Exploring digital libraries: Foundations, practice, prospects

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Exploring Digital Libraries: Foundations, Practice, Prospects is a well-organized and timely new book. Soon retiring from her position as an assistant university librarian at the University of Pittsburgh, author Karen Calhoun is an experienced librarian, researcher, and writer with strong credentials in metadata management and digital libraries. She takes a broad and international perspective, having interviewed many distinguished scholars and practitioners and incorporated their views. One chapter reports the results of interviews with nine digital library experts on successful projects in their communities. The experts offer insights as to why some digital libraries are long-lived while others fade into memory. Calhoun reviews a vast amount of literature and includes important topics such as the Semantic Web, linked data, and cloud technology. As Calhoun indicates, the Semantic Web, which provides common formats to facilitate the exchange of data, is growing rapidly and applications built upon it are beginning to appear, but its evolution is still in the early stages. Legal issues such as intellectual property rights and licensing terms and conditions, essential for understanding digital libraries, are also reviewed. Exploring Digital Libraries includes a glossary and an extensive list of references.

Calhoun begins with an excellent overview of the first decade of progress in digital libraries from 1991 to 2001, identifying and discussing significant outcomes in research and practice, describing accomplishments that set dominant themes, and offering a framework for understanding the interplay of different stakeholders. In the second decade (2002 to 2012), the key challenges Calhoun identifies are interoperability, community engagement, intellectual property rights, and sustainability. Two chapters cover digital repositories and hybrid libraries. The discussion of repositories includes discoverability, usage, current positions and roles, cyber-infrastructure, next-generation systems, and data and e-research support. Regarding hybrid libraries, where traditional and electronic information sources are combined, Calhoun discusses changing information-seeking behaviors and preferences, new collection strategies, and emerging technologies. She states that cloud-based hybrid library systems may offer a more integrated alternative to the current fragmented array of systems, tools, and services. In addition to technical themes, the author explores the social
value of digital libraries, including how perceptions of value have changed, in ways that should aid planning future library services, spaces, and expectations in the networked environment.

This discussion flows into a look at the origins and fast-moving nature of the social web, sometimes called Web 2.0, which focuses on user-generated content, networking, and social interaction. Calhoun describes digital libraries’ new role on the social web and raises the possibility of digital libraries as social platforms. She introduces a visual framework that attempts to bring some coherence to the many confusing elements of digital libraries’ evolution toward the social web and discusses the social web’s impact on scholarship. Calhoun ends the chapter by pointing out that libraries have traditionally been collection-centered, with core values different from the social web’s values of engagement and participation.

Looking to the future in her final chapter, Calhoun writes, “Most digital libraries continue to operate from a traditional, collections-centered service model. Change will be difficult, especially in the realm of scholarly practices and norms, where the roots of tradition are deep.” (p. 256) She raises the need to rethink what libraries and digital libraries should and can do for society and concludes that “emulating the creativity and pioneering spirit of digital libraries’ first 20 years is the starting point for creating the next grand vision for libraries’ digital future.” (p. 256) Exploring Digital Libraries is a thorough examination of the past, present, and future prospects of digital libraries, and I recommend it to students, scholars, and practicing librarians.

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Higher Education Outcomes Assessment for the Twenty-First Century follows two earlier books by the same editors, Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education (Libraries Unlimited, 2004) and Revisiting Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education (Libraries Unlimited, 2006). Directed toward librarians, faculty, and university and government administrators, this new work offers strategies to understand and implement assessment. The editors claim that “for libraries, [outcomes assessment] requires a new way of thinking, one that librarians have long resisted, namely, moving their involvement in assessment from the course to the program and institutional levels. Such a movement requires a new type of librarian.” (p. xii)

The book is divided into four sections, which outline outcomes assessment, describe the changing role of federal and state governments, detail special issues within assessment, and finally, offer concluding thoughts and perspectives. Unsurprisingly for an edited collection, the chapters in this book are somewhat uneven. While the first two chapters are useful overviews of the current state of assessment within higher education, the third and fourth chapters are excellent, in-depth discussions of the impact of federal and state governments on higher education generally and assessment more specifically. Chapter 3 undercuts much of the current discourse on college affordability by providing statistics on state divestment from higher education; ultimately, it says, states seek “more output with fewer input resources.” (p. 91) Chapter 4 includes a valuable critique of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 and identifies the crucial shift in the