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THE FUTURE LIBRARIAN: A DIVERSE AND COMPLEX PROFESSION

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Abstract

The library professional is an active actor in the information society and the professional identity is affected by societal and cultural phenomena as well as technological changes. The library users' changing information behavior, different forms of information, and information overload challenge the professional perspective; what is the core expertise of the library profession and what new skills are needed in the future? The library profession meets a growing complexity in its role and it becomes difficult to balance the generalist and expertise level of the profession (Stover 2004). Desirable future skills are related to operating and navigating on the Internet, and being open for interaction with the users on the Internet. At the same time the professional identity is firmly anchored in the traditional core values and competences of librarianship (Huvila et al. 2013). This paper discusses the challenge of the diversity of the expected qualities of librarians. The paper has both a professional as well as an educational point of view. How do we educate library professionals of tomorrow in a society where information and information related activities are continuously growing and changing? What are the core competencies, what are the key challenges, and how do we find a balance between technical and social skills? This paper is based on empirical work looking into expectations of the future library profession among library directors, as well as LIS-students.

Keywords: library profession, professional competencies, library education

Introduction

There are many reports on the changing information society where networking, connectedness and social information are important parts of life. Internet is a gateway to a countless number of information sources and we develop new ways of managing our information use in the context of social and mobile media. Our information behavior is changing, a networked individualism (Rainie & Wellman 2012) is developing with new efficiencies and affordances in our actions. We invest a lot of time in social networking, we see information as a collective resource and we think of information as in constant flux. This new information environment is challenging for the libraries that face the changes from two angles. Firstly, the *information environment is changing*, challenging collection building and management, integrating physical and virtual spaces. Secondly, *the library user is changing*, challenging the library functions, including mobile and participatory services (Widén 2013). This has also consequences for the library profession and the key competencies that are required for library work.

The networked society

The changing society is not only about the growing amount of information. Today we rather talk about the networked society and its consequences. According to Castells (2005) the crucial change is embedded in the networks that are not limited to physical space because of enabling technology. Digital networks are flexible, adaptive, and global, and constitute therefore the basis for today's society. The purpose of technology, rather than the existence of it, is the key to the changing information society and we need to know the dynamics, constrains, and possibilities of the new social structures to understand the networked society of today. The effects of the networked and global society are highlighted in a recent trend report by IFLA (2013). Five high level trends describing the development of global information environment are identified and point at different tensions going on which are relevant for libraries and the development of library services. New *technologies* regulate our access to information where technologies can both expand and limit people's access to information. *Online education* will be increasingly present and democratize as well as divide global learning. Lifelong learning in informal ways is highlighted. Monitoring data about individuals and social groups will grow and be both cheaper and easier, leading to expanding data sets that redefine the boundaries

of *data protection*. This put special challenges on individual privacy and trust in the online world. The rise of *new voices* is promoted by our connectedness in society. More transparency and citizen-focused public services will be initiated by open government projects. Finally, new technologies will also enhance the *global information economy* leading to business model disruption in many industries because of the hyper-connected and networked environment. This can lead to new and creative solutions but it also points at some concerns on how new innovations may bring existing products and concepts towards an end. New techniques override old and they might have far-reaching effects on behavior, markets, and society.

One such example is the book that engages people to ask what will happen to the printed book and media because of the digital development. However, Piper (2012) reminds us about the fact that the reading experience is more important than the format of the book; reading is the glue that keeps the history of books going on. New technology like tablets brings qualities into the reading experience that is not possible with the printed book like zooming and navigating. Still, reading a book is a subjective activity but at the same time we like to share the experience. This is also underlined in our landscape of social media, bringing new dimensions to our reading experiences rather than bringing reading to an end. This metaphor underlines the importance of adapting to technological change, combining traditional and new competencies. Jenkins (2006) has furthermore written about a culture of convergence, which entails the notion that content is no longer bound to certain artifacts. Instead, content passes through both physical and online boundaries. It is clear that the networked society, with all the new technology, will create new distribution models and disrupt existing information chains on society level as well as affect individual information practices (IFLA 2013). There are new actors on the information arena assuming traditional library roles. Scientific publishers and professional societies are collecting and providing research literature and the publishers in academia are assuring themselves good profits (Coffman 2013). How the libraries succeed in adapting to these changes in the networked society is crucial.

The changing library user

There are conflicting ideas about the so called net generation, the digitally born. There is a strong discourse saying that young people are media- and information literate, but what it entails is not that straight forward. First of all it is important to remember that the digital generation is as diverse as before, affected by socio-economic status, social class, gender, and geography. Empirical work has shown that young people are not that skilled in evaluating information although they are quick information seekers. They have more restricted technology use than the rhetoric suggests but on the other hand they have a broader user profile than the older generations, meaning they have a higher multi-tasking profile (Rowlands et al. 2008; Selwyn 2009; Nicholas et al. 2011). There is a concern that young generations don't read properly because they don't read printed newspapers or books. This might result in a situation where they get too fragmented knowledge structures and they are not able to contextualize. On the other hand they connect what they read with others, share online, and build new forms of contexts (Piper 2012). The New York Times Customer Insight Group has studied this new contextualization through a study on what drives people to share information online. Today, the social media environment is built on interactivity and we share more content, from more sources, with more people, more often, and more quickly. Sharing and reading other people's responses help to understand and process information and experiences. We share because it is a way to support causes or issues we care about and we feel more involved in the world (New York Times 2011).

It is important to understand young people's actual use of technology, Internet, social media in order for information professionals to guide them correctly. To be relevant to the next generation of students, libraries must consider both policy and technology changes. McDonald & Thomas (2006) argue that libraries seem to disconnect with online communities (next generation users) when it comes to technological tools. Libraries don't have enough tools to create digital scholarship and scholarly communication and they often produce (support) contents for desktop PCs rather than new and mobile devices like smartphones. Libraries also seem to disconnect when it comes to policies. There is a need to better integrate library search tools to new environments, linking to larger sets of open access data. Further, libraries seem to disconnect in opportunities, and it is a challenge to change library culture towards a more flexible and user-oriented approach in line with new information

behavior. Many disconnections between the library and the millennial generation are closely related to infrastructure, the library is not that seamless, instantly available, networked information environment. It is also a question of different perceptions. In an OCLC report on online library catalogs, Calhoun et al. (2009) found that both librarians and users approach the catalogs with a purpose in mind. However, the users are trying to satisfy information needs while the librarians are carrying out work tasks. They also found that the perspectives on data quality differ: librarians are influenced by advanced principles of information organization while users are influenced by their experiences of different web sites.

The changing library profession

The library profession has been discussing change management for a long time. The role of information technology in the LIS profession has put special focus on the ability to adapt to change, and especially rapid change that technological innovation has brought to the library environment. Over the years it has been shown that e.g. technological development in libraries have contributed to the emergence of different professional strategies to adapt to change. Because of the complex information environment there has been a need for both generalists and experts (Olsson 1995; Hjørland 2000). In this discussion there is also often a distinction between skills needed in traditional vs digital library context (Baruchson-Arbib & Bronstein 2002). Traditional library skills are connected to *collecting* and *organizing* information (Pedersen 2006). The literature underlines the need of change in librarianship but with emphasis on maintaining traditional skills with updated ability to operate in the context of Internet and e.g social media. It is important to change attitudes and understand the new digital order. Information is no longer library property and there is a need of understanding how people seek and use information. An assertive and proactive behavior is underlined, believing and focusing key skills, with flexibility to adjust to information society at large, being user-centered, and promoting and marketing the library (Baruchson-Arbib & Bronstein 2002; Joint 2006; Huvila et al. 2013). During recent years there has been a strong Library 2.0 discourse, focusing the possibilities of social media in libraries. Library professional skills in this context doesn't seem to be located so much in certain qualities, but rather in their convergence and complexity. The Library 2.0 discourse has been explicit about capacities to act in the context of digital and social media (Huvila et al. 2013).

Library professionals are in general positive towards new technology and they believe that there is a high interest among users as well (Kronqvist-Berg, 2014). However, library professionals have difficulties in finding the time to develop new services and finding the right balance between these and the traditional work tasks. They furthermore show a lack of confidence in their own skills, although the majority describe themselves as open and flexible with a high level of computer experience.

A report by DIK (2011), Association is a professional association and a trade union for university graduates in the fields of documentation, information and culture, reviewed literature on the future skills by librarians. They identified seven key areas; digitalization, reading, scholarly communication, participatory culture, pedagogical skills, marketing, and academic skills. The key areas focus on communicative skills in various ways as well as juridical competence within the different areas.

- *Digitalization skills*: technical competency and ability to communicate with IT personnel and systems, juridical competence, license agreements, and procurement.
- *Reading*: information and media literacy skills among users, competency to meet all kinds of user groups (children, multicultural, people with disabilities)
- *Scholarly communication*: how science is produced from the researchers' point of view, juridical competence, agreements, publication processes, different information practices within different disciplines, bibliometrics, writing practices, digital archives
- *Participatory culture*: skills in digital technology, information literacy, social competence, marketing, communication
- *Pedagogical skills and supervision*: learning environments, learning platforms, reference work, juridical competence, communication skills, learning methods, collaborative skills
- *Marketing*: internet and social media as communication and marketing tools, juridical competence, presentation skills, writing skills, visualization
- *Academic competence*: change management, leadership, learning and development, relational competencies

Similar skills also occur in a focus group study of library professionals (Partridge et al. 2010). In this study the following are considered important skills of a contemporary librarian: interpersonal and communication skills, change management, complementary skills in for example IT, information management, innovative, adaptable and flexible, active learner, leadership skills, marketing skills, project management skills, and community engagement. The technological development and the implementation of social media in libraries provide a challenging role for the library professionals and it is quite unattainable that one person could encompass all the required skills. The emphasis should therefore be on assembling functional work teams (Kronqvist-Berg, 2014).

Expectations of the future librarian among library directors and library students

University library perspective

During a week in April 2014, 14 library directors from Finnish University Libraries answered two questions about future challenges of university libraries and key competencies of future library professionals. Five *main areas of challenge* are identified by the library directors with emphasis on economical concerns and focus on new services because of changing customer needs.

1. *Economical challenges*
   There is a strong concern that the financial resources are diminishing because of the competition between the universities. At the same time the costs are increasing both when it comes to e-resources and library premises. The management of financial resources is crucial but at the same time external actors like publishers and national university politics affect the costs more than is manageable directly by the library.
2. *New services*
   There is a shift in research processes including aspects of e-science and a networked culture among students and researchers. The library customers are part of a networked and global environment. This put special emphasis on developing services like research data management and supporting scholarly communication, including bibliometrics, social media services, and open access. Flexibility is underlined as well as being knowledgeable in knowing your research environment and integrating library services in the learning and research processes.
3. *Communication and management*
   The importance of communicating the role and importance of the library within the university organization is underlined. It is about making the library visible beyond the physical library premises, integrating the library activities into the whole university and research community. Change management is important in this context while there is also a concern about the collaboration between university libraries because of the competitive situation between universities on a national level in Finland.
4. *Collections development*
   The role of physical collections is diminishing while the digital collections grow rapidly. The balance between these collections are challenging as well as keeping the collections relevant and up to date. This involves a deep understanding of the customers' needs, moving from the traditional role of collection based towards customer-based services. The changes also affect the libraries' physical spaces.
5. *Personnel*
   New areas of competencies emerge and there might be lack of personnel with relevant skills. Recruiting competent personnel is also a challenge because of decreasing financial resources.

Key competencies of the future librarian

Based on the 14 answers from the library directors we can identify five key areas that are expected from the future university librarian. The skills listed in the five key areas were mentioned by several library directors. The sixth group of skills is expertise mentioned only once.

1. *IT-skills.* Technological skills were most mentioned, including systems development (architecture), and building network environments.
2. *Knowledge about research environment and work.* This includes knowing the library user (researcher), research management, and skills in bibliometrical methods.
3. *Pedagogical skills.* These are needed for being part of the learning processes, plan relevant user education and information literacy support, and for supervision.
4. *Social and communicative skills* including social skills and interactivity, language skills, different communicational skills and marketing knowledge.
5. *Collection management skills.* The ability to manage digital collections, big data, metadata, and more generally information management.
6. *Other.* Organization management skills, project management skills, lifelong learning, knowledge about copyright, licenses and agreements.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between the factors at play. The collection and service are central in the relationship between library professionals and the university. The present study points to the challenges and competencies that need to be addressed to make sure that the collections and services continue to improve.
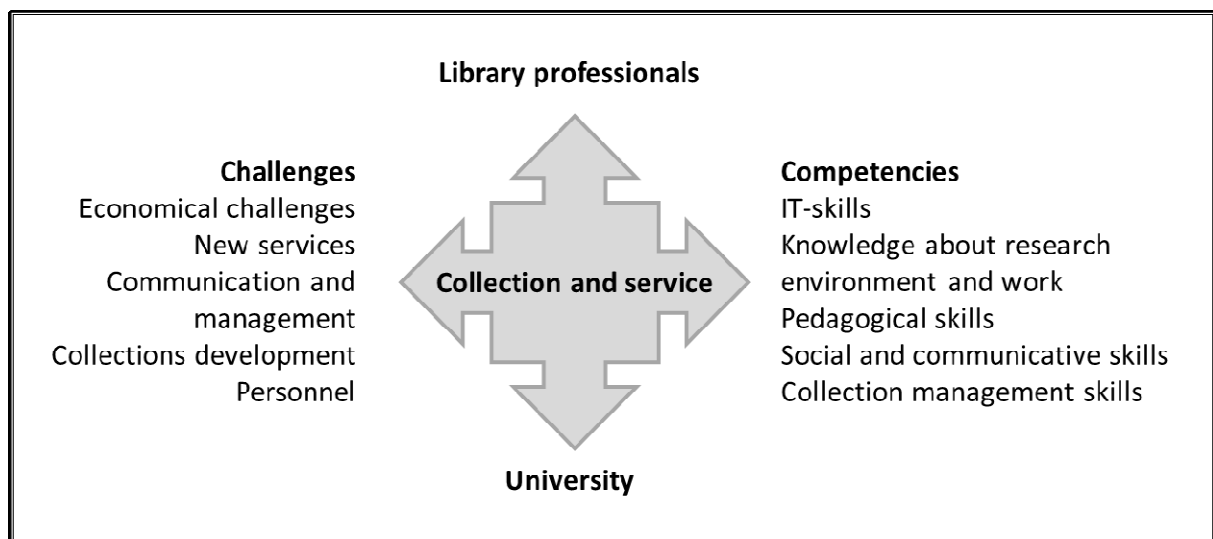

Figure 1. Challenges and skills in university libraries

The listed competencies are reflected in the future challenges. New services demand knowledge about research environment and work, IT-skills, social and communicative skills, and pedagogical skills. The challenge of communication and management put emphasis on social and communicative skills and collections development put emphasis on collection management skills. It is, however, interesting that the library directors did not put forward any specific economical skill considering their expressed concerns about the economical challenges.

Student perspective

Only a small pilot study with a handful of library and information science (LIS) students at Åbo Akademi University has been conducted at this point (n=10). The students evaluated the education and assessed what competencies they expect are important for a future librarian. The students have a more general approach to required *skills for future librarians.* They underline both practical and theoretical knowledge on library work and processes such as knowledge organization, information retrieval, and customer services. They see that a flexible, open, and comprehensive approach as well as general knowledge is an advantage, as well as keeping oneself up to date with change and development, e.g. concerning technical skills, e-resources, licenses, and social media. More specific skills that were mentioned are economical skills (budgets), pedagogical skills (information literacy), management skills, and social competence.

In their studies they experience that the most *interesting learning outco*mes are connected to both collections (information retrieval, knowledge organization, collection, database, and information management), and services (social media, information literacy, information behavior). They also mentioned quite opposite contents to be valuable like book history, and the changing information and reading behavior. Teaching methods that are valued are discussions and project work. Finally they underlined the importance that work practice is part of the study program. They expect that *most valuable learning outcomes* are those connected to more traditional library tasks. Practically oriented skills are mentioned such as information retrieval/seeking, knowledge about databases and information sources, evaluation of information, knowledge organization/cataloguing, resources management, pedagogical aspects, management and leadership. Also knowledge on new techniques and tools as well as the ability to be open to challenges and change is expected to be valuable insights in their future work. Finally a societal approach to library work is underlined.

Educational perspective

Main challenges within the LIS education are connected to the same factors that have been described in the above sections. This perspective is based on articles by professors and teachers in the LIS education field published in Scandinavian Library Quarterly. There is a constant demand on developing the contents in LIS education because of the rapid change in the information landscape and the context in which libraries act. Traditional skills must be combined with new ones, resulting in a broadening set of skills (Bergstedt 2008; Widén 2012). Everything is not possible even to include in a bachelor or master program and the profession is a typical target for continuing education and lifelong learning (Audunson & Gjestrum 2012; Widén 2012). The basis must be taught but the ability to operationalize theoretical knowledge is crucial. The education is often described in terms of competencies and how theories, concepts and methods can be used in practice (Andersen 2008). The education also battle with the balance between being a professional education and developing it as a discipline. The education is based on research but needs to be brought into a practical approach. The competencies must also be on a general level so that they can be adapted to different organizations in the information provision branch (Audunson 2008; Widén 2012).

The future librarian – a diverse and complex profession

It is obvious that there are a lot of changes and challenges connected to library work in the networked society. Existing information chains and distribution models are disrupted and individual information practices change. Keys to future LIS professionals seem to be to understand trends and predict consequences. Technological change is in the forefront leading to

- new information behavior (connected, interactive, fragmented)
- new research practices and processes (e-science, scholarly communication)
- new information provision models (new actors, open access, expensive e-publications)
- new digital collections (research data, e-publications)
- new library services (integrated into learning and research)
- new library professional skills that support the above development and change

The conservative nature of librarianship doesn't give the libraries the best of a starting point. There is a need for a shift from a responsive model towards a pro-active model and innovative approach (Rees 2005). However, in our small study the university library directors seem to have a quite proactive approach to the future library field and required professional skills. The directors have a unique and important viewpoint. They have an overall perspective to the whole university context and information environment. They focused surprisingly little on traditional skills and Information literacy (user education). Instead, they focused on understanding the user, the changing research processes, technology, and communicating both the importance of the library and with users. Specialized skills are expected to be of greater importance than general library skills. From the students point of view it is clear that they experience that it is important to first learn the basic library skills but at the same time they are aware of the importance of flexibility and ability to adapt to ongoing change. The library profession is a practical working field, which also is underlined by the students.

The library profession is a typical profession where the set of competencies are constantly growing and broadening. This is a challenge for the LIS education; what are the key competencies and what are the skills that the students should learn when they arrive into working life. The study program includes a comprehensive set of perspectives and skills. The students value a very broad set of competencies but it might be difficult for them to grasp the very core of the library profession. On the other hand the library field is broad and professional competencies depend on the library or information provision organization in question. In the case of university libraries it is a great advantage that the LIS education is a part of the university, giving the students the possibility to get to know the research environment.

The library profession is already today a diverse and complex profession that benefits from an open attitude towards change. There is an ongoing tension between collections and service and a continuous ambition to connect library services to changing user needs. This picture will probably be even more complex in the future. It is important to study different trends in society to be able to develop the library work as well as the library education into relevant directions. Based on this review and evaluation the critical competencies today are technological skills, communicative skills, and knowing user practices.

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