

Sustainable Librarianship: How librarians work with sustainability and what it means

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Abstract

This presentation will provide insights into ‘sustainable librarianship,’ that is, how librarians work with sustainability and what this work might mean for our future understanding of libraries and librarianship. Sustainability and sustainable development have been a focus of libraries since the 1990s and increasingly since the 2010s. Sustainability is often associated with the dramatic climate changes of our current day and age. But sustainability and sustainable development are more than climate activism and environmentally friendly solutions. It is fundamentally about ensuring living conditions for present and future generations in environmental, economic, social, and cultural terms. This holistic understanding of sustainable development forms the basis for the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In recent years, libraries have engaged in sustainability and sustainable development issues, from the International Federation of Library Associations and Organisations (IFLA) to local public libraries worldwide. Sustainable librarianship can be expressed in many ways, depending on which understanding of sustainability is dominant, referring to the environmental, economic, social, or cultural understanding of sustainability. Sometimes, ideas about sustainability are most clearly present in the architecture and design of the building, sometimes in the services and events that the library offers, and sometimes in facilitating opportunities for library users to act on sustainability issues. Sharing initiatives, alternative collections, and community engagement activities are just some examples of this work. But why are libraries, or rather librarians, engaging in the sustainability agenda? What are the rationales behind such work? How is this expressed in library practice? And what are the implications of this work on our understanding of the role of libraries and, not least, librarians? In this presentation, I hope to offer insights that help to answer these questions. I will do so by drawing on a literature review of 102 scientific publications from 1997 to 2021 on libraries, sustainability, and sustainable development (Mathiasson and Jochumsen 2022) and a case study of a public library sharing initiative called The Sustainable Library (Mathiasson and Jochumsen 2023). Reflecting on the findings from these studies, I hope to inspire a discussion of sustainable librarianship and what it might mean for our understanding of libraries and librarianship in the future.

Keywords: libraries, librarianship, sustainability, sustainable development, Sustainable Development Goals

References

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