Future Activities of Academic Libraries
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For the last few years there has been a continuing discussion on the future shape and activities of libraries, especially academic. Librarians and library/information science researchers have identified many factors that influence the constitution, staffing, activities and usage of academic libraries. However it has been very difficult to predict the future and clearly say what those libraries need to do to survive as useful academic units. Now it seems that more recent views on the problem are converging and beginning to draw a consistent image on the possible directions that libraries should take.

Reorganizing library space

There is no doubt that the information role of library is decreasing. Students (and also researchers) more frequently direct their questions and problems to internet search engines rather than to libraries [BL&JISC Study, 2008]. Also, a short visit to a „traditional" library concentrating on handling paper resources shows that there are virtually no users there. Instead, students need space for meetings, discussions, groupwork, relaxation and access to the internet. The Deplhi study undertaken by Feret and Marcinek [Feret, Marcinek, 2005] predicted that in 10 years (i.e. in 2015) as much as 50% of research books and 90% of research journals will be distrubuted in electronic form. While books are still far from reaching this prediction (according to Wiley, still 80% of books are published in print), estimates state that 80% of journals were being distributed in electronic version in 2012 [Wiley, unpublished]. Not far from the 90% predicted for 2015. The same study predicts that in 2015 only 25% of university students will physically visit their library at least once in the academic year for information purposes. Another 50% will visit the library at least once a year for other reasons (relaxation, groupwork, meeting friends). All these trends should turn the attention of library managers to reorganizing library space. From print stacks to open, inviting spaces. Space encourages interactions, meetings, building communities. Still of course with information resources to hand, but available effortlessly, with no barriers.

The library as guide in an information mess

The JISC report [BL&JISC Study, 2008] reveals ways young researchers look for information:

- 89% of students use search engines to begin any information search
- 93% are satisfied with the experience with a search engine
- information literacy among young people has not improved despite widening access to technology
- little time is spent evaluating the information found
- young people have poor understanding of their information needs
- faced with a long list of search hits, young people find it difficult to assess the relevance of the materials presented and often print off pages with no more than a perfunctory glance at them

On the other hand, the number of research articles read by the average US researcher grew from 150 in 1977, to 280 in 2005 [Tenopir, King, 2008], while the length of the day has not increased and still remains 24 hours. This means that researchers need to spend a higher percentage of their time on reading and analysing the information found than on actually looking for it.

In this environment, one can hardly find institutions and people more appropriate than libraries and librarians to guide readers through the information mess, and help them find proper information faster. There is still a place for the library to assist users to increase their information literacy, to distinguish between reliable and not-so-reliable sources of information, and to evaluate resources.

Embrace technologies, go mobile

With hundreds of technology gadgets around, libraries should not be surprised by users entering the library and asking to provide learning or research resources in the way most convenient for them. Of course, there always be users looking for traditional books, but they will be requesting electronic content for mobile devices more and more frequently. Are libraries able to provide it? Will it be content, which is „required by users" (as opposed to the content, which is simply „available to libraries")? Can we handle technology? Can we produce the electronic content other than digitized old paper books and journals? What if students come asking for a podcast from the latest lecture they missed?

Even ebook readers can hardly find a place in libraries.

Libraries and librarians need to keep up with the progress of technology and information exchange. There is nothing worse than incomprehension of the language users use: „is there mobi of this book available for my kindle?". Librarians need constant training, constant interaction with new technologies including mobile devices. And they should be ready to provide flexible legal models of access to the most requested library content in electronic form for all kinds of devices. That's really a challenge.

„The global local and the local global"

Globalization cannot bypass libraries. One of the trends in society identified by Thomas Frey of the DaVinci Institute [Frey, 2006] is that „the demand for global information is growing exponentially". In fact, in the research world, the country with the biggest publication output is still the USA. But countries with the biggest output growth (dynamics of change) between 1997 and 2007 were China (500% growth), Korea (200% growth) and Brazil (160% growth) [Elsevier]. There are more and more international research collaborations. The number of patents published in Asian languages bring problems to European and American patent examiners because of their inability to read, translate and understand them. World distribution of research and education is changing. Students from China and Korea are coming to study in the universities of Central Europe. It is therefore crucial for societies to be prepared for citizen migration and create libraries to serve multi-cultural societies. Learn languages, learn cultures and customs, collect multi-language resources... That's the main task in this field.

On the other hand, electronic content can be available everywhere, regardless of the location of the library. Whether in Poland, Slovakia, France or the US, we can all have access to the same, global databases. So what will make a library unique? It seems that the future power of local libraries will lay in rich local content, shared with a 'global' world. Libraries should look for resources that nobody else can have and make them available globally. Digitize old local newspapers, collect and digitize postcards and pictures, artworks of local artists, special collections... Try to collect local information even if today it cannot be digitized (smells, sounds, etc.). And most important: make a home for them in the library and make these collections available to the World.

Keep calm and carry on...

In all this information mess, libraries should not forget to carry on their routine functions and activities: collecting resources and providing access to them. One cannot forget that the majority of reliable resources are still commercial and paid. While not underestimating Open Access, we should remember that 70-80% of journals are NOT Open access and libraries should take care of providing access to these resources. Negiotiations with providers, membership of consortia, analyzing usage – are still the domain of libraries. A very important domain! Also, printed resources are still powerful and libraries should take proper care in selection and purchase of these.

Be useful for 'mother' university

Last but not least: academic libraries are part of the university structure. They should have the skills and knowledge to accommodate the changing environment of higher education. University heads need more help in citation analyses – go for that! They need a place to host e-learning at the university – go for it! Students need space for presentation rehersals – find a proper place in library to accommodate them! The more open we are for the needs of the university, the more appreciated the library will be. It will almost always require „classical librarians" to change their roles, to perform non-librarian activities, to swallow their „librarian pride", but it's all for good!

Will we be more proud of ourselves and our profession if we are exctinct?

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