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Online Issues Are Global

Carol Tenopir
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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Online Issues Are Global

THE INFORMATION INDUSTRY is international. With major English-language online publishers based in the Netherlands, Germany, and Canada (not to mention Alabama and New York), the information you lease may be generated and designed anywhere in the world. Likewise, the issues and challenges facing libraries as they move to large-scale digital collections are global in nature.

Conferences about digital libraries are also international; in September I attended "Digilib: Towards a User-Centered Approach to Digital Libraries" in Finland. Two hundred attendees from over 20 countries discussed how to gather user information for the purpose of designing more useful digital libraries. Sessions were organized around five main themes: methodology of user studies; usefulness and validity of digital resources in research; evaluation of digital library programs and services; impacts on learning and research; and new developments and future visions.

A highlight was the keynote speech by Lars Bjørnshauge, director of libraries, Lund University, Sweden. Bjørnshauge focused on the most important challenges that face digital libraries—and for which we lack solutions.

Content challenges

The first issue is content. Building digital collections remains a challenge from both the fiscal and the selection viewpoint. Because funds must be reallocated from print to digital, we are making choices that impact the future. My research shows that digital libraries are having a positive effect on user behavior: users are able to read more from a wider variety of sources, in less time, and rely on quick desktop access. But librarians need to assign monetary amounts to those

Carol Tenopir
(ctenopir@utk.edu)
is Professor at the
School of Information
Sciences, University
of Tennessee,
Knoxville

responses to justify their digital initiatives.

The trends are clear. The yearly Association of Research Libraries statistics (www.arl.org) show a continued increase in the expenditures for electronic materials and serials and a decrease in monograph purchasing. Since much digital information is leased rather than purchased, our collections and priorities are shifting.

> **W**ell-integrated digital collections create another problem: the loss of the library brand

Users must be assured that the information content we provide them today will still be available tomorrow; research shows that almost one-third of the articles a researcher uses are more than a year old.

Archiving, access, and integration

Archiving is another unresolved issue. Initiatives that leave archiving to publishers or national libraries may not be the best solution, according to Bjørnshauge. Libraries are still working out how to cooperate to make digital archiving workable and reliable, but archiving is ultimately our responsibility.

Access is both a legal and a technical issue. Some license agreements require controlling access or authenticating users, which may be barriers to use. I wonder how to make access easier, while still gathering information that will provide insights into user behavior. Privacy concerns, license agreement restrictions, and usage data all become part of the access conundrum. Access is also a fiscal issue. Subscription or one-time purchase payments encourage increased access; pay-per-use deters it.

Integration is a related challenge. Bjørnshauge bemoaned many different services and interfaces and redundancy among online services. In addition, libraries must decide how best to integrate

open access material into the library catalog. Are library portals or linking software the best solution? Should we adapt commercial software like federated searching tools or develop application software ourselves? At one time we thought Z39.50 would solve the "too many interfaces" problem. Now it seems as if the solution is a Google-like design.

Personalization, user training

Research shows the variety of personal searching styles and preferences. One solution to this diversity is to build more personalization into our online systems. Bjørnshauge spoke of the need for tailored library and information services that will provide a virtual one-stop shop. MyLibrary interfaces can incorporate table of contents services and current awareness alerts and, in academic libraries, fit in with courseware-managed learning.

A related unresolved issue, according to Bjørnshauge, is the call for increased and improved user training—both online and face to face. With numerous interfaces, the need for information literacy, and the habits of Google-entrenched users, training is needed more than ever before.

Well-integrated digital collections create another problem: the loss of the library brand. Virtual users don't know what digital materials are selected, paid for, and provided by the library. Library branding of web-based materials is essential for future support of the library.

The whole package

Finally, Bjørnshauge urged us to think of "the whole package." Librarians must integrate and plan for print and digital collections; provide physical facilities that include collaborative workspace and encourage an "information commons" milieu; and support teaching and learning by developing tools like "MyCourse Library." Digital library development can transform the role of librarians all over the world from collection managers to active participants in research, teaching, and learning. Knowing our users can make this happen more successfully.