

Editorial

Critical Thinking About “Getting Research Published” in *College & Research Libraries*



Editor's Note: In our last issue, Lorcan Dempsey and I explored the ways in which the *C&RL* transition to an open-access, digital-only publishing model might allow us to think differently about the place of the journal within the scholarly communications landscape in our field and to promote a vision of *C&RL* as a “platform publication” for libraries in higher education. Editorial board member James Elmborg joins me this month to continue this discussion of the content published in *College & Research Libraries* and the ways in which we can work together to ensure that the journal continues to attract the best thinking and writing about academic and research libraries.

What do *portal*, *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, and *The Journal of Documentation* have in common? In addition to their obvious connection as important journals in the field of Library and Information Science, each has done something over the past 10 years that *College & Research Libraries* has not—each has published one (or more) articles recognized by the ACRL Instruction Section as “an outstanding publication related to library instruction” through the Ilene F. Rockman Publication of the Year Award. *C&RL* has published many excellent studies of information literacy instruction and assessment over the past decade, and our IS colleagues are faced with a difficult decision each year choosing one publication from the wealth of journal articles, book chapters, and books produced on this essential subject of study, but it strikes us as notable that not a single study published in *C&RL* has been selected for this recognition during a decade when the scholarship has blossomed under renewed focus and benefited from new methodologies for research on teaching and learning in libraries. What is it about these award-winning essays that helps them to stand out in a crowded field, and what might a closer look at them tell us about the content we attract to *C&RL*?

College & Research Libraries is routinely recognized as one of the leading journals in Library and Information Science, and as the flagship publication of the Association of College and Research Libraries. It is acknowledged as a venue for rigorous research studies as well as for substantive thinking about the practice of academic and research librarianship. But “routine” is no longer a feature of scholarly publishing in our field. Over the past decade, *C&RL* has faced increasing competition to recruit the best work for publication, not just from established journals, but also from an array of new journals, blogs, and other venues for thoughtful discourse made possible by new publishing technologies. This discourse has been fueled by a cadre of LIS faculty and library professionals ready to apply different lenses to our research and practice, and skeptical of the reception that their work might receive in our journal. Some of the work that has not appeared as much in *C&RL* in recent years might be considered “traditional,” e.g., philosophical inquiry.¹ A closer look at the Rockman Award winners over the past decade, however, tells another story, that of the rise of critical theory as an important lens through which librarianship may be viewed. Like philosophical inquiry or histori-

cal inquiry (or qualitative research, in general), critical theory represents a research methodology that some of its most thoughtful practitioners have suggested they did not feel “fit” within the scope and mission of this journal. If true, this is an issue that must be addressed if we are to ensure that *C&RL* remains as vibrant and important a venue for the publication of the best scholarship in our field in the twenty-first century as it was in the twentieth.

Where might we find the roots of the current perception about what sort of research is appropriate for publication in *C&RL*? In 2001, *C&RL* editor Donald E. Riggs authored an editorial entitled “Getting Research Published” that provided suggestions to prospective authors on the “best practices of writing a research article and getting it published in a respectable journal.”² The editorial provided a number of useful suggestions that remain relevant today—identify one or more questions to be addressed through your research, compose a literature review that clearly articulates the ways in which your research contributes to the literature of the field and to the promotion of what we now call evidence-informed practice, and demonstrate the wider relevance of your work to the reader—but it also articulated a very specific approach to research that was considered “most appropriate” for publication in our field and in our journal. Writing at a time when qualitative research still struggled for recognition, and when critical theory was in its early days of application to LIS, and when evidence-based librarianship had yet to attract many adherents outside of the health sciences, Riggs articulated an approach to conducting and writing up one’s research that was deeply informed by traditional empirical (scientific) research methods. The editorial goes so far as to suggest that alternative approaches to publication are not “research” and will not be published in *C&RL*. In the years since, despite the appearance of some substantive literature reviews and “thought pieces” in this journal, it seems clear that the articulation of one acceptable approach to LIS research (down to identifying specific sections expected in any research report) may have discouraged many authors from submitting ground-breaking research to *College & Research Libraries*.

Much has changed since the publication of that influential *C&RL* editorial. Fundamental transformations of the traditional worlds of technical and public services are well underway. In technical services we have seen an explosion of digital platforms and collections with new workplace configurations and new techniques for thinking about and managing them. In public services, we have seen fundamental questioning of traditional reference fueled by the shift in demand away from this service on the part of students and faculty. And, the information technology available in libraries today is so different in its scope and use as to have either launched totally new kinds of library spaces or fundamentally transformed the kinds of spaces and services that one would remember from a decade ago. The old intellectual poles of the library—cataloging and reference—have given way to new, highly experimental library practices in technical service, public services, and the ways in which each engage with our user communities and with our colleagues on campus, in the world of publishing, and beyond. Surely, we need to continue to disseminate empirical findings about what is emerging and how these new practices are faring, but just as importantly we need to foster a climate of open experimentation and questioning about what we are doing in these dynamic, emerging spaces. We need to ask more informed questions and develop better frameworks for imagining new services.

Critical theory has proven extremely valuable for these purposes, and we may find evidence of this value in many places. Library Juice Press has enthusiastically embraced critical perspectives, publishing an influential volume of wide-ranging essays devoted to library instruction, edited by Maria Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier.³ John Buschman’s *Dismantling the Public Sphere* provides a critical vocabulary

to ask sophisticated questions about the political climate that drives the defunding of higher education in our time.⁴ Buschman joined Gloria J. Leckie and Lisa M. Given to publish a speculative book introducing various critical theories and concepts that have potential to invigorate thinking in and around library practice.⁵ These works provide a broad-based platform that opens important possibilities for developing a critical research agenda, especially when considered alongside the rich and maturing literature reflected in the Rockman awards.⁶ Finally, the less traditional network for scholarly communication includes the vibrant community of librarians contributing each week to discussions on Twitter (#critlib), as well as evolving resources like “In the Library with the Lead Pipe,” which pushes forward a critical dimension, blurring the lines between blog and peer-reviewed journal. Indeed, at this moment, at all levels of publication, critical theory is serving a valuable role in shaping thinking about academic librarianship.

All is not well in the library literature, though. As anyone working in critical theory can attest, overly constraining definitions of what “counts” as research still dominate our journals and our assessment of professional achievements, much to the detriment of the maturing thinking in our field. While ethnography and qualitative methods have gained acceptance during the past decade in previously empirical disciplines like Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, Linguistics, Education, and Economics, librarianship remains more resistant to these new ways of thinking. When journal reviewers have narrow criteria for what counts as “real” research, the range of our ideas and concepts is invisibly narrowed accordingly. Of course, every library journal should strive to publish only the best work, and every journal is responsible for deciding what that means, but every submission deserves to be read for its potential to help us think about libraries and librarianship, not whether it “looks” like a scientific study. Many emerging leaders of the library profession come from humanities backgrounds where they have developed sophisticated ways of thinking with critical models. Just as we need research that approaches problems scientifically, we also need the energy and creativity these new scholars bring to their research questions and to their professional practice using these critical approaches. When these emerging professionals get early feedback that the work they produce is somehow inferior or not “real research,” we send a clear message about who belongs in our field (and who does not). And as these librarians mature professionally, it is imperative that their critically positioned research be acknowledged for its value in the conversation and not dismissed because it takes an alternative, non-empirical stance. Tenure and promotion committees in academic libraries need to be especially attuned to this issue.

C&RL aims to be part of the way forward at this important moment. As an easy first step, this journal could quietly begin to accept works that employ critical methodologies. However, given *C&RL*'s history and importance as ACRL's flagship journal, it seems important to us to be more explicit about an evolution in our editorial position. Library research needs to become much more open to critical theory as one part of the broad range of research approaches that can help us imagine the future of library practices. Indeed, the intellectual vibrancy of this field depends on our ability to synthesize multiple research traditions. Libraries can and should be an intellectual crossroads where multiple kinds of thinking intersect in surprising new ways to create robust new models for our future institutions. *C&RL* aims to be a major venue for that kind of thinking. We want to actively assert that authors working at the intersections of critical theory and library practice are encouraged to submit their work to *C&RL*. We want to actively assert that submissions employing philosophical inquiry or historical inquiry are equally welcome. We are committed to reviewing that work with open minds and high standards. This invitation does not mean, of course, that every work that takes

a critical position will be published. Far from it. *C&RL* will continue to uphold its rigorous standards through careful peer-review processes. We do intend, however, to ensure that *all* research, no matter its methodology, will get a fair reading with an eye to what it might contribute to the field. By doing so, we re-commit ourselves to the bedrock principle that *C&RL* is a journal committed to advancing the highest quality scholarship in academic and research librarianship and that all approaches to producing scholarship of that quality should be welcome in its pages.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Richard C. Fyffe, "The Value of Information: Epistemology, Ethics, and Library Science in Luciano Floridi's Philosophy of Information," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* [forthcoming].
2. Donald E. Riggs, "Getting Research Published," *College & Research Libraries* 62, no. 5 (2001): 393–393, accessed November 29, 2014, doi: 10.5860/crl.62.5.392.
3. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, eds., *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010).
4. John Buschman, *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003).
5. Gloria J. Leckie, Lisa M. Given, and John Bushman, eds., *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science: Exploring the Social from Across the Disciplines* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2010).
6. See, for example, Michelle Holschuh Simmons, "Librarians as Disciplinary Discourse Mediators: Using Genre Theory to Move Toward Critical Information Literacy," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 5, no. 3 (2005): 297–311, accessed December 1, 2014, doi: 10.1353/pla.2005.0041; and Heidi L. M. Jacobs, "Information Literacy and Reflective Pedagogical Praxis," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 34, no. 3 (2008): 256–262.