

The Atlas of New Librarianship, by R. David Lankes. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011. 978-0-262-01509-7; 10x10, 408 pp., 1 map, 242 figures, 3 tables, \$55.00.

reviewed by Elaine Harger

Where to begin this review of *The Atlas of New Librarianship* by R. David Lankes? Being a lover of maps and atlases since childhood, I jumped at the chance to review this hot-off-the-press book from MIT Press. But, where to start is a dilemma. With the sinking feeling I got thumbing through the pages searching in vain for the rich, colorful graphic representation of the terrain our new librarianship will travel in years to come? With the tears of pride toward my profession when I read Lankes' account of how the Free Library of Philadelphia handled its "homeless problem"? Or, maybe I should just immediately dispense with the irritation caused throughout my reading of *The Atlas* toward the seemingly non-existent editorial oversight of this coffetable-quality produced (and priced) tome. So many choices from a wild topography of reactions to a book hailed by other reviewers as: "Essential" – "wow.wow.wow" – "Deep thinking, beyond brands" – "not a book...a manifesto."

My fellow reviewers have convinced me. There is only one appropriate place to begin – on the positive side, with a point of agreement, and an invitation to conversation. On page 11, Lankes writes,

There are, no doubt, other limiting perspectives in this work, and it is your responsibility to point them out and my responsibility to listen and work with you to correct or at least account for them.

Okay, David. Ready to begin a conversation?

At the foundation of the new librarianship is knowledge, conversation and community, (not books or buildings or cataloging systems) and the pole star to navigating this new librarianship is a mission statement: "The Mission of Librarians is to Improve Society through Facilitating Knowledge Creation in their Communities."

Lankes presents his thinking through a series of "Threads" and an assortment of "Agreements." The threads (aka chapters) – Mission; Knowledge Creation; Facilitating; Communities; Improve Society; and Librarians – take up roughly half of the book, and through them, in a breezy, conversational tone, Lankes explains the vision he has for a new librarianship. The agreements (aka appendices) –147 in all – which take up the other half of this 408 page book, and provide elaboration (more on this later) on some of the concepts, theories, and proposals raised in the preceding threads/chapters. The book also comes with a folded 67 x 89 cm. map, a graphic representation of concepts and connections of the

new librarianship, pieces of which are presented in both the threads and agreements.

There are some ideas one can heartily and unhesitatingly agree with, and others worthy of serious consideration. Here's a small sample:

"Members Not Patrons or Users"...I like the term because it implies belonging, shared ownership, and shared responsibility. p. 6

I feel it important now to state that I am not anti-book or anti-artifact. They are amazingly useful tools and are indeed amazingly effective in helping transfer knowledge. p.41

...information literacy must include the idea of conversational literacy. p.73

I hate the READ posters [although he does admit to liking Yoda's]...What I would put in their place is Ask posters. p.73-4

Perhaps an area where you can serve a major need in your community is by moderating in-person meetings, ensuring safety from those seeking to dominate the conversation, or sidelining a conversant. p.77

...if the conversation is important to your community, you need to find a way to be a part of it. p.110

What you as a librarian must aspire to is intellectual honesty. p.123

The social justice obligation of a new librarian is to implement values within their communities, particularly around concepts of minority views¹. They must do so by understanding the value systems of the community and do their best to speak within that value system. However, once again the mission of "improving society" trumps the value norms of any one given community. p. 125

How can you as a librarian expect to produce positive change agents from your members, and ask a community to change and improve, if you are not willing to do so yourself? p.128

Our goal is an improved society, and that means that individual librarians must risk personal comfort and clearly defined boundaries for the greater good. Librarians must lead. They must do so not out of a desire for power, money, or a better parking spot, but because the better the leaders in the library community, the better the community as a whole can serve society. p.134

While it fills this gray-headed librarian's heart with gladness to see knowledge, facilitation, community and social improvement placed at the forefront of the new librarianship, I have to admit (as Lankes himself frequently does) that there is much here that is not new to librarianship at all. In recent years, these four concepts have not always been given the central position Lankes places them in, but there have been (and still are) librarians for whom these ideas have long served as guiding lights both professionally and personally. By way of example, Lankes writes,

...in our new librarianship we facilitate literacy in members [aka patrons or users] to empower...literacy is about the power to excel and, when necessary, break the rules to improve society and the community. p.75

This will certainly sound familiar to the ears of librarians with grayer heads than mine. No mere coincidence accounts for the fact that libraries have long been the sites of literacy programs across the nation serving members of their communities. Would a librarian who'd been involved with setting up libraries during Freedom Summer in Mississippi think literacy as power marked something "new" in librarianship? How about a librarian inspired by the work of Paulo Freire?

"New" is a pesky little adjective – it works, of course, to describe the truly new. It also describes things that are not new, in and of themselves, but that are new to the person encountering them for the first time. There is also the newness arising from our society's cultural predisposition to historic amnesia that often makes it appear that something is new, when in fact it has actually been around for quite some time, but has fallen out-of-style, or into a period of dormancy, or was driven out, repressed, or otherwise forced to flee or be forgotten. And, of course, there is the constant, unrelenting marketing of "new" thises and thats. Few would buy, for example, a new book called *The Atlas of Old Librarianship* – which is not to suggest that Lankes' book doesn't present some new ideas, but there is a fundamental scholarly sloppiness in neglecting to either research or to acknowledge historical antecedents.

The point of this little semantic digression (leading to a major concern), however, is that although Lankes does admit that many of the tasks he charges the new librarianship with aren't really new, he never asks "What happened?" What happened, for example, to the idea that "literacy is power" so that the director of the iSchool at Syracuse should feel compelled to place this idea in the forefront of the profession's attention again by claiming it for the "new" librarianship?

It is precisely here that this reviewer finds *The Atlas*' greatest shortcoming. In not exploring the historical roots of issues or acknowledging the power dynamics at play within and upon librarianship, forces which cause us to become trapped in cycles of new- and oldness, a truly new and empowering vision of the profession can never be achieved. Lankes' vision will get "lost" like others that came before, pulled under to sit in the depths before popping to the surface again to be noticed by someone as something "new." Maybe it is because we school librarians (employed, unemployed, on trial or otherwise) are possibly more tuned in to this phenomenon than our colleagues in other settings that I'm dwelling on this business of newness. After all, how many generations of "the new curriculum" have we seen come through our schools? More than we've seen generations of students, that is for sure. But this is important. Those who don't learn from history

are bound to repeat it. So let's do a little deep thinking exercise on one paragraph from the book.

Librarians must go back to the days of pathfinders and annotated bibliographies. In a real sense, the drive toward efficiency put in place by Dewey a century ago is going to greatly decrease the value of librarians. This drive has led to the equating of copy cataloging to information organization. Librarians are taking records focused on artifacts, developed in one context, and assuming they have universal utility to all communities. This is crazy.

Several things are going on in this passage. First the implication here is that, somehow, notions Dewey had about efficiency are responsible for the fact that pathfinders and annotated bibliographies need to be revived by the new librarianship. Well, the disappearance of these tools from the library scene had nothing to do with Dewey, and everything to do with the belief, quite popular in library and information science circles in the 1980s and '90s, that keyword searches of digitized information made things like pathfinders and bibliographies obsolete. Plus, they took time to compile and money to produce. It was much cheaper to do keyword searches to find everything the patron/user/member might need. At the time, many librarians argued that we shouldn't abandon bibliographic work, but they lost that "vicious" debate. They were, after all, only a bunch of Dewey-loving bibliofundamentalists, definitely not-with-it dinosaurs.

About the copy cataloging, yes, a drive toward efficiency prompted the practice of copy cataloging, back in 1901 at the Library of Congress. It was also a drive toward standardization, an effort to compile of a comprehensive list of books published in the U.S. and holding libraries, and probably even a simple desire for the sharing of professional knowledge and skill. However, the "equation" (or, I'd suggest, the substitution) of copy cataloging to library-specific information organization, and the practice of utilizing the former in place of the later, was all about money and made possible by technological developments. RLIN and OCLC made it possible to have library clerks begin to take over work done by librarians. Furthermore, large-scale use of unenhanced copy cataloging took off in the 1980s and '90s, so it simply isn't fair (never mind accurate) to blame old Melville for all this.

As for the matter of the assumption that cataloging practices have "universal utility to all communities," the fact is that cataloging is an art, and the cataloger can approach his or her work as a copyist or as an artist (or any combination thereof). A cataloger can acknowledge all members of the library community and provide access points to the artifacts that live in the library that address any number of special needs. That such artistry takes place less-and-less these days is a reflection, more than anything else, of (1) budgetary priorities, (2) the demise of cataloging as not only a specialization, but as a skill in the field, and (3) technological possibility.

Lankes' blanket refusal to acknowledge the economic, information industry, market, and ideological forces at play here (and elsewhere in *The Atlas*) leaves one wondering why new librarians *are not to be informed* of these power dynamics. Lankes writes that, "It pains me to see [librarians] battered and beaten in the winds of a financial and political storm." (p. 98), but does this pain prompt him to add to his extensive explication of the new librarianship any alerts on how to identify, and possibly be prepared to deal with, such "storms"? And, why in the world call them "storms" in the first place? To make us feel even more powerless than we already do? Storms are a force of nature. There is little librarianship can do in the face of a tsunami or a tornado, while there is much that can be done when confronted by often self-serving and sometimes manipulative markets, industries, trends, *if* one knows how they work, *if* one can read the signs of their presence and activity, *if* one can decode their doublespeak. Why not give over a few pages of *The Atlas* to an examination of this reality? Elsewhere, Lankes writes, "if paraprofessionals are being brought in to replace librarians because they are cheaper, this is not the right reason." (p. 177) But, surely, Lankes knows that the trend toward hiring of paraprofessionals was and is fueled *exactly* because of their low "cost." Why not describe that dynamic so that new librarians can at least have a textbook understanding of the process?

The Atlas glosses over far too many ideas and statements in similar fashion – from passages regarding ERIC's demise to "augmented reality" to "massive scale" data collecting to roaming librarians in the pediatric wards of hospitals. The conversational quality of these threads trumps any inclination for the rich, deep exploration they deserve.

Moving on to another concern, *The Atlas* suffers from a lack of editorial oversight.

There is no index, although one would be most helpful. Ditto for a bibliography. And, never mind the funky alphabetization of Agreement headings², but the unevenness of the content within them comes across as downright sloppy – lazy. Imagine, if you will, that Webster decided not to include any information (except SEE references) for 60% of the words in his dictionary; that he provided only partial information for 11%; but did provide pronunciation keys, parts of speech, plurals, tenses and definitions for the rest – 41% – although with extreme unevenness. The Agreement for Scapes, for example, is 13 pages long, while many of the Agreements that have more than a wee SEE reference, only contain a one paragraph "Agreement Description" and/or a "Conversation Starter" and/or "Related Artifacts" ie. citations.

Here's a sample of other, mostly minor matters: Typos (Scape for scape being the most frequent in spite of the fact that Lankes offers a rule about when and when-not-to capitalize); sentence fragments ("These services consisted of some libraries but a lot of AskA services (they get their name from services such as Ask-A-Scientist, Ask-a-Volcanologist, etc.)." p.122);

and formatting (see p. 100 for an alignment mistake). And, as far as I'm concerned, the typo on p. 385 is unforgivable (can't even bring myself to tell you, dear reader, what it is). I can, of course, accept that *The Atlas* is a work in progress, but the book has the feel of a very long e-mail. One overlooks the niceties (such as spelling), and surfs the surface in order to share what's on one's mind at the moment. Or maybe I simply expect too much from MIT Press' editorial staff.

Before finally commenting on the cartography of *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, there is a very disturbing us-versus-them thread in this book. Part of it is rhetorical, and – okay – I can deal with that, but another part seems either unnecessarily antagonistic or actually downright and truly mean-spirited.

There is a debate coming...it is sure to be vicious, [it] will come from within our own ranks. It will be from the annoyed librarians³ of the world who seek the status quo and see their mission as recorded knowledge⁴, the collection of artifacts, and the maintenance of organizations labeled libraries.... But listen to me. There will come a point when the debate must end – when, as we know from our understanding of Conversation Theory, we must agree to disagree. Then we will have to do something painful. We will have to leave them behind. p.172

First, it must be said that Lankes is as much on the side of more and bigger technology as he is on the side of community, facilitation, knowledge and librarians. This comes through clearly in the pages of *The Atlas*. And if the choice comes down to circuitry or bricks and paper, he'll be on the side of the circuits, bits and bytes, digitally-mediated conversations, and superdatasets. Now, I know many librarians who would almost rather die than watch a library destroyed, and I know these are not "vicious" people. They are passionate, yes, and they will argue vociferously against exchanging book-filled libraries for "massive scale" databases of transportation departments with their daily asphalt temperatures and of apartment complexes in Dubai with their daily elevator-ride times and destinations the maintenance of which Lankes tells us we must embrace as an important (and worthwhile) task of librarianship's future. And, when anyone in the camp of the computer industry (an arm, of course, of the military-industrial-security complex) states, "We will have to do something painful," well, I can't help but wonder "Why painful"? Why an expression of violence, why the armageddon-style "leave them behind" as if librarians who defend the books and the buildings (as well as the OPACs and internet terminals, library Facebook pages, community outreach programs, etc.) are deserving of hell and damnation? What could possibly be the underlying (unconscious?) intent of this atlas?

Might the intent be revealed (as in a Freudian slip?) in the Agreement heading "Intellectual Freedom and Safety"? I find this heading intriguing. The notion of intellectual freedom is usually a stand-alone. Not in Lankes'

book. He explains that librarians must make the arena of knowledge and conversation “safe” for voices of dissent, for minority voices. Okay. So, how is describing a not-yet-held debate as “vicious” and warning of “painful” consequences a model of the exercise of intellectual freedom in a safe environment? I thought we were supposed to “walk the talk.” Or maybe Lankes is actually edging toward alliance with those for whom “security” trumps the First Amendment. That is, after all, where the big bucks are.

Finally, about the cartography of this atlas. There isn’t any. Tinted titanium-looking balls of varying sizes are strung together by definitely anorexic arrows into what could pass as a classic hierarchical organizational flowchart (except that rectangles and straight lines have been replaced by the curves of spheres and downward flowing arrows). The map, folded into a pocket at the back of the book, shows the entire chart. Each sphere and arrow is labeled. The atlas itself contains fragments of the map at appropriate places. Each Agreement contains its piece of map and sometimes references to threads, citations, conversation starters, descriptive paragraphs or excerpts from lengthier, related texts. One telling aspect of this map is that everything flows in one direction. No feedback loops, no inputs, no representation of context. Not even a label. Nothing but empty white space surrounds the mission of the library and everything else flowing from that solitary source.

And the cover – Alas! Here is planet Earth reflected in, and framed by, some-brand, top-of-the-line computer screen with what looks like GPS data around the edges. Over both screen and planet is another reflection, of a hand, a white man’s hand, cuffed in the sleeve of a business suit, index finger pointing to the word “New” in the book’s title – hovering over Siberia. The hand sort of floats in some clouds, like the hand of God, with the sun reflected at the base of his little finger.

Clearly, man and technology dominate the planet. And here I was, kind of hoping that it would be a central part of the mission of a “new librarianship” to compel our communities toward a different understanding of our relationship with the Earth. Silly me.

If you are a map enthusiast, as I am, you will not find anything that touches your heart. Not that librarianship (new, old or otherwise) can’t be mapped, it just isn’t – here. To be fair, an atlas is a huge undertaking, maybe too much so to expect of today’s largely 2.0 penchant for surfing over surfaces. Most software can produce flowcharts. But one would need to dive into some heavyduty cartographic software to actually produce a map.

The Atlas of New Librarianship is without a doubt worth a read, and Lankes is, I believe, sincere in his invitation to converse. If you’re like me, crazy with the marginalia, you’ll have to buy your own copy. Otherwise, borrow it from your nearest and dearest, brick-and-mortar library or visit it online at <http://www.newlibrarianship.org/wordpress/>.

Footnotes

1. Although Lankes makes repeated references to librarians' responsibility in facilitating minority, dissident, silenced views in community conversations, *The Atlas* is strikingly barren of any references to or citations from the plethora of writers and works regarding minorities (racial, ethnic, gender, class) and their concerns, communities, contributions to librarianship, and experiences as minority, as dissident, as silenced. A case of historic amnesia, oversight, ignorance?
2. General practice (even in the new librarianship, one would hope) is that initial articles, such as "The," are ignored for purposes of alphabetization. So, for instance, "The Mission of Librarians is..." would be alphabetized under "Mission" not "The" which is where Lankes places it. Also, general practice is that in alphabetizing a phrase, one selects the keyword as the one by which to alphabetize. Thus, "Importance of a Worldview" would be alphabetized under "Worldview" rather than listed under "Importance" as is done throughout this book. In a digital environment, of course, it doesn't matter too much how things are alphabetized, but it does matter in a book.
3. It is below-the-belt to use as a general moniker (for all librarians who might not share Lankes' worldview) the name of this anonymous blogger who delights in dis'ing anyone who non-anonymously holds viewpoints other than her (his?) own.
4. Lankes goes to great length to express his loathing for the phrase "recorded knowledge" on p. 41.