



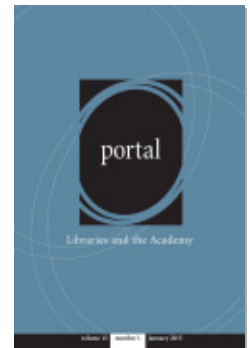
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The Atlas of New Librarianship (review)

Dale S. Askey

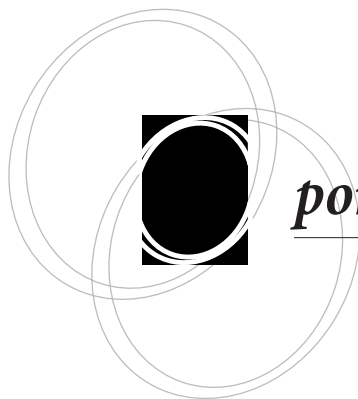
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portal: Reviews

The Atlas of New Librarianship, R. David Lankes. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011. 408 p. \$55 (ISBN 978-0-262-01509-7)

This book, written by a well-known library and information science educator at Syracuse University, sets a high bar, even at first glance. With its pithy title, glossy cover, and unusual format, one expects a work that will alter the discourse on librarianship in fundamental ways. The *Atlas* has its own website and iPad app, and is intended to be an open-ended conversation in which others can participate.

What the *Atlas* purports to do is not simple. It consists of two main textual components that consume roughly half the space, Threads and Agreement Supplements. The six Threads are written in the style of a textbook, to be read linearly, but with sufficient signposting in the form of headings to permit some degree of selective reading. The Agreement Supplements are essentially appendices, where topics mentioned in a Thread receive more extensive treatment. Lankes introduces a Map, used to link Agreements to each other via Relationships. Some of the Agreement Supplements—penned by Lankes or by guest authors—thoroughly treat the topic at hand (for instance, the Institute for Advanced Librarianship Idea or Learning Theory), while others are stub articles or

headings waiting for treatment (perhaps via the iPad app). This structure—building a textual work around a visual map of Agreements and Relationships—creates an uncomfortable hybrid between monograph and reference work.

Much of the content makes sense given Lankes' goals, yet structural shortcomings undermine the *Atlas's* effectiveness. The Threads are supposed to be readable from cover to cover. But the architecture of the book (Map and Relationships) as well as, yes, its physical heft and size, make it patently unsuited to such a reading experience. As such, the book's structure would be more fitted to readers who consult the work over time or wish to follow one Map branch or set of related Agreements. The *Atlas* lacks, however, an index and navigational tools, such as the pointers to the Agreement. Supplements are often misleading. For example, an asterisk after the heading "Social Justice Issues" has a pointer that reads "See Agreement Supplement for a deeper discussion of the ethics of new librarianship." Is one to consult "social justice issues" or "ethics" or "new librarianship," and how would one know, other than by learning through experience that the header with the asterisk leads to the prize? There are other navigational issues, such as the fact that the Web Citations offered (persistent URLs for online



sources) are inaccurately numbered. Page headers would have enabled readers to orient themselves at a glance while flipping back and forth between various sections.

The *Atlas* suffers from a lack of precision in terminology. Starting with the title, concepts such as librarianship and librarian are used loosely and without clear definition. Lankes appears to be using commonly accepted definitions—a librarian is someone who has an MLS and works in a librarian capacity in a library—overlooking the ambiguity underlying such titles. In 2011, what precisely is a librarian? Many “librarians” lack an MLS and, conversely, individuals with an MLS often fill roles in libraries that do not require that degree. Furthermore, the vast majority of individuals who work in libraries are not MLS librarians, but staff falling under any number of other designations who increasingly find themselves in central roles. One can understand Lankes’ bias as an LIS educator, but the failure to grapple with the ambiguous and evolving nature of the profession is a major weakness of the work.

Lankes’ librarian worldview, to borrow his term, seems to be strongly influenced by librarians working in public services; for example, he uses the trope of the reference interview to explain any number of related situations. What of the others working in libraries—systems analysts, archivists, programmers, development staff, etc.—all of whom have quite defined skill sets (putting Lankes’ claim that “the prime value of librarians is not their skill set or their credentials” in question) and apply those skill sets to concrete issues facing libraries on a daily basis. The model set forth in the *Atlas* privileges a librarian class above all of those people, and reinforces their right to assert control of libraries by dint of precisely those narrow credentials he discounts. Is this a viable, or

even descriptive, model for the operation of many libraries?

Attempts at humor give the sense that the author is accompanying a bitter pill with some palliative sugar. In fact, none is necessary; the pills Lankes presents are neither bitter nor terribly alarming. Self-referentiality bulks up the text and detracts from narrative cohesion, leading to an overarching “all together now” impression that is reflective of many a library conference or library blog but is off-putting in a work with such an ambitious agenda. Lankes also has a tendency to soft pedal the more erudite sections of his book.

The author writes that “two different people reading this can come to different conclusions: Lankes is crazy or Lankes got it right.” The *Atlas* itself leads me to neither conclusion. There are many salient passages and points in the *Atlas*, many laudable and critical ideas in play starting from the notion that librarians facilitate knowledge creation in their communities. Had this volume been spared the cumbersome architecture and purged of distracting asides, inside jokes, and digressions, it could well have achieved cult status among librarians and framed future discussions. As it stands, it buckles under its own unfulfilled ambitions.

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“Leading from the Middle,” and Other Contrarian Essays on Library Leadership, John Lubans, Jr. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2010. 298p. \$50 (ISBN 978-1-59884-577-8).

Seasoned library administrator, experienced library school professor, and eminently readable commentator on the library profession, John Lubans, Jr., possesses a