Shaping the Library's Future: Why and How should Libraries Seize the Opportunity of Publishing their Strategic Vision

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Abstract

In the broader context of the role of strategic communication in enhancing an organisation's purpose and identity, this paper examines the benefits for research libraries of publishing a strategic vision. In today's rapidly changing world, it is critical for libraries to define their 'signature', reaffirm their identity, uphold clear values and foster a culture of purpose. This paper outlines the benefits of publishing a formal strategy for libraries to shape the future of their organisation, attract partners with similar goals, and regularly assess and reaffirm the library's objectives. The publication of a strategy document that has been developed collaboratively and that reflects the library's collective ambitions, values and identity can facilitate the translation of the strategy into concrete and meaningful actions. This paper is a call to action for research libraries to better communicate the potential of their services to academics, partners and the community, but also to give collective and lasting meaning to their work and missions by publishing a medium or long-term vision.

Keywords: Research Libraries; strategy; vision; development; partnerships

A significant number of libraries aspire to enhance the manner in which they present their vision and ambitions for facilitating access to knowledge. Effective communication with decision-makers, funders, partners and end-users (the "outside world") is necessary to make the library visible, understandable and usable. It helps reaffirm the importance of the library's role to the institution's progress.

1. Crafting the Future: Positioning Academic and Research Libraries in their Ecosystem

A fundamental aspect of enhancing the library's visibility lies in the identification of its unique identity, or 'signature'. In order to optimise the dissemination of the library's potential to a diverse range of partners and stakeholders, it is essential to refrain from spreading ourselves too thinly, contradicting ourselves, and presenting only a limited aspect of the library's capabilities. The challenge lies in articulating the library's strengths, values, vision, strategic choices, priorities and potential in a standard text and in simple terms, that can be sent to a wide range of stakeholders. A number of academic and research libraries have initiated the practice of disseminating their strategic plans online (Swiatek Cassafieres & Brunetti, 2024), SPARC Europe is an example of this. It has a clear identity and visibility, as demonstrated by its four-year strategy. with a strategy that offers a clear identity, good visibility and outlines its current activities and future potential. It also explains how SPARC Europe can develop and be a valuable partner to other organisations.

It requires careful balancing to ensure that the library's specific priorities and viewpoints are integrated into the institution's broader strategy, while maintaining a distinct identity. The objective is to be original, but not isolated:"*Strategic planning is something library leaders typically anticipate […] ensuring alignment between library strategy and that of the wider university or other governing body*" (Shaghaei et al., 2022).

In some cases, it is relevant to present the library's alignment with broader frameworks, overarching policies (national, European, international…), current trends, or to show what actions the library is taking to address technical, social, cultural, innovative or heritage challenges. This illustrates how the library can be a valuable partner for current or future projects.

It is important for libraries to find ways to affirm a clear identity and highlight their potential. The formalisation, publication and dissemination of a strategy is an effective way of positioning the library, making it visible and valuable, and presenting its current services. It also enhances the library's potential in the eyes of its stakeholders by making them aware of it and helping to stimulate their interest.

2. Empowering Libraries: Publishing the Library's Strategic Vision

Developing an academic library strategy helps to communicate the identity of the service. By clearly articulating the library's or the library network's aims and values, the strategy demonstrates to other stakeholders that they share similar objectives. Potential partners are able to identify areas of convergence: they can easily come up with projects and ideas for collaboration. This may result in invitations being extended to the library to take part in cultural initiatives, research and structuring projects. The library's complementary expertise can lead to fruitful collaboration.

Partnerships and dialogue bring new developments and help libraries to evolve in a holistic and meaningful way. It also creates future evolutionary paths and options for consistent identity transformation. This helps to counteract scattered, dispersed, purely opportunistic, fuzzy, or solely library- or technology-oriented developments that diminish the collective meaning of work for library staff, and could lead to libraries being cut out of their ecosystem.

"The library strategy needs to prioritize communicating the benefits arising from the partnerships they lead or participate in and to assert their own identity and credit within them" (Cox, 2023). This is typical of the LIBER 2024–2027 strategy when it describes libraries as future hubs: *"By 2027, research libraries will be engaged and trusted hubs of their user communities, collaborating with each other and with local, national and international stakeholders in their role as change agents and facilitators, and taking up task in public engagement in research."* With this priority in mind, LIBER has selected citizen science partners such as Scistarter and Ecsa for various citizen science projects led and managed by its Citizen Science Working Group. It can of course also be interesting to look at public libraries' framework(s) for developing cultural strategies on territories, national libraries

trends, libraries archives and museums (LAMs) major challenges, and consider others sources of inspiration, depending on what makes each library specific.

Formalising a strategy is important for attracting and prioritising partnerships. It is simple to find inspiration or compare an existing strategy with those of other institutions or library networks, where these are openly shared.

However, it is not always easy to find the right method to get the strategy off the paper and into action. Fortunately for those new to the field, in addition to the theoretical strategic management literature, which serves as a first approach to pave the way for developing a new strategy, there is the possibility of finding or asking for feedback from the community. Looking at how other libraries and organisations have managed to design and write their strategy makes it easier and more enjoyable to start the process for the first time, or before embarking on a major change.

3. A Key to Success: Harnessing Collective Power in Order to Reaffirm Library Identity and Foster a Culture of Purpose

Affirming the library's vision, values and identity in a public document suggests that library staff share a common vision and understanding of their work. The implementation of a strategy is based on the adoption of a collective approach, directed towards a common horizon. This facilitates the positioning of the library's actions within its rapidly evolving, multi-scale ecosystem. How have other libraries and organisations managed to engage their teams or members in shaping the future of the organisation? How have they managed to develop collective work and produce a shared strategy?

Agreeing on the "why" of the work is the basis for ensuring that the vision reflects the teams' support for the 'signature' shown in the strategy. If library staff do not see themselves in the strategy, or cannot see their work in the global vision, there is a problem that needs to be addressed. Shared goals help the team co-design and implement a concrete, consistent and realistic roadmap. LIBER, SPARC Europe, most institutions that have developed a formal strategy have ensured that the proposed horizon reflects colleagues' shared ambitions for the library network and their areas of expertise.

Some publications describe the method used to develop a strategy, and many colleagues are willing to share their experience and methodology. It is a matter of deciding where to look for inspiration to adapt a reproducible methodology to the library's own process for creating a new strategy or redesigning an existing one. CC-BY examples from the academic and research library sector are also available (see Swiatek Cassafieres & Brunetti, 2024),

LIBER has a tradition of integrating the voices of its members. The association uses a collaborative approach to define its strategy. LIBER members are consulted at various meetings, including a special time during the annual conference, *"[LIBER members] are the structural components that implement the strategy and have a clear view of the progress, the issues that they face and the opportunities that are raised. New ideas are discussed and structural changes, if needed, are proposed"* (Swiatek Cassafieres & Brunetti, 2024). In parallel, the Executive Board, Steering Committee and Working Groups are making recommendations, while interviews are being conducted with various stakeholders. The result of this collaborative work is a strategy that meets the needs and ambitions of its members and in which they feel involved: As Giannis Tsakonas states it, *"[This] collaborative approach ensures LIBER to produce and foster a consistent, ambitious and visionary strategy, to strengthen the links with the everyday research libraries' reality, and to deliver reusable, inspirational and quality outputs to the library community to advocate for their missions and raise a strong voice in the academic world as well as in society in general."* (Swiatek Cassafieres & Brunetti, 2024).

In order to remain meaningful over time, a strategy must be regularly reviewed after its initial design. It is essential to plan evaluation periods with appropriate performance and outcome indicators, and to carry out this evaluation process with the teams and other stakeholders who have contributed to the development of the strategy. Evaluating progress enables the library to consider making some adjustments or to refocus some aspects of the strategy. Evaluations can be conducted internally or with extensive user engagement. This step-by-step evaluation of performance also enables the library/institution/organisation to regularly question internal processes in order to improve and develop them. Every institution or organisation has its own way of doing things and its own pace. LIBER engages its community in regular evaluation of past and then current strategy and publishes mid-way strategy documents for its members and partners. Regular or periodic evaluation helps with decision-making. It also paves the way for the construction of the next strategy, whether it is a continuation of the current one or a disruption to it.

For their part, SPARC Europe's board members state: *"We periodically review our goals following our vision and our mission taking into account how the context of openness is evolving over time. It is therefore important to review and update our strategy periodically to review our activity and to set new goals. We are also committed to engage all our Board members in the definition of the strategy to gather all the different contexts and perspectives from all corners of Europe"* (Swiatek Cassafieres & Brunetti, 2024). Evaluating the strategy is an ideal way to increase or restore a sense of purpose to the work of the teams and to enable new members to feel that their activity is part of the current strategy.

3.1. Call to Action

Libraries need to find ways of communicating the potential of library services to academics, partners and the wider community. This is the first reason why libraries need to engage in formalising and publishing their strategy. A major benefit of formulating a strategy through collaborative work is that it gives collective meaning to the work of the team.

However, writing a strategy is an ambitious and complex exercise: it is all a matter of balance. A library strategy needs to demonstrate the library's identity to a wide and diverse range of stakeholders in order to inspire them to build partnerships. In today's rapidly changing world, it is critical for libraries to define their 'signature', reaffirm their identity and uphold clear values. The collective and meaningful work of defining a shared vision with the library team, positioning your library in its ecosystem, fostering a culture of purpose and presenting it through the publication of your library strategy for the coming years is a powerful step you are invited to take. It is now up to you!

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