



Guest Editorial

Introduction to the special issue: perspectives on research libraries

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Introduction to the special issue: perspectives on research libraries

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this article is to introduce the special issue of *Journal of Documentation* focusing on perspectives on research libraries.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper outlines the theme of the issue and its underlying problems.

Findings – The traditional services of research libraries may diffuse to other kinds of institutions. There is, however, a need for information specialists studying and improving research infrastructures. Future services probably need to be more focused, domain-specific and based on research in information science.

Originality/value – The introduction is written to assist readers surveying the issue and to share the thoughts of the editors in planning the issue.

Keywords Research libraries, Information science, Digital media, e-Scholarship

Paper type Viewpoint

Libraries in general and academic/research libraries, in particular, are important institutions from the point-of-view of information science. The main reason is that information science is mostly associated with schools of LIS (library and information science) which owe much of their historic justification to the education of librarians. This relationship has – at least implicitly – influenced the discipline's self-understanding and development although many topics, such as bibliometrics, bibliographic databases, internet search engines, domain analysis and others, have never been limited to the perspective of libraries as institutions. To consider information science/LIS the study of libraries (or for libraries) would be just as mistaken as to consider medicine the study of hospitals (or for hospitals). Nonetheless, libraries (together with other memory institutions, such as archives and museums) are important for information science.

This thematic issue is part of a research project funded by the Danish Ministry of Culture in 2011-2012. Apart from this issue, the research of the project has been reported in an anthology: *Viden i spil – forskningsbibliotekers funktioner i forandring* (English tr.: "Co-creators of knowledge. The changing functions of research libraries", Høyrup *et al.*, 2012), and a thematic issue of a Danish library journal (Hjørland and Høyrup, 2009). The authors thank the research council of the Ministry of Culture for their support.



Both public libraries and research libraries are seriously challenged by the developments in digital media (see Huymans and Hillebrink, 2008, for a very sharp analysis of the perspectives of public libraries). Research libraries are challenged because first their bibliographies and reference works, next their scholarly journals and now their books are published electronically, kept in the publishers' "digital libraries" and made accessible by publishers on commercial conditions. Research libraries no longer own copies of their journals but just connect the users to the publishers, and the same can very soon become the case for books (which, as it is well-known, only play a minor role in many sciences).

From the perspective of the editors, who are all researchers and scholars in information science, the most important thing is not whether the (research) libraries survive, but which professional functions are necessary to be performed in the future and which we should therefore educate our students to fulfill. If these tasks are performed by the publishers, libraries or by any other institution seems less important. Our focus is therefore on information services that do not define themselves as based on the conditions of physical documents in physical libraries. On the other hand, our perspective does take research libraries as the point of departure: we see much of the work concerning research infrastructures and information services to be in direct continuation of the tasks and processes performed by libraries.

The issue contains five contributions:

- (1) *Niels Ole Finnemann: Research libraries and the internet – on the transformative dynamic between institutions and digital media.* This article looks at the situation of research libraries from the broader perspective of the developments in digital media. The disruptive, revolutionary potential of these media is demonstrated in different stages of the development of the interrelationship between digitization, digital media and research libraries. Today the historical dynamic has reached a point where all institutions concerned with knowledge handling will have to redefine themselves. Research libraries are gradually incorporated into a number of new "research infrastructures" which are being built around different kinds of data materials. Each research library may specialize according to some sort of coordinated criteria.
- (2) *Hans Jørn Nielsen and Birger Hjørland: Curating research data: the potential roles of libraries and information professionals.* A great issue in the current literature about research libraries is their potential role of managing research data. The article studies the arguments for and against this task being performed by libraries and information professionals and presents the many competitors to libraries in this field. It does not, however, analyze or evaluate specific tools or services of data management. The paper looks into the definition and understanding of "data" (as well as the data-information-knowledge hierarchy) in order to illuminate the similarities and differences between the traditional roles of document management versus data management. Also, the many alternatives to research libraries as data curating institutions are considered. Although research libraries may also have important roles to play, much data is integratively produced and organized by other organizations, e.g. meteorological institutes, in which case it seems naive to consider libraries the main actor. An important new creation is the *Data*

Citation Index introduced October 2012 by Thomson Reuters on the platform of Web of Knowledge. Such centralized data registration (both general and domain specific) is a natural extension to bibliographic databases and thus a potential task for information professionals.

- (3) *Stefan Gradmann: From containers to content to context: the changing role of libraries in eScience and eScholarship.* This highly illustrated article considers the role of research libraries in relation to front-end technologies of the Internet such as the Semantic Web, the Resource Description Framework (RDF), “linked data”, the “web of things”, “nanopublications” etc. The author finds that “the actual distinction between documents, their content data and related metadata becomes increasingly meaningless and obsolete – the current discussion of data curation in scientific working environments probably reflects this change!” Concerning the role of research libraries/information professionals, the author suggests assisting researchers, for example, by developing:
 - semantic abstracting and named entity recognition to enable “strategic reading”;
 - contextualization of information objects as a basis for generating new potential knowledge; and
 - robust reasoning and inferencing tools yielding digital heuristics and hypotheses.
- (4) *Hans Dam Christensen: The framing of scientific domains: about UNISIST, domain analysis and art history.* This article continues the work by Fjordback Søndergaard *et al.* (2003) and Hjørland *et al.* (2005) in modelling scholarly domains from the point-of-view of information science. For the first time, the UNISIST-model is discussed in relation to a specific domain (art history, in case). The general idea is that advanced information seeking requires, or may at the least benefit from, knowledge of how information is organized in the domain being searched. There is a need for studies in all domains and these studies may serve both research libraries and information professionals in other institutions. We hope that this study may inspire more researchers to continue the analysis of the framing and the description and discussion of domains of all sorts.
- (5) *Elena Maceviciute: Research libraries in a modern environment.* This paper is a broad overview of trends in studies of research libraries as reflected, in particular, in the recent monographic literature. The author finds a “surprising resilience of research libraries and [. . .] ability to change within a short period of time”. Maceviciute argues that this ability makes research and academic libraries as organizations “perfectly adapted to the current times of incessant transformations, contrary to the widely spread stereotype and image of them as conservative institutions.”

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