Reinventing Academic Libraries for the Post-Digital Era

This issue of Signum is focused on themes around the LIBER Conference to be held in Helsinki, from June 29th to July 1st 2016. We introduce developments in different sectors of Finnish libraries, especially from the perspectives of openness of information and open science.

Throughout their long history, the basic role of academic libraries has been to ensure open access to scholarly publications. This task has remained the same from the very beginning when unique manuscripts were copied manually, through to the collecting of printed resources, to the current days of providing access to digital resources. In the past, when knowledge resources were a rarity, the collection itself lay at the very core of the academic library, and networking between libraries made it possible to disseminate those scarce resources between different academic libraries and their users.

This situation was revolutionized by the advent of digital documents and the creation of digital networks; these changed the paradigm of academic publishing. The optimists and idealists of the 1990s thought that the digital revolution in scientific publishing would lead to open access to all scientific results for all humankind. How wrong they were! We have erected even stronger fences between those who have and those who have not – access to scientific publications is now more restricted than ever. The digitization of the scholarly work has even started to challenge the possibility of the academic library network conducting inter-library loans. This avenue has now started to look like a cul-de-sac.

Today, if the academic library network is to play any role in scholarly discovery, it must adopt an ethically transparent policy. It has to proclaim that there must be only open and openly-published scholarship. If not, then scholarship will be transformed into a world of rumours and secrets; this will become a millstone that will slow down the global development of scholarly advances. The present information environment that has forgotten its history is actually starting to be a barrier to serious academic work. Thus, we need to reinvent the academic libraries for the post-digital era.

The recent discussion about open science has emphasized the need to ensure access to research documents to every reader, and this should not be dependent on the individual's ability to pay for the increasing costs demanded by academic publishers. Today, openness and transparency are crucial to the development of research: we have already seen promising results emerging from data mining and other digital techniques that surpass the abilities of the human mind to handle huge

masses of digital data. It is most likely that this approach will lead to discoveries that open new vistas in our understanding of human behaviour and the natural world.

This poses new challenges for academic libraries and their leaders as well as demands for new services. First and foremost, it will be essential to invent a new business model for scholarly publishing. It must be recognized that publishing incurs costs that must be covered, especially in the digital environment where long-time preservation of data seems to be a growing, albeit largely unpredictable, cost. Perhaps the most fruitful way would be that publishers and libraries would combine their forces in order to find a reasonable compromise for the division of labour and tasks.

Open access to both digital publishing and research data will mean that libraries and library staff have much to learn. Most of us have fond memories of the book-filled library and its customs; in fact, we feel comfortable with those memories. But such nostalgia poses a huge risk; many of the traditional practices originating from the printed era have been carried into the digital era but now it seems as if we are imprisoned by them. Functioning in digital data needs completely new approaches and skills, especially when one considers the services and applications needed to efficiently implement new data mining.

This new world will need much more than creating new library networks and improving their ability to combine forces. It will be essential to influence policy makers to provide the resources necessary to create these new services and collections. One could envisage the creation of a global collection policy that will not only guarantee access to printed resources but at the same time devise an effective way to ensure the long-time preservation and use of these digital documents. The digital environment seems to be facing the same dangers as many threatened species in our natural world – masses of unique information becomes extinct every day and thus future research may not be able to exploit hard-won but now lost knowledge.

It is evident that academic libraries and research library associations have an important role in creating the future we seek. We are no longer blue-eyed innocents, believing that digital technologies would hand us easy solutions to all kinds of problems. Today, we are all too aware that this is not the case. Nonetheless, libraries must view this current situation as an opportunity, and not treat it as a threat, if they are to make a crucial contribution to the future, not only scholarship but for all humankind.

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