THE INTEGRATION OF DIGITAL LIBRARY SERVICES IN AN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction

The topic of this paper is the integration of digital library services in an academic environment. A model of library-customer integration developed at Linköping University is presented. We also discuss how new academic library models based on the new digital information environment interfere with traditional principles of library work in a way that challenge core values in the role of the academic librarian. By examining its practical consequences we argue that the implementation of this kind of models is not just a matter of making structural or organizational changes, but of changing everyday thinking patterns.

Fundamental for this paper is the view that the revolution of information technology has been adopted very effectively by the libraries but without producing any dramatic changes in the traditional principles and strategies that guide the everyday work and priorities. Even though the academic information environment still is turbulent and there is little consensus on what a successful academic library will look like in the future, it must be regarded as very problematic that principles of the old information environment continue to rule the new electronic information era.

Another important assumption that is made in this paper is that the new digital information environment implies a shift in perspective, that can be described as not viewing the universe in terms of libraries centrally located for users, but instead a universe where each user being surrounded by libraries and other information assessing opportunities (cnfr Herman, 2001; Sack 1986).

New technology and traditional thinking

On the one hand it can be argued that dramatic changes have been made at academic libraries in response to the new digital information environment. Most academic libraries, including Linköping University Library, offers a wide range of digital services and resources. But on the other hand, at a closer examination, one will find that these services and resources are mainly organized according to traditional library principles. In the case of Linköping a guiding principle for the virtual library has up to recently been to create systematic and well organized general services and e-resources, for example subject specific gateway services. The virtual part of the library functioned as an extension of the traditional library, an enterprise on the side with relatively low priority, except for of e-journals. A low usage of existing services was often put in relation to researchers' lack of practice of web technology etc. This description is probably adequate for a great number of university libraries that have become, and will stay, a kind of hybrid library.

It goes without saying that the first step in the development of the digital library has been to make it accessible to its users. But by continuing to concentrate too eagerly on delivering

functions and accessibility, there is a risk that new digital services are created, not in accordance with their own logic, but rather adjusted to the logic of the traditional library. One example of this traditional way of thinking is the extensive collections of web-resources that are treated as if they were as homogeneous as books and with the result that by the time any potential user gets across this resource it is obsolete. It is important not only to pay attention to technical solutions, but to take a step further and focus on how these solutions should be used in order to be of practical use to students, teachers and researchers.

The library is coming to the user not vice versa

One of the most important characteristics of the digital breakthrough is that it breaks down the barriers of geography and time. What previously made academic libraries regarded as something at the side of the core academic activities has thereby vanished. There is an opportunity to erase the boundaries between information seeking and learning as separate activities. We suddenly find ourselves in a new situation where information seeking and learning take place at the same time. We are confronted with a new and critical key concept where time and place no longer are obstacles, namely *context*. The natural limitations are no longer given in the same way as they used to be but have to be created continuously and together with others. We suddenly have to act on the other half of the field and under different conditions than the ones we are used to.

In his examination of end-users in academia Herman (2001) argues that it is only by understanding the motivating forces behind researchers' and teachers' adoption of information technologies that academic libraries can attain the goal of new information infrastructures. The solution is close cooperation with these groups. This is also a major motive for those who argue that whether academic libraries will succeed as an institution in the future is related to the way they succeed in establishing alliances with faculty based on shared credentials and interests. As Crowley (2001) puts it: libraries without faculty allies are simply not players on a university campus.

Ross Todd (2002), among others, has pointed out that this new electronic information environment has major implications for information literacy initiatives. He suggests tailor information to individuals rather than massproduced delivery. "At the core of this is critically evaluating the educative role of the librarian somewhat beyond the mastery of databases, sources and collections, and, through a shared learning framework, examining how real value can be added to the real needs of information seekers" (p 8).

What are the results when this perspective - the libraries moving out of their buildings - is incorporated into new strategic initiatives regarding integrating digital library services in new contexts?

A model of integration

At Linköping University a project was initiated with the aim of incorporating these ideas into a new model for the integration of digital library services in research and education contexts. The project is a collaboration between the University library and three major departments including the department of Business Administration and the department of Construction & Production Technology. Fundamental to this model is to:

• Focus virtual library tools as instruments for *integrating* library services and resources in the daily work of research units and course/curriculum activities. The services and resources developed within this project should be custom made from a teaching/faculty

perspective. That is important as we know that the use of electronic resources, more than traditional ones, corresponds to direct and specific needs.

Refine and direct information in accordance with needs assessment. The critical question:
are we doing this for our users or ourselves - is even more important today as we tend to
create technical solutions before knowing exactly what problems these are supposed to
solve in our eagerness to respond to new but unanalyzed demands from the surrounding
environment. The key factor here, as well as in the above paragraph, is cooperation
between librarians and teachers and students.

Put in practice, the first step was to establish the library at departments and research groups involved in the project as a natural part of their web structures. The aim is not only to connect the homepage of a department with the library homepage, but to develop local custom made library homepages for different units. We see the specialized librarian being able to establish him-/herself as a coordinator for web based information resources. A requirement being that the library is part of the living web milieu of that particular department or research unit.

At the next level tailor made web pages are made for courses and curriculums. This includes identifying special needs of active library support on course level and initiate librarian-teacher alliances. The guiding-star here is flexible solutions in each case. In addition to custom made guides, digital course compendiums, temporary electronic collections the purpose is to make the librarian visible to students as a resource person when it comes to information matters. The librarian should not only be regarded as a resource when it comes to information retrieval related questions, but also for matters regarding for example copyright ethics and information literacy issues.

Challenging traditional principles

This model has now been in use within a project for one year and the preliminary results has lead to a discussion about expanding its use. For academic libraries like Linköping, for which this model means a new approach of library-customer integration, it has consequences on many areas that are principally interesting and problematic. Most obviously are the economic issues and questions that bring critical priorities to an edge. Another aspect concerns the social barriers involved in the process of integrating librarians closer to faculty. It also challenges current organizational structures as it will imply the use of temporary structures such as task forces and project groups. These are all relevant issues that have to be dealt with in order to begin using this model generally.

But another even more dramatic consequence that this kind of model implies is a gradual shift in relation to the principles traditionally directing the organization of the academic library. These shifts may be described as:

General services → Specialized, custom-made services Autonomy, objective → Outgoing, collaborative Traditional librarian skills → Academic, communication skills Collecting, sorting → Refining, directing General needs → Temporary needs

All of these traditional dimensions are strongly connected to the dominating image of the librarian, both among librarians themselves and among others. This means that this kind of

change of directions is not made just by strategic decisions. Ultimately, it raises questions like: What is an academic librarian?

Concluding remarks

This paper has described a local project where academic library services are being integrated into the context of education and research in a way that challenge the traditional role of librarians. A part from being an example of how academic libraries can respond to the new conditions created by the digitalization of the information environment, we have made some remarks on the underlying rationale of these integrating activities. Our purpose has been to discuss some new train of thoughts about the integration of digital services generated from a perspective were the mental picture of a centrally located library is abandoned. This perspective can be formulated as:

Academic libraries are today being extended *out to the field* where its customers are; and should not be seen as centrally placed institutions but as something students and researchers are being *surrounded by*, and as something that is built on context-relevant alliances with researchers and teachers

Today this is a well known reality for all academic libraries and a logical consequence of the virtual library. Still, it is hardly a main *perspective* adopted by the librarians themselves. And it is not necessarily thought of as being a critical issue; it is probably thought of more in terms of new technology giving libraries new opportunities beside the core activities, rather than being a circumstance that changes the core itself and even changes the realms of the traditionally organized academic library as a whole. Some writers have gone as far as regarding this being the end of the line of the traditional library model (Noam, 1997).

Behind such visions, there is an assumption that the digital availability of information at some point will reach a critical mass forcing us to totally re-evaluate the function of the physical library. Already at this stage we find ourselves at the point where we need to discuss the relation between traditional services and the new digital ones.

References

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