Law Libraries as Publishers

New Column

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Libraries are many things to many people—collections, places, communities, and services—and it is perhaps impossible to decide on a core function. Some academic law libraries are also publishers, a role that merits more thought and discussion than it has received.

Both legal publishing and academic law libraries' collections are undergoing significant changes. Major driving forces include digital publishing technologies as well as financial pressures on law schools and legal professionals. Many legal information sources have been digitized from analog formats, and others are born digital. Libraries have adapted to this format shift. While they initially collected print copies and added digital access as a supplement, reductions in collections budgets and space have led many libraries to cancel or discard analog copies and make digital the format of first resort.

These developments have opened opportunities for law libraries to participate in the production and distribution of legal information in interesting ways. Unlike print, digital does not require large-scale operations to be economical, and in some cases libraries can undertake publishing projects that would be turned down by (or would never occur to) private publishers or government agencies. A library may not have the shelf space to keep full runs of all law journals, but it can create a digital collection of faculty scholarship. Course textbooks from major publishers may be too expensive for students, but a library can publish textbooks by the school's faculty.

I see academic law libraries taking a more direct role in the creation and distribution of legal information. This column will report on the various ways in which law libraries publish materials—both newly created works and those that have already been published. We may examine law libraries publishing law journals, books, faculty bibliographies, research guides, and government documents. Most of the publishing discussed will be digital, but not necessarily so. For each type of publishing project, we will compare and contrast a few examples, looking for best practices and interesting varieties.

The column will also discuss policy issues that publishers have long dealt with but that are relatively new for libraries. How should a library manage the copyrights it owns? Are there legitimate privacy interests that libraries should protect when publishing court records? Can libraries develop sustainable business models to maintain their publishing projects over the long term? How should a library preserve its publications?

I am always eager to discuss publishing by law libraries. To help inform future columns, I would like to interview librarians working on these issues. I expect the next two columns to deal with publishing faculty bibliographies, overseeing student-edited law journals, and compiling unique historical collections. Any readers working on these projects or interested in law library publishing more generally are welcome to contact me at bkeele@indiana.edu.