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(Technical) University libraries and public libraries : collaborate to provide access to information for all!

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Abstract

University libraries all over the world have managed to acquire access to large databases of scientific information. And many have set up repositories as 'green road open access' to assure free access to their own published academic output. And in order to pave the way for 'golden road open access' on the longer term.

How could these efforts also be profitable for public libraries? Many of them are targeting their services to new user groups. Like professionals in many disciplines, who would be very interested to be able to get access to academic information via the public library.

And even the general public, being the traditional public library user, has a growing interest in academic information. University libraries could address access for a general public already during their negotiations with publishers.

At the same time public libraries could profile themselves towards university libraries as a stepping stone to reach a broader audience and fulfil the demand in academia to create more social and economic value with their scientific results.

When looking at technical university libraries the public library could be used as an easy entrance to get more people interested in technical sciences and as a means to attract more students. The public library will develop into a natural channel for these efforts when both types of library will learn to collaborate more.

Introduction

Frank Sessa, Director of the Miami Public Library wrote, already in 1962 (Sessa;1962), about the relationship between the public and the university library. In those days he described the general concern that students preferred to study at the public library instead of the university library; the public libraries felt overburdened by that phenomenon, while the university libraries thought this was quite exaggerated. They were involved in a heated dispute, even at a national scale, and the two types of library did not seem to try to approach each other.

Currently active collaboration between public libraries and university libraries is still a relatively uncommon phenomenon. But they do have now surpassed the level of mere quarrelling about student behaviour.

Remarkably now is that cooperation seems to be more common between national libraries and public libraries than between university libraries and public libraries. Collaboration is aimed at development and implementation of joint projects and activities around library and information services and technological innovation. It is about the establishment of a technology partnership, particularly with regard to the development of a joint strategy for digitization of holdings and the long-term preservation of digital information. Another activity is the creation of special digital collections which are of mutual interest and exploration of the possibilities of an exchange of digital collections. Finally the exchange of experts, scientific knowledge, experience and technologies in various areas of library and information activities.

Some examples:

In Sweden the Royal Library (KB) has, since 2011, an extended task from the Ministry of Culture to have overall responsibility for all publically funded libraries in Sweden. This new assignment infers that KB as a governmental authority now is responsible for conducting

national overview, promoting cooperation, driving development forward and monitoring all public libraries.

In the Netherlands the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science develops a new Library Act and with this Act they assign a new role to the National Library meaning that the National Library, as of 2015, will be the central player in organizing the 'national digital library'; they will as well get the strategic responsibility for the development and innovation of the public library field. The idea is that this national digital library in future will also contain the collections of the university libraries.

In the US a joint effort is put into the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). All libraries, archives and museums are working together in this gigantic project that will establish a platform and resources that will help libraries and other cultural heritage institutions to succeed in a digital era.

An example of international cooperation concerns the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek and Hong Kong public libraries.

In the next paragraphs I would like to show the importance of collaboration between public libraries and university libraries in two areas: access to information and knowledge valorisation.

Access to information: the university library as a resource towards the public library

In the last 15-20 years university libraries all over the world have managed to acquire access to large databases of scientific information.

The rising debate about 'open access' to publicly financed scientific information was a stimulating factor for many universities to start local repositories with national aggregators to be able to provide 'green road open access'. It was meant as a way to assure free access to their own published academic output and in good faith that this would pave the way for 'golden road open access' on the longer term. This now turns out to come true.

In Europe EIFL (www.EIFL.net) is an international not-for-profit organization with a global network of partners, running a wide range of programs and events designed to increase access to knowledge. Founded in 1999 they began by advocating for affordable access to commercial e-journals for academic and research libraries in Central and Eastern Europe. Today, EIFL partners with libraries and library consortia, both public and university libraries in more than 60 developing and transition countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Their philosophy is that access to knowledge is fundamental to education and research, but also to the improvement of lives, and the creation of human capital upon which the development of societies depends. Libraries play a key role through the provision of high quality information resources and services. However, factors such as the high cost of commercial e-resources, legal barriers and poor technology infrastructure risk leaving many people around the world behind. They managed to overcome many of these barriers.

The movement towards open access to information could be a turning point in access to scientific information for all users that were up to now deprived of this access. But open access to academic resources is still a longer term solution and one question is therefore still unanswered: how will users, not connected to academic institutions and therefore usually not allowed to have access to university resources be able to find and access this information, whether it is open or not? Through Google many of you will answer. Of course that is a possibility, my answer would be: through the public library. When public libraries and university libraries link their search mechanisms and systems, many users will be automatically lead to new information resources that were hidden from them up to now.

New user groups

Why would that be so important, I can hear my former (but also sometimes my current) colleagues ask. 'Ordinary' users are not interested in pure scientific information, they cannot understand it, so why bother...

My answer always was and still is: it is not up to us to decide for a user what he/she might be interested in. Think about all these professionals in many disciplines, who would be very

interested to be able to get easy access to academic information. Do university libraries reach, let alone serve those groups? I don't think so.

How could public libraries play their role? Many public libraries are looking for new ways to develop their services and give new meaning to their role towards a broad public. Many of them are therefore targeting their services to new user groups. By providing easy and preferably open access to scientific resources they could attract these new user groups, that are not being served elsewhere.

And even the general public, being the traditional public library user, shows a growing interest in academic information. University and public libraries together could extend their public role and significance by setting up services that provide 'translation' of academic information into formats understandable by larger user groups.

In the Netherlands, for instance, such a service is now set up for medical information, organised and financed by patient groups. Universities themselves could play their role in this as well, I will come to that later on.

Conditions

In order to reach this new situation, action should be taken both by university libraries and by public libraries.

University libraries/ consortia are actively involved in negotiations with the publishers about access to scientific information. As long as open access is not yet the standard they should address access for a general public already during their negotiations with publishers and try to find reasonable financial terms for other user groups to participate in a contract.

When negotiating open access they should negotiate access for public libraries as well. In the UK this is already recommended by a report on open access from the Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings, chaired by Dame Janet Finch (Working Group, 2012). The UK government has announced, that it will make publicly funded scientific research available for anyone to read for free. One of the recommendations is about Walk-in rights for the general public via public libraries, so they can have free access to global research publications owned by members of the UK Publishers' Association.

Public libraries for their part should be prepared to seek collaboration on a national scale to find financial resources to be able to join in schemes with university libraries, also when open access is not yet available. And of course they should approach new user groups that can profit from these extended resources offered by the public library.

Knowledge valorisation /knowledge transfer: the public library as a resource towards the university (library)

Universities invest in partnerships with industry and government, an activity that adds to the economy's innovative strengths of a country, and contributes substantially to the advancement of society. Universities foster their students' and scientists' entrepreneurial skills, stimulate innovation and knowledge valorisation. Universities, at least in the Netherlands, recently established departments for knowledge valorisation or knowledge transfer as a key pillar alongside those of research and education. Knowledge transfer makes scientific knowledge available to society and is seen as of major social significance.

In a recent paper Ingeborg Meijer (Meijer, 2012) addresses the societal returns of research in more detail. She presents a conceptual framework that builds upon logical models, science communication and productive interactions. It describes social, cultural and economic returns from science in professional, public and private domains that are connected to research through specific stakeholder interactions.

"Valorisation is a term mainly used in European countries: it is a French word which means 'to make useful, to use, to exploit'. Essentially, it should be understood as the process of making use of knowledge. Valorisation often only describes the transfer of knowledge into companies or to the commercial sector for economic benefit. Societal valorisation such as absorption by professionals, dissemination through education, networking platforms, communication to the broader public, is however equally relevant.

Valorisation is also often used to describe a one-way- interaction: the dissemination of scientific knowledge to society while it should be a more mutual, bi- directional learning process”.

When still a director at Delft University of Technology Library we started to work closely together with the department for Knowledge Valorisation (‘Valorisation Center’).

The library built up (access to) a patent portfolio and established a service providing direct access to scientists e.g. by organising meetings on specific subjects between Delft scientists and interested individuals. The library built exhibitions showing scientific results and by doing so addressed the general public as well.

Also other activities organised by the university, like popular versions of scientific articles and a museum for youngsters with representations of scientific findings, were contributing to knowledge valorisation.

This is exactly where public libraries could profile themselves towards university libraries as a stepping stone to reach a broader audience and fulfil the demand in academia to create more social and economic value with their scientific results. First, of course, the university library should take the initiative to involve itself in knowledge valorisation activities. By collaborating with local public libraries they will have an easy entrance to get more people interested in scientific results.

And when a public library already invested in a good relationship with professional user groups, like I discussed above, collaboration could even be more profitable to both the university and the public library. A direct link could be formed between these user groups and science groups within the university.

Another aspect where collaboration, especially between scientific and technical universities and public libraries, can be helpful is in the approach to students. In general (at least in the Netherlands) it is not easy to interest younger people to choose for a study in science or technology. Knowledge valorisation could be very helpful here: by presenting scientific results in a popular way young people could become fascinated. And the public library could also here play the role of linking pin: young people very often are still connected somehow to the public library and they could be introduced in a kind of natural way to the interesting aspects of science and technology.

Conclusion

Having worked now at both a university library and in the public library world it strikes me that there seems to be little inclination to look at and learn from each other. Librarians at either side have certain prejudices about the way they serve their own user group and are not meant to serve each other’s user groups. However it is my strong believe that both types of library could complement and support each other in providing easy access to information and be a platform for each other’s’ development.

IATUL could present itself as a supporter of this idea and open up the twinning initiative for this purpose!

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