

Changes for librarians

*Bas Savenije
University librarian
Utrecht University*

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The changing role of libraries

In the past decades a lot of changes have taken place in the services and infrastructure of university libraries as a consequence of developments in information technology.

The first wave of library computerisation took place in the seventies. Manual back-room activities, such as acquisition, distribution and cataloguing, were turned into computer-controlled activities. This period also saw the introduction of various electronic databases and the on-line public access catalogue (OPAC).

During the second wave of library computerisation, which started in the nineties, the focus was on the deployment of computer networks providing access to remote electronic information. Since then, access to electronic information is no longer limited to so-called secondary information. Primary information has now become available electronically as well.

One far reaching consequence is the decreasing prominence of the library's physical collection and the corresponding increase in the importance of information reference. The library is becoming a gateway, referring users to information irrespective of the location where that information is physically stored.

Of course, libraries still buy books. But the number of books bought is decreasing annually, as well as the number of books circulated.

The majority of the scholarly journals is now electronically available and many libraries are cancelling print subscriptions in favour of electronic access. As a consequence of the worldwide Open Access movement there is also a growing number of peer reviewed journals without a subscription fee.

But libraries are not restricting themselves to simply providing access. It is also their task to provide additional services. They provide search facilities that enable the user to search simultaneously in journal packages of different publishers. They develop personal alerting systems according to a profile defined by the user himself. They select (often with the help of research groups) the relevant open access sources relevant for each user group. They develop portals that help the user in searching and organising the information sources relevant for his own purposes. And they give advice whenever it is needed.

In doing so libraries try to enable the university's primary processes by integrating their services as much as possible in research and learning.

Some implications

These developments have a number of important implications.

Faculty are visiting the library building less and less. Especially in STM-disciplines, faculty rely heavily on journals and these are now electronically available. On the other hand, large numbers of students are still visiting the library, but only in a limited extent to use its physical collection. They want to search, retrieve, and process information, and they need computer facilities to do so. Consequently, the library building is becoming a learning resource center.

Some of the back office processes are changing dramatically, for instance selection and acquisition. They are to a large extent replaced by negotiations about licenses. The financial aspects of these licenses differ from the traditional subscriptions, which makes it necessary to develop new financial models for the distribution of costs within the university.

Where printed journals are replaced by electronic ones, also the handling of documents is changing. It will be necessary to make a rational analysis of work flow processes to realise this change in an efficient way.

Libraries suddenly are confronted with competition. Publishers are developing services directly for endusers. Google has developed Google Scholar: a search engine directed towards scholarly information. However, the advantage the library has in comparison to their competitors is their knowledge of research and learning, and their direct contacts with faculty and students. This enables them to create added value to the information sources: services tailored to each specific target group.

Also this competition urges libraries to innovate outside the traditional library functions. A good example is the creation of institutional repositories: archives of the scientific output of the university, collected and preserved by the library and made accessible through the university's website. Also a number of libraries develop services for the faculty to enable them to publish their publications without interference of traditional publishers.

As a consequence, the technical infrastructure becomes ever more important. The library makes use of a growing number of "systems": not only the traditional library system, but also, for instance, a system for the management of e-sources and a system for the repository.

Changing demands on librarians

These developments bring forward changing demands on library staff.

Service staff is being confronted with a growing demand for help with the use of computers: technical questions, questions about interfaces, but also questions concerning the search for information.

Libraries used to be collection driven. In the past decades they have become more and more driven by demand, but since library use becomes interactive they now have to take into account the demands of different individual users. This asks for a different attitude

and many libraries are organising training sessions or workshops to help their staff to meet these new demands.

Information specialist and subject librarians now have to behave like account managers. They should have a thorough knowledge of their target groups and their demands and maintain a network of faculty members that are valuable for the library.

In the back office the need for library staff is somewhat decreasing in cataloguing and document handling. The handling of electronic resources is relatively less intensive, but also less routine and, especially with new licenses, rather complicated.

Then there are many demands on the IT staff: for managing the library systems but also for new developments. Often libraries now use open source software (for instance for repositories), which nevertheless calls for devoted IT staff.

While the library is constantly changing, a different kind of managers is needed: they should be able to create and implement change. Financial expertise also becomes more important. Not only because of the different licensing agreements, but also as a consequence of decreasing budgets. Management information and benchmarking are becoming important issues.

Summarising one might say that while the library may need less staff in the back office, there is a general need for staff with higher qualifications: user driven, IT-knowledge, knowledge of the university, knowledge of where the library is going. Also stronger managing capacities for managers and department heads are needed. And all this knowledge should be kept up to date.

Last but not least, library staff should be more flexible than in the past. Libraries used to be a stable working environment. Now the only thing one can be sure of, is that the library will keep on changing in the next decades.