The term hybrid library is not a new one in the lexicon of academic librarians. Indeed, it has been synonymous with the identity of the modern academic library for over two decades now – a mid-point in the transition of academic libraries from tangible places in which traditional, print-based materials are acquired and made available, to fully digital spaces acting as gateways to networked resources (Oppenheim and Smithson, 1999). Arguably, current ‘state of the art’ academic libraries remain emblematic of the hybrid library. The new Main Library at the University of Birmingham where I work, for example, opened in September 2016 and offers patrons access to both print and digital resources, with technology-enabled public spaces offered alongside a Research Reserve dedicated to the print body of our research collection (University of Birmingham, 2017).

Clearly, the hybrid library is a concept that endures in the present. But what of academic libraries of the future? Will an academic library become a solely digital space? In a sense, much of how academic libraries develop in the future will depend on how technology itself develops - particularly around the internet and developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI). At present, we clearly distinguish our library spaces between those that are ‘physical’ (i.e. the building, the shelving, the equipment) and those that are ‘digital’ (i.e. the online discovery layer, the Virtual Learning Environment). However, one vision of a future library - dubbed Library 4.0 - has been offered as being indicative of what will emerge at the point where the clear distinction between the ‘physical’ and the ‘digital’ spaces starts to break down (Noh, 2015). For instance, Noh (2015) uses the example of how a Library 4.0 system would be intelligent enough to work collegially with a library user by analyzing information independently (p. 792).
To an extent, defining the academic library of the future is difficult because what was thought of as the digital endpoint for libraries when the concept of a hybrid library first gained currency has itself become problematic. By the turn of the century, the key mediatory role librarians played in setting up access to electronic content within digital libraries was becoming apparent (Borgman, 2001). However, changes in scholarly communications practices, characterized in particular by the Open Access movement, have unsettled the notion that the library's chief function is as content-acquirer and mediator, causing some to wonder what the role of the academic library might be in a world where digital information is pervasive and free to access (Anglada, 2014; Dempsey, Malpas & Lavoie, 2014; Lewis, 2013).

The answer to this seems to be that the function of academic libraries will evolve in accordance with such a world. For example, it has been suggested that libraries will cease to be places where content is collected and mediated, but will instead be recognized as a place where institutionally-created content is curated (Dempsey, Malpas & Lavoie, 2014; Lewis, 2013). Elsewhere, it has been argued that traditional perceptions of the library as mere collectors of information objects needs to be vigorously challenged so that libraries are recognized as the place to go in search of support in the process of converting information into new knowledge (Anglada, 2014).

Arguably, though, these are challenges academic libraries are already striving to meet and have been for some time. For example, the curatorial role of librarians is already in evidence given the activities academic libraries undertake when managing institutional research and research data repositories (Cox & Pinfield, 2014; Cox & Corrall, 2013). Elsewhere, the idea that academic libraries are already shifting their identity from being places synonymous with collection building to places synonymous with user and research support is arguably symbolized in the ever-evolving role of the Subject Librarian (Brewerton, 2011; Gaston, 2001).

Thus, a picture of the academic library as an entity whose future identity (and value) can be drawn out of the challenges it is already meeting starts to emerge. Whether that picture changes really depends on how the challenges themselves develop, but one thing is clear, academic libraries can evolve to meet them.

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