation of their work has led to libraries and librarians seeking external measures of prestige and, with that, power. Mirza and Seale (2019) articulate how "academic librarianship professionalization efforts emphasize credentialing, either within librarianship through the MLS or within higher education through other advanced degrees," as well as through a masculinization of librarianship (p. 258). This effort is most clearly demonstrated through emphases on technology, innovation, and disruption, all of which are gendered terms that are connected with masculinity and prestige (Mirza and Seale, p. 257). Browndorf and Seale (2020) further echo this point, affirming that associating liaison librarianship with "information technology, thereby masculinizing it... provides a single solution to the complex problem of proving libraries' relevance and thus securing funding in an age of austerity" (p. 19). In this attempt to rebrand or even obfuscate the work of library employees, namely that which is emotional

and maintenance-oriented, are efforts to make this critical work “seem more masculine, more prestigious, more professional” (Mirza & Seale, p. 260-261).

One obvious attempt to masculinize liaison work is the adoption of the product owner (PO) role. The PO is not the library’s representative for a subject, skill, or approach, yet remains a high-profile, public-facing expert on a tool or service, such as an institutional repository. Product ownership is a concept taken from agile software development, particularly the scrum approach to development, which is a flexible approach in which users’ needs are constantly evaluated and prioritized (Schwaber & Sutherland, 2020). While exact duties and responsibilities might vary depending on implementation, PO’s serve as subject matter experts for their products, and guide the overall vision, mission, and direction of a product, which can be a software, a service, or both (Sverrisdottir, Ingason & Jonasson, 2014). As a liaison to users, PO’s are responsible for identifying needs, conducting user experience testing, and communicating with various stakeholders. For products requiring development, PO’s manage the product backlog, which contains feature requests, bug fixes, and other system improvements, as well as performing direct development, resolving issues, and prioritizing work for future sprints, or development efforts. In other words, PO’s serve as a crucial channel between front end users and development, alleviating pressure on developers to communicate with users and stakeholders, and advocating for user needs to developers. Of note: PO’s manage all sorts of tools and services, regardless of where development occurs. Even for third-party vended and purchased solutions (e.g., Springshare products), PO’s can play a vital role in gathering user stories, advocating for needs to management, and liaising with vendors or collaborators to meet user needs.

Product ownership has always existed in librarianship in one form or another: roles like repository manager, production coordinator, or positions that manage user-facing services likely all recognize components of product ownership. The term “product owner,” along with agile development and scrum methodology, have been used in technology-related library projects, including digital collection building, since at least 2008 (e.g., Dulock & Long, 2015; Fernández et al., 2008; Forsman & Hansson, 2014; French et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2013). These changes developed slowly and were adopted from other industries based on their usefulness and track records of success. For example, after hearing of the success of this approach and implementing the phased approach to projects, librarians at Colorado University, Boulder were able to multitask more effectively and complete projects of high priority (Dulock & Long, p. 7).

As academic libraries contend with a backlog of legacy digital projects and products, the role of the product owner is critical: when facing a decision to retire a service, migrate a platform, or develop a new offering, a PO can be the voice of the users (Narlock & Brower, 2021). This function can be understood through the example of institutional repositories (IR’s), which are “systems and service models designed to collect, organize, store, share, and preserve an institution’s digital information or knowledge assets worthy of such investment” (Branin, 2005). Academic institutions launched these systems on campuses worldwide over the past two decades, either via the adoption of open source technology or by purchasing a vended solution, either at the individual institution or through a consortium.

Framed as “essential infrastructure for scholarship in the digital age,” repositories were built with the expectation that faculty, staff, and other stakeholders would flock to the service to deposit their content (Lynch, 2003). The exact implementation of an IR varies widely from institution to institution: the scope of the repository, who manages it, and where it is positioned organizationally are all variables. While some universities designate specific repository managers, such as a scholarly communications librarian, others might choose to integrate it with the university’s official archive. Regardless of how an institution implemented its IR, the optimistic expectations were generally similar across the higher education landscape: that IR’s would allow researchers to make their outputs widely available, simultaneously battling rising costs within scholarly communications and raising the institution’s profile.

However, as articulated by Dorothea Salo (2008), the “Build it and they will come” approach was wholly insufficient. Repositories heavily employed library jargon that was foreign and uninviting to campus partners. Moreover, as IR’s struggled to gain recognition with their target users and grappled with concerns

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of trust and open science, repositories failed to respond to changing user needs and basic expectations; problems ranging from user interfaces that lacked critical functionalities like drag-and-drop upload, all the way through to linked data harvesting for automatic population of repositories have all spurred users to find alternatives. Moreover, repositories have been forced to contend with:

- Restricted financial resources to support digitization for faculty who straddle the analog and digital realms;
- Limited support from internal library colleagues, especially with limited recognition and adoption from campus faculty members;
- Inconsistent and incomplete metadata from self-deposit;
- Competition from a growing number of discipline-specific repositories as well as more user-friendly general repositories that do not connect with institutional repositories.

Despite these challenges, IRs have remained prevalent in academic libraries. As a problematic service with conflicting expectations and many opportunities for improvement, the IR is exactly the kind of product that could benefit from the specialized attention of the PO model.

Understanding the position of product owner at the intersections of public services, technical services, and liaison librarianship, specifically when considering the use of crisis narratives and concerns around feminized labor, is a critical gap in the literature: while the PO role has been in librarianship by name since at least 2008, a comparison with the other roles within the library is notably missing. This understanding is critical not only because these positions exist within a historical context of service and because libraries can benefit from learning that history, but also because, otherwise, issues that have plagued librarianship could be carried forward unintentionally. In order to fully interrogate the relationship between subject and functional librarianship and the role of the PO, we examine the implementation of this approach at our institution.

Case Study

At the University of Notre Dame's Hesburgh Libraries, consortial development of an institutional repository began in an open-source community in 2012. The earliest goals of the product envisioned it as a unified digital library platform that would provide a single location for researchers to share their scholarly work, research outputs, and research data, as well as for the libraries to provide access to digitized rare and archival holdings. This overly inclusive vision meant that internal development had a broad scope for implementing features and was guided by various technical leads, significantly impacted by personnel turnover. Development continued in a sporadic fashion, often aligning at the intersection of "What is easy?" and "What is needed?" as technical staff continued growing the open source code. This meant that development included the minimum components of an institutional repository, minimal support for digital collections, and other partially developed features. While our repository did a lot of things, it did few of them well.

During this time, the Hesburgh Libraries also began exploring the product owner approach to stewarding large technical products. This approach has been in use since 2017 (Wu, Guimaraes, & Wang, 2020). While it is now applied to all of our critical products, both those that are purchased or licensed as well as those that are internally developed, the role of the PO grew organically at Hesburgh Libraries. The first PO's were appointed to lead a massive migration and redesign of the library website (Harden & Ajamie, 2021). These individuals were upskilled from their current positions and had their position descriptions modified to include the new responsibilities. After the success of their work, and after library administration saw the

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clear benefits of designating user advocates with a long-term goal for the service, other potential PO's were identified in the organization. These were individuals who already worked closely with the target demographic and were experts in their fields. These individuals were appointed to the role of PO of products with varying responsibilities from minor (e.g., reporting bugs to a vendor) to major (e.g., managing a product backlog, guiding developers, conducting user testing, performing outreach). The IR received numerous product owners over the years, with the most current PO's appointed in May 2019. These particular individuals were chosen because of their experiences with digital preservation, outreach, and collection management. While not formally trained as liaison librarians or archivists, each PO was familiar with these areas as well due to their engagement in professional spheres.

Prior to appointment of POs, the IR was undervalued and underutilized, and had few internal champions. With myriad problems plaguing the system, including the need to support both digital collections as well as scholarly outputs, the PO's set about revitalizing the system (Narlock & Brower, 2021). This necessitated a wide variety of tactics designed to improve usability of the system, all focused on maintaining current -- and securing new -- champions of the system. In particular, it is worth highlighting the importance of outreach in connecting with and supporting campus partners to raise the institutional profile; thinking critically about patron needs and implementing changes to support a wide variety of users; and evaluating fit of content to ensure the best experience for users as well as the long-term success of the product.

The work of raising the institutional profile is clearly demonstrated by the work of the PO's in supporting the University of Notre Dame's Graduate School. As long-time users of the IR to make electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs) accessible, as well as key conduits to graduate students, the Graduate School's support was critical. Over the course of several meetings between the PO's and stakeholders at the School, it quickly became clear that the administrative software that connected to the repository was of critical importance to their daily operations. However, personnel changes over the years meant that the tool had fallen into a state of disrepair as competing priorities had siphoned off developer support. By prioritizing work to improve basic functionality of the system, the PO's satisfied the needs of a critical campus partner while raising the institutional profile of both the repository and the Libraries. In achieving this aim, the POs' work mirrors that of other liaison librarians.

The PO's were also tasked with thinking critically about patron needs and implementing changes to support a wide variety of users. In addition to the Graduate School administrators and other "behind the scenes" users, the repository must also appeal to purely front-end users, such as faculty researchers and graduate students. These individuals access and download content for their teaching, research, or personal interests, usually discovering the materials through direct links or a search engine. However, as new features had been added to the repository over time, some functionalities had begun to contradict others, introducing more confusion than clarity. For example, the IR allowed for records to be created without attaching any files. This could occur for a number of reasons, including a researcher's need to request a digital object identifier prior to publication, or leveraging the repository to demonstrate a department's scholarly impact by aggregating research in a single location that can be publicly viewed. One such unit on campus was using CurateND as the de facto dataset for all publications related to its work. However, due to publishing agreements, it did not deposit any files to the record, instead referring users to the publisher websites. While of critical importance for our administrative power users, this approach was confusing for front-end users looking for a file to download. Over the course of a couple of months, the PO's were able to redesign the records pages to make it clearer where users could find content when encountering a record-only record.

PO's are also tasked with evaluating fit of content to ensure the best experience for users and the long-term success of the IR. This becomes especially apparent when considering how to identify content that is within -- and equally importantly, *out of* -- scope. Firm boundaries around content scope were essential when consulting with patrons who were interested in using the repository for their teaching and research. While librarians and other service-oriented professionals may be tempted to bend rules to fulfill patrons' desires, ultimately the clearly articulated boundaries are more beneficial in the long run for numerous reasons,

including that the repository can continue to develop appropriately. Such situations also allow the PO's to connect the patrons with a more appropriate service to better meet their needs.

At the Hesburgh Libraries, then, it is critical to note that the PO's are empowered to prioritize maintenance of the work; while none of the above examples are especially innovative or groundbreaking, they provided critical service to campus partners. These changes led to an increase in campus adoption of the IR, which led to increased attention paid to the legacy and aging code base. In their work, the PO's necessarily collaborated with many of their Libraries colleagues, including subject librarians, patron-facing staff, and archivists. Thus, by building bridges among internal and external stakeholders, the PO's were successful in improving their designated product and in creating renewed excitement around it. This result mirrors Hoodless and Pinfield's (2018) finding that when subject librarians had better relationships with their academic departments, the existing liaison model was more likely to survive. Similarly, when a PO is successful in their liaison work, they are more likely to receive funding and support for their tool and service, and to meet the needs of target users.

Implications and Discussion:

The similarities between PO's and liaison librarians is apparent: from building relationships with campus partners, to thinking about patron needs and how to meet them, to raising the institutional profile, subject and functional liaisons and product owners have a significant area of overlap in their responsibilities. To a large extent, the adoption of the product owner role can be understood as a reformulation of the liaison librarian role. Instead of serving as a liaison for a subject or functional specialty, the PO serves as a liaison for critical tools and services for the campus community.

While the role of the PO might still seem new to academic libraries, viewing and understanding the position through the lens of the liaison librarian provides a different perspective on the role. As emphasized by Browndorf and Seale (2020), it is critical to "develop an historical view of the continuities in our work and profession, as well as the ways in which they have shifted and evolved. We must openly and forcefully advocate for the value of gendered service work both historically and currently" (p. 30). Moreover, adopting a historical appreciation for how librarians have conceived of their public services work helps to break out of the circle of crisis, as articulated by Drabinski (2016), and reiterated by Seale and Mirza (2019): "Librarianship's constant state of crisis and search for external markers of prestige can only exist comfortably outside of historical memory and critical analysis" (p. 254). When evaluating the role of the PO from the historical perspective of the subject librarian, it is apparent that the position of product owner is essentially that of a liaison librarian -- in a shiny and masculinized package.

As libraries continue to adopt methodologies and processes from other industries, it is critical that librarians keep a critical eye on the language that our organizations use. For example, while the role of the PO has an unquestionably significant functional overlap with that of the subject librarian, recasting the position to be a "product owner" -- a term from software development industry -- is an attempt to make work that liaison librarians already perform appear more masculine, and thereby more respected. One could make the same connection about libraries' creation of functional specialist roles, which emphasize technology and innovation, work that is more valued than good old-fashioned "service" in an era when higher education is working hard to mimic the corporate world.

The double-edged sword of masculinizing product ownership is that it glorifies a certain type of liaison work, while other types (e.g., subject librarianship) are still feminized. PO's are celebrated for their liaison work, often rewarded with additional resources to continue developing their products and serving the needs of their community, and have a title that is easily demonstrated as valuable within and outside the organization. In a library where the product ownership model is in place, requests for additional liaison librarians or additional subject collection funds would undoubtedly be viewed differently than requests for

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additional product owners. Additionally, outside of the organization, PO's can leverage their titles to transition to other positions. The role of the PO often comes with informal management, user advocacy, and project management skills. While these skills are also necessary for a successful liaison librarian, the PO title conveys them in a sexier, more marketable way. While terms like "product owner" might not be employed throughout academic librarianship, understanding this repackaging provides an opportunity to extend the conversation beyond the new role and view it instead through a historical lens, in order to better advocate not only for the value of our own labor, but also for that of our colleagues.

Conclusions and Future Research

Through this investigation of the product owner methodology at the Hesburgh Libraries, specifically through the case study of institutional repository, and a comparison with the extant roles of the functional and subject liaison, it is clear that the adoption of the role "Product Owner" is an effort to masculinize existing labor and expertise. This column addresses one institutional context; future research could explore a wider analysis of roles like this in academic libraries. While this labor is performed throughout academic libraries, who is identified explicitly as product owners? Do those individuals typically work with information technology offices? How are they perceived in comparison to the more traditional liaison librarian? Who is explicitly recognized for their work? What support, in terms of resources or even structured time, do these individuals receive?

Recognizing and understanding the ways in which our work is repackaged and masculinized in order to attain respect, prestige, or other markers of success is crucial. By critically evaluating the language used to describe librarianship, we can better advocate for ourselves, our colleagues, and the impact of our labor.

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