

New Roles for Academic Libraries in Scientific Information

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In this presentation I will focus on the situation and development of academic libraries both in a macro and micro perspective. The macro perspective comprises society as a whole, higher education and research – areas in which libraries believe they have little or no influence.

The micro perspective comprises conditions within the libraries or within the political and economic framework of the libraries.

My remarks are formed by 27 years of experience from the law library¹ of the University of Oslo². Judging by the number of library visitors, the number of visits to our home-pages and the size of our collections, our library is a fairly large law library by international standards. It has twenty full-time staff, out of which eighteen professional librarians, and an equivalent number of part-time students.

Society: Some Characteristics

- It is characteristic of most European countries that knowledge, education and new forms of communication are economic values and hence important areas of commitment.
- A consequence of today's accelerating technological development is a demand for new knowledge, new disciplines and professions.
- The educational market is less national than before. The European Market and the internationalization in most fields require knowledge of other countries' culture and language.
- The increasing international competition in the areas of higher education and research affects private as well as public educational institutions.

Higher Education: The Universities

My reflections regarding the problems and challenges of the universities are also based on knowledge of my parent organization, The University of Oslo. It has always been a public university with all funds covered by the national budget. But the trend we have seen over the last years is a reduction in the university budget and an increasing gap between the needs of the university and the allocated resources. Therefore the university must also look for external funding and income in order to increase or even maintain the quality of research and teaching. Irrespective of public or private funds, high quality is the most important factor in the competition for academic staff, students and economic resources.

However, recruiting highly qualified academic staff by offering good salaries has not been possible at the University of Oslo and when the salary is low, it affects the social status. What remain as recruitment factors are idealism and a quest for knowledge.

The university must adapt to the new requirements of society, must meet the needs of the private and public sector and must accept the challenges of life-long learning, remote teaching, post-graduate education, problem-based learning, interactive teaching methods and digital course-material. The physical presence of student or teacher is no longer self-evident.

I will not attempt to suggest possible strategic solutions for the university, but it is evident that it must function as a flexible and open system, a system that is willing to change - a condition for survival in today's competitive market oriented society. But the traditional values and ideas that the university has built up over the centuries must also be respected and protected in the future.

THE ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Introduction

The academic libraries have always played an important role in the life of the universities. They have been regarded as essential to research and academic studies. Physically, they have often been situated in the middle of campus and thought of as „the heart of the university“. They have also been a valuable resource for other parts of society. We see that technology today makes it possible to implant artificial hearts and manipulate the human genes. We may well wonder what implants will replace the library?

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Which Commitments Should the Academic Libraries Make?

It is said that knowledge workers will be the most important profession in this century. Who are they? In my opinion there is no doubt that they are the information specialists – our librarians. Through the years they have developed a knowledge and methodology in collection management, quality assessment and retrieval that are indispensable whether we are dealing with printed or digital information.

Even though students, teachers, researchers move in a digital world with fast access to the core body of knowledge from their personal computer, they still visit the library. Why? Because the library is committed to solve their information needs and personal communication is still the best way. The library is also a forum for discussion and a social meeting place.

This complex situation gives us, in my view, one main commitment: to serve the hybrid or multifunctional library in years to come.

New Commitments – Dare We Choose?

Do we have the competence, the resources, the support to attack new areas of development? Do we know the real information needs of our users in years to come?

It will be years before we can answer these questions. Do we have time to wait for the answers? The answer is no! We must dare make choices now.

Evidently, the choice of commitment varies between libraries, depending on the institution's infra-structure and special needs. In the following I will present some of the areas chosen by our library that should be of interest to other academic libraries.

Scanning of Printed Texts

Our goal is to improve availability to material difficult to access or in other words, to meet the needs of our users in a speedy and rational way.

In our library we have had an increasing demand for translated versions of Norwegian legislation, not least from abroad. The Norwegian authorities have never approached this problem in a systematic way. Acts have been translated more or less ad hoc, many stored in the Foreign Office. We set out to collect whatever existed of translated acts and have constructed a database available

on Web called Translated Norwegian Legislation³, and we have scanned the documents into the database. Search keys are date, number, words in title (any language). Due to copyright rules not all acts are in digital form. The database also has an index of the printed acts only available in the library. In addition there are links to the official Norwegian texts in Lovdata (host for the Norwegian legal information system).

No one else had endeavoured to undertake anything of this kind before, as it had not been considered commercially interesting. To us, it has been economically interesting. We are spared the work of retrieving, copying and dispatching. The database itself was developed in co-operation between library staff and staff committed to the digitization project of the University library. There is free access. Perhaps we ought to turn it into a fee-based service? At any rate we have acquired experience in what it takes to construct a database tailored to the need of our users and we have made our work visible to the surroundings. The database is visited by lawyers all over the world.

An Electronic Book

For many years we have given courses in library use and retrieval of legal sources for students at different levels. In 1997 one of my colleagues and I published the second edition of a textbook on the study of law (*Praktisk rettskildelære*). The Faculty of law introduced a new course in practical methodology for graduate students (Profesjonsstudiet) in which our book became part of the curriculum.

When the book was published we negotiated a deal with the publisher, giving us the liberty to produce an electronic Internet version of the book. To accomplish this we managed to get external funding and technological expertise from outside. The electronic book was completed in six months.

The book has become an interactive netbook with hyperlinks to the text and to electronic sources elsewhere on the Internet, features impossible to implement in a printed version. The book is continuously updated.⁴

The project has given us experience on many levels and has been noticed by the faculty. The academics have, moreover, discovered a potential for their own future textbook production.

Gateways to Subject Information on Internet

Studies of the excellence of search engines show that robots are not a reliable agent for retrieving scholarly information. Out of a billion web-pages only 5 - 7 % represent academic material, the best engines merely cover 10 to 20 % and a great deal is out-dated. This chaotic picture needed some structure in order to serve our users.

For several years we collected legal links and organized them primarily according to nation. But as more and more legal information world wide became digital, Web grew rapidly in importance as a resource for the legal world and we realized that something drastic had to be done. In the summer 1999 we chose the database programme Roads as administrative tool for our link collection. First of all we had to learn the programme, set up specifications and working routines. Major goals were to organize the links according to subject and to involve most of the staff in the process. Our ambition was, and still is, that this Internet-based information service should have the same quality as our traditional paper-based collections. We have allocated 15 % of the staff to this task. Two librarians work half-time with input of data, coding, describing and assuring quality. Most of the other staff members spend about 10 % of their time supervising the Internet within their respective fields and suggesting new links to be included (title and description)

In January 2000 the two other Norwegian university law libraries in Bergen and Tromsø joined the venture and thus what started out as a collection of links turned into the Norwegian gateway to law information.⁵

What are the consequences for our library of this new service? In relation to new technology we have taken on a new role. This is essentially what we always have done: evaluating, describing and making available. With the gateway to law we have provided researchers and students with a good tool towards finding legal sources on the net, and we have given the reluctant ones a temptation to get started.

As there is free access to the database, the legal profession outside academia has discovered the value of our work. We are now negotiating with the Norwegian Bar Association regarding co-operation in the future development of the database.

There are no great costs involved in such a project, but it entails, as all new projects, a change in priorities and the rationalization of other tasks. With a

professional staff full of enthusiasm and highly IT-qualified this change has been possible.

Competence Development

A lot of what we do today demands another competence than that we acquired at Library school a few years back. In today's situation it is evident that staff development/staff training is time consuming, but nevertheless essential to the organization. Extensive use of own staff for competence development strengthens competence and increases the library's general teaching qualifications. Strategies for staff development may take place on different levels:

Firstly, to ensure a general high standard of competence for all staff. Secondly, to tailor competence for special tasks (areas of work) or special groups of staff to make staff more focused on the relationship between competence and their field of work.

Personally, I am a very slow IT-learner – might have something to do with age? But that's not the only reason why I am impressed by my staff's ability to tackle new technology. They seem to have the mentality: We will figure this out! We do not want to rely entirely on the computer experts. This is one of the reasons why we have been able to engage in and succeed in so many projects. The combination of librarianship and IT knowledge gives greater insight in potential areas of development than mere computer knowledge. Therefore I believe in developing relevant IT expertise in my own organization. I must admit, however, that we sometimes need purely technological expertise and we have recently engaged a computer technician as well.

Paradoxically, having a staff qualified in IT technology represents a danger. They can be tempted to take better-paid jobs outside the academic world. In order to keep the best there must be a change in personnel policy at the university, allowing to a much larger extent than today, the possibility, for instance, of salary differentiation. But to achieve this, we need acceptance from the head of the university and understanding from the unions and professional organizations.

Other Projects

As time is limited I will only list a few of the other projects we have undertaken, some of which are consortia based:

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- Electronic journals
- Outsourcing and centralized solutions
- Research documentation and mediation
- Fundraising

Library Management

The context for library management for the last thirty years has been one of change, which means that the library constantly has to deal with new territory, adapt to new demands and refashion services to meet changing needs. For library managers there is a great challenge in inspiring staff to address all these new areas of work and thus turn the library into the flexible organization it needs to be.

Considerable time should be spent in helping staff to find ways of rationalizing everyday routines and making change in priorities. In my organization we have developed a relatively „flat“ structure which entails that all staff must know something about everything in addition to being experts within limited fields. This makes it easier to involve more people in project-related work and have others take over other tasks that need to be taken care of. We all know the benefits of teamwork: there is the effect of synergy and the good feeling of participating towards a common goal. For the team spirit it is important that as many as possible have ownership in the results of our achievements.

On several occasions I have emphasized the importance of promoting our services. In the struggle for resources and positions we have to improve our marketing strategies. On many occasions the head of the library could well be an important promoter. But as we address a highly skilled and intellectual „consumer“-group accustomed to making their own evaluations, the best promotion is the product itself: quality service that satisfies the users' information needs.

With networks and resource-sharing co-operation on different levels is more relevant than ever, e.g.:

- Co-operation with the academic environment of the parent organization
- Co-operation with end-users to ensure a user-centered library
- Co-operation with other libraries, publishers and computer scientists

Concluding Remarks

Electronics has not yet superseded the paper-based environment, the printed media, on the contrary. Due to the latest in computers, network technology, digital printing and scanning methods there are more printed pages produced than ever before. But the academic libraries are only able to purchase a small fraction of the total academic production. The future trend for book acquisition will surely follow the development we have seen for periodicals: only acquisition of the publications most in demand, basic literature and the predicted future classics.

For the rest, information fulfillment will be based on a combination of electronic interlending, some kind of „last minute“ delivery and retrieval of digital documents.

But this is a development that will not diminish the librarians' position as intermediaries and managers of knowledge. The challenge for the library is therefore to strengthen its position as an institution that meets the information needs of its end-users regardless of the relative importance of its own collections.

In what way have the projects I described earlier in my talk affected our library? First of all, we have created some indispensable tools to help solve our problems, but more important, we have demonstrated the almost „unmeasurable“, that our work has provided value-added services. This has in turn resulted in the willingness of the faculty and external funds to give more backing, to allocate more resources to our library.

This spring, we have observed and noted the turbulence on the stock exchanges all over the world due to the rise and fall of computer shares. We experience, on the contrary, that our library's shares steadily rise. Why? First of all, because we are not a shareholder company or a purely commercial enterprise in a speculative branch. Secondly, because we represent an institution that works towards ideal long-term goals without a bias to short-term rewards. We value knowledge and quality above dividends and options. Therefore we must seize the opportunity to tell our environment that it pays to rely on us.

If we apply technology in a reasoned way, we will contribute to the further development and innovative use of existing tools, to the benefit of our users. Moreover, if we are open to new developments in research, learning and technology, we will always keep ahead in what is our field: academic and professional information.

References

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