

Is the Sky Actually Falling? Using the Theory of Fields to Illuminate Contemporary Discourses in Academic Librarianship

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I want to set the stage in September 2012, when the long-simmering frustration of librarians with publishers' and vendors' control over and imposition of increasingly expensive pricing and restrictive terms of access finally came to a boil. In the library at the State University of New York (or SUNY) at Potsdam, Jenica Rogers, the Library Director, cancelled American Chemical Society journal subscriptions. The ACS is arguably the most influential and major chemistry publisher in North America, and Rogers not only cancelled their subscriptions, but she went public with the story on her blog.

Here's part of what she wrote:

Librarians, this is a call to action. SUNY Potsdam will not be subscribing to an American Chemical Society online journal package for 2013. We're doing this because the ACS pricing model is unsustainable for our institution and we were unable to find common ground with the ACS. Instead, we explored other options and exercised them. You could do the same, and maybe together we can make enough choices to make our voices heard in meaningful ways.¹

After she wrote this, other academic librarian and scientist bloggers picked up the story of "Jenica and the Giant." It was also reported in scientific and higher education news outlets, such as *The Scientist* and *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Blog posts and comments were generally extremely supportive. Librarians, many of whom had long dealt with expensive pricing and restrictive terms, were grateful, supportive, and in agreement with her. Librarians encouraged each other to be brave enough to follow her example.

But apart from the flurry of blog posts about the situation, this example doesn't seem to have affected very much within librarianship. We are still cancelling journal subscriptions, and we may even be cancelling ones that are just as significant as the ACS titles (in fact, the Canadian Research Knowledge Network, or CRKN, did not renew its deal with the ACS, and issued a press release to that effect), but we aren't speaking out about it, nor have we seen widespread action that is "making our voices heard."

¹ Rogers, Jenica, "Walking Away from the American Chemical Society," *Attempting Elegance*, September 12, 2012, <http://www.attemptingelegance.com/?p=1765>.

Two questions, then, emerge from this example:

1. When so many librarians agree with Jenica Rogers that “the system is broken” because it gives all the power to publishers and vendors to control pricing and impose terms, why haven’t we seen more widespread, successful attempts to “fix the system?”
2. What might it take for us to fix it?

We can find answers to these questions in the sociological theory of strategic action fields (or, theory of fields) put forward in recent years by Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam.² The theory of strategic action fields provides a framework for thinking about stability and change in social institutions.

My goal here is not to explain why collection development is broken and how we can save it, but rather to use the example of collections and this story to introduce the theory of fields and show how important this theory can be for librarianship. To introduce the theory, we will focus on these aspects:

- The field: boundaries, rules, structure
- Incumbents and challengers
- Social skill
- Stability within fields
- Crisis and episodes of contention

We will now go back to the story of Jenica and the Giant, and look at it through the lens of the theory of fields, highlighting these elements. In doing so, we will gain some very helpful insights into the questions of why we haven’t seen more widespread, successful attempts to “fix the system,” to adjust this power imbalance between vendors and librarians, and what it might take for us to do that.

First, we need to consider our field.

Any organization or institution is a strategic action field, so there are many ways to define fields within librarianship. We have the field of academic librarianship which, in this example, contains the field of collection development. We could also have subfields of particular academic libraries, or of collections for particular disciplines (for example, a subfield of chemistry collections at SUNY Potsdam). This collections field includes:

- academic librarians, both collection librarians and library administrators;
- publishers and vendors;
- consortia of academic libraries who pool their resources to negotiate and/or acquire resources;
- library staff who process acquisitions;
- and the faculty and students who use library collections.

The purpose of this field (what Fligstein and McAdam call its broad interpretive frame) is that academic librarians want to serve faculty and students by making collections available for them

² Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

to use. Within a field, the various groups of members will each see this purpose from their own perspective. Librarians see this as part of our *raison d'être*; it is part of our professional responsibility and ethics to provide materials that faculty and students need. Faculty and students want easy access to collections. Publishers and vendors have a financial interest in the field; our desire to provide collections is a way for them to make money.

What is at stake in the field is the ability of librarians to have real decision-making authority over their library's collections. On the local level, this is related to librarians' power within their institutions – does the subject librarian make the decision, does the library director, or do they make it together? More broadly, this decision-making authority depends on whether publishers and vendors work with librarians to set terms and prices that work for us, or whether they set terms and prices that effectively take away our choice. Do we have the power to say no?

Now let's turn our attention to how this field operates. Fligstein and McAdam call these "rules" but they're really tacit, unwritten conventions about "how we do collections."

There are several, but among them are six that are particularly relevant to this example:

1. the publisher/vendor sets prices for materials and terms for access;
2. pricing is confidential;
3. library budgets are limited;
4. librarians acquire materials – it's we who do the selecting and buying;
5. librarians acquire materials on behalf of faculty and students, within budgetary constraints (not librarians acquire what they themselves want);
6. librarians are "nice," polite, civil, kind, generous and don't rock the boat.

In our example, the ACS set prices which were confidential (a big power advantage), SUNY Potsdam had a limited budget and was deciding how to spend it on behalf of their faculty and students, taking their needs into account. There is a pretty strong consensus that this is how the field of collection development works.

Where this example gets meaningful and interesting is in the last convention – Rogers was civil, but she also rocked the boat. There are a few other "rules" that weren't quite followed in this example:

- publishers and vendors generally negotiate prices and terms with librarians - in this case, the ACS was not willing to negotiate;
- librarians want to make faculty and students happy, and have a hard time making people unhappy by saying no but Rogers did not accept that saying "no" would make SUNY Potsdam's faculty and students unhappy.

Now, let's consider who the incumbents and challengers are in this field.

Incumbents are the members who have power and influence. The field generally works to their advantage and is shaped to their interests. What we can see from our rules is that the incumbents here are publishers and vendors, even though the field is about *library* collection development. Publishers have power to make materials available for purchase, to control pricing in their favour. This is what the ACS did with SUNY Potsdam.

At the time of our example, SUNY Potsdam had access to ACS titles as part of a statewide package. This package included mandated 6% annual price increases, and mandated content additions each year, which would also increase the cost. The ACS wanted to move customers to a consistent pricing model, which Rogers supported because it offered consistency and transparency; however, she was adamant that the pricing model was not appropriate or sustainable for small institutions such as SUNY Potsdam. The ACS was unwilling to consider other models.

A last way in which the publisher has power in this example is that the American Chemical Society both publishes chemistry journals and is the accrediting body for chemistry programs, and its approval depends on libraries having access to certain journal titles – making it harder for libraries to say no.

So, our field's incumbents are publishers and vendors.

Librarians are therefore in a challenger role; challengers are the actors in the field who are disadvantaged and have less power. We have some power to spend or not spend our money, but that's less than the power to set pricing. Three important things to know about challengers are:

- Even though they are disadvantaged, they may in fact benefit from the structure of the field. Sometimes they're fine with how the field works; incumbents are not necessarily wrong or mean (nice publishers have power too).
- Even if they don't like how the field works, they may go along with the status quo because it works *well enough*. That's certainly the case for librarians. In our example, Jenica Rogers certainly wasn't happy with the way things worked, and she did what she could to push against the ACS pricing, but she essentially operated by these rules (although she did "rock the boat").
- Even in the most stable strategic action fields, they may have "an alternative, contrasting conception of the field," one that opposes the dominant conception and the prevailing rules. Again, that's largely what we see in our collections field. Many of us imagine other structures for how collections could operate, because we don't believe we can sustain the status quo.

The incumbent/challenger distinction isn't quite that straightforward, because challengers in one field can be incumbents in another. For example, collection managers or library directors who ultimately control the library budget, like Jenica Rogers at SUNY Potsdam, are incumbents in their individual libraries, compared to subject librarians who may control less of the money or have less control over the budget.

While Jenica Rogers was in a challenger role in her dealings with the ACS, she was successful in not giving in to their pricing model and setting an alternate course for her library. According to the theory of fields, one of the reasons she could do that is that she was a socially skilled actor.

Social skill can be defined as “the ability to induce cooperation in others”³ and a socially skilled actor does this in three ways: she reads people and environments, she frames a meaningful course of action, and she mobilizes others.

The concept of social skill is one of the most important parts of this example. Rogers had a really good grasp of her local context at SUNY Potsdam. In the words of another library blogger, she “saw well in advance a moment of truth coming.”⁴ She could see that she might not want to keep paying what the ACS was asking, and that she would need the support of the chemistry faculty in order to change the status quo. And so she spent several *years* talking with the chemistry faculty about the sustainability of ACS pricing.

When it started to look like they might need to cancel, she was able to frame other lines of action. She and her collection development manager provided the faculty with options, and when she presented those options, she talked about what it meant to be chemistry faculty at SUNY Potsdam – the meaning of their local role – and she told them, “we have an ethical responsibility as members of the scholarly information ecosystem to make smart choices”⁵ – the larger meaning of our role within academia.

She was persuasive and authoritative, and was able to mobilize faculty to give her their support so that she could act as she felt was best.

She is using her social skill among librarians too – she has seen a moment of truth coming for us, and she gave her story as an alternate course of action, and called on the meaning of librarianship and *our* role, to try to mobilize librarians to act.

Her social skill alone wasn’t enough to make the ACS cancellations happen; she also had several important resources at her disposal. She controlled the library’s budget and she could choose to spend the money or not spend it. She had power and authority as the Library Director, and she used the power of that position. She had probably built up a lot of social capital with the chemistry faculty (social capital meaning good relations with others that enable mutually advantageous cooperation) so they knew that they could trust her. She had the resource of *meaning* – she was able to call on the meaning of scholarly communication and the ethics of librarianship. Socially skilled actors, such as Jenica Rogers, are successful to the degree that they are able to mobilize resources, take advantage of their positions, relationships, and the rules of the field.

Now we’ve arrived at stability and change in fields.

The theory tells us that a field is always changing. A stable field isn’t static. It experiences constant adjustments and shifts, but those adjustments essentially reproduce the structure of the field. We’ve experienced some pretty major adjustments – think of the shift to e-journals – but they have reproduced the same structure in terms of who has power and whose interests are

³ Neil Fligstein, “Social Skill and the Theory of Fields,” *Sociological Theory* 19 (2001): 112.

⁴ “Hero, Villain, Poltroon, Ignoramus, or Bumbler?” *Gavia Libraria*, entry posted September 28, 2012, <http://gavialib.com/2012/09/hero-villain-poltroon-ignoramus-or-bumbler/>

⁵ Rogers, “Walking Away”

being served. As long as the field is still able to fulfill its purpose – in our case, as long as we can still provide collections to faculty and students – it is a stable field, no matter how unhappy we are with the structure and the rules of our field. As long as we are consumers of publishers’ and vendors’ products, we will not be able to fix the system.

In order to “fix the system” that gives vendors so much power, the field would have to be transformed. The theory of fields tells us that this transformation happens when the field experiences an episode of contention. There are three crucial things to understand about episodes of contention:

- They are almost always started because of something that happens *externally* to the field, and that “something” is usually a crisis. This could be a societal crisis like war or depression, or it could be the result of a crisis in a nearby field. For our example, that could be the collapse of the publishing industry.
- They completely change the field. Challengers and incumbents are flipped, the rules are up for grabs, and a new structure is created. This could mean that librarians become the publishers and creators of content, as some are suggesting, or it could mean that instead of paying for content after it’s produced, we pay for content before it’s produced and support a wide open access publishing network.
- Whatever the new structure is, it will be shaped by the strongest, most socially skilled actors, those who are best able to read the situation, frame a meaningful course of action, and mobilize others to act.

So we need to ask ourselves, is our field experiencing a crisis? I don’t think it is, and I think we need to ask ourselves whether we really want to transform and re-write the field, or whether it is basically working for us, and what we want is to make adjustments that will make the existing field better. And if that’s what we want, then we need to stop talking about it as though the sky is falling.

That does not mean, however, that we should be complacent. In fact, the theory tells us that there are five important things we can and should keep doing so that we can be ready to build a new field when the time comes:

- strive to improve our position and make adjustments that work to our advantage,
- tell stories about why librarians are the only ones who can provide collections to meet our faculty and students’ needs,
- build our social capital, our professional skills, and take stock of what other resources are available to us,
- try out alternative models and courses of action, and
- develop our social skill, and support socially skilled actors among us.

When we look at our example here, we can see that these are all things that Jenica Rogers is doing.

This theory has given us great insight into this example of collections and SUNY Potsdam. It has shown us that we aren’t “fixing” the field because that is likely only to result from an episode of contention, and it has helped us see why social skill and resources are crucial. But it isn’t just about collection development, because that’s only one aspect of librarianship where we experience a power imbalance and where we might want things to be different. The theory of

fields gives us a systematic framework for piecing together all the various examples and mapping out trends in our profession in a critical and informed way.

The theory gives us a very practical and enlightening understanding of change within librarianship. We often say that “libraries are always changing,” and the theory allows us to re-frame most of those changes as shifts and adjustments, which we can then distinguish from large-scale transformations. This can help us ensure that we’re putting the right amount of energy and effort into the adjustments and the transformations. It can illuminate the conditions that might be necessary for substantive changes to librarianship.

The theory of fields lends itself particularly well to informing both research and practice, which is useful for academic librarians because we are practitioner-researchers. In terms of further research, the theory could be applied to historical developments in librarianship, to other domains of librarianship, or specific aspects of the theory could be examined, for example, to determine the qualities of socially skilled librarians. In terms of informing our practice, the theory gives us a different way to think about our profession and it can suggest and inform possible responses and courses of action so that we can achieve the adjustments and transformation that we want.