IT as a Utility Network+ workshop: Libraries of the Future 3

13 November 2013, British Library, London

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1. Introduction and summary

A group of experts from a diverse range of organisations and with wide experience in the library and digital sectors gathered at the British Library to explore the role of IT utilities in the context of the evolving role of libraries. The goals of the day were to discuss key issues, generate ideas to take forward and broaden the network of people with interests in this area.

This workshop was the third in a series on this subject. The first event took place at the Bodleian Library in Oxford on 17 April 2013 ([read the report](#)) and a smaller, scoping group met on 18 September 2013 at the University of Southampton.

Christine Madsen, head of digital programmes at the Bodleian Libraries set the scene with a presentation of her work on "the business of libraries", followed by ITaaU's principal investigator, Jeremy Frey, introducing the concept of libraries as social machines. The context of the day was rounded off by ITaaU's Colin Bird's overview of the [literature survey](#) the network has conducted into particular topics relating to the future of libraries in order to understand the extent to which these areas are being considered in scholarly publications.

The discussion that followed, in breakout groups and a plenary session, was based around three areas: social activity; social learning; and future roles and services. However, it naturally ranged widely and also considered the purpose and process of libraries, the librarian as broker, understanding users, and information literacy.

Ideas for future work that emerged out of the discussion included hybrid digital-physical projects, a library innovation survey, a digital aura app, studies of accessibility and new economic models, a librarian-technology interaction project and a networking meeting.

A number of pledges were made of work to take forward, key of which were future workshops in Oxford and Aberdeen, a wiki for collaboration and a request for specific project proposals for funding.

2. Setting the scene

Christine Madsen, head of digital programmes at the Bodleian Libraries, gave a thought-provoking overview of her research into the role of libraries – past and present – and how our relationship with libraries might be changing in the digital age.

Libraries are "about learning" and, in the past, were multidisciplinary spaces in which people spent time - and even lived – in order to learn and be with collections and other scholars. Traditionally, especially in Oxford, libraries grew by borrowing and making copies of the books brought by visiting students. These libraries were tiny to begin with – in 1320 there were just 280 volumes in the Oxford library, increasing to 560 volumes in 1443 and 2500 volumes in 1598 (at which point a new building was needed and the Bodleian was built). In contrast, today, the Library of Congress acquires 7000 volumes *a day*.

The mid-19th century saw a huge spike in the size of library collections and it was then that libraries made the shift in emphasis from learning to information – the library as a storehouse of information, a warehouse of knowledge.

In Christine's view, libraries should be about supporting knowledge creation rather than being solely about connecting people with information:

"People take information (and getting them to that information is part of a library's role) and they turn it into something new. In business we would call it innovation, in academia we call it scholarship. The library's role is to provide a set of services that help people in that process: to get people from information to new knowledge."

A range of tools and services (some of which can be digital) are offered by libraries to make this happen: structured collections that reflect someone's knowledge set; a safe space to question and, possibly, fail; an active space to engage with other people and connect; and also a quiet space to reflect.

Jeremy Frey continued the day's scene-setting with a look at libraries in the social machine context, based on recent work by David De Roure [link?], with a concept that can be traced back to a paper by Tim Berners-Lee. Libraries could be viewed as social machines as they function because of the interface between people and machines – it's objects-people-technology interacting.

Jeremy asked whether the social machine context is a valuable way of looking at how libraries have and will evolve: can we make some contrast between those libraries based on a physical space and the online Wikipedia version where the knowledge is exposed without the same sort of space? How can social media integrate a wider group of people into a discussion in a library? How can a library get value out of its knowledge of the usage of its assets?

3. Topics covered

The breakout discussions were focused on three areas: social learning; social activities; and future roles and services but, given the breadth and depth of knowledge of the participants, the discussion ranged far and wide.

What does a library do? Collecting, curating, connecting … creating?

The notion that libraries are concerned with the 3Cs – collecting, curating and connection – was swiftly expanded to encompass a fourth C – creating. This is library as active space and examples were given of libraries bringing in "maker areas" and 3D printers, providing access to the kind of equipment that people may not be able to afford to have at home. Another interesting example was the New York Public Library's scavenger hunt – an overnight adventure during which 500 young people played a specially commissioned smartphone game based on clues and collaborations inspired by 100 of the library's objects. After finding each object they wrote short personal essays inspired by the quest. A collaborative book based on these personal stories about the future was made and the volume added to the library's collection.

"It's a cool way to show what libraries can be about – find stuff, get inspired or aggravated and then create something new and then it goes back into the library. It's the whole lifecycle of a library."

Purpose and process

A theme running through the day was the difference between purpose and process when discussing libraries - and the risks of confusing the two. Allied to this was the need for an awareness of the differences between types of libraries – what are the differences in the learning that takes place in academic libraries and public libraries? In a public library, finding out when the next bus leaves can also be classed as learning. Is there a scale from academic libraries where ambiguity may be valued in learning and people do not necessarily want definitive answers to public libraries where people want to come out with firm information? The question of merging the two models was raised: when the public library service is no longer working as a national service, should academic libraries be open to all? That requires a national policy.

Librarian as broker and intermediary / the barefoot librarian

The relationship between libraries and information is changing and the role of the library and librarian as information broker is changing. It needs to be a "pushing" role as well as "pulling" role. The pushing role is being developed by some medical libraries where a healthcare librarian will go on rounds with a consultant, armed with an iPad, and able to check best practice and feed that information back to the doctor. The role encompasses filtering knowledge ("this is the latest and most/least contested research") and getting it out to the people who need it when they need it rather than waiting for them to come into the library. It's about putting the library into IT as much as putting the IT into the library, and taking the library out into a digital space.

Libraries as a social space

The idea that libraries should offer social activities to entice in those who might not otherwise go to them (such as offering gaming workshops to teenagers) is one that has proved popular in Scandinavian public libraries where they are increasingly seen as a place of social encounter. But does that lead to an increasing issue of contestability - if those social activities are a fundamental part of libraries then what about the books and the role of connecting people to knowledge and supporting learning? Many other places offer social activities so what's the USP of a library?

Understanding users

There is much value to be gained in understanding users - what you can know about an individual person and what they are interested in and how you can tailor that as they find new things. It's the Google profile model. One of the brokering roles of the librarian is to

know what's going on and in which communities. The library is at the intersection of many different types of network (just as is Google). In Denmark, where a third of all public libraries are community-run have no paid staff working in them, how do they fulfil that brokering role?

Information literacy

Information literacy is just as important for public or continuing education as digital literacy and librarians play an increasingly important role in information literacy. They need to help people to sort through information – not telling them not to use Wikipedia but how to deal with multiple sources of information and judge them. This is also an opportunity for librarians to promote and support cross-disciplinarity (and not just cross-discipline-based but also cross-format-based eg using visual resources).

4. Project ideas and areas

During the day the participants came up with a number of ideas for consideration by the network as possible projects to explore in more depth. While it is not possible to take all of them forward, some will be considered for funding and others explored further in the email discussion list created after the meeting. The ideas included:

Hybrid digital-physical projects

The library as a hybrid space in which there is a merging of the digital and the physical. It's related to the healthcare example in which the physical and the digital intersect: the librarian accompanying the doctor on their rounds is navigating the digital world, allowing the doctor to focus on the physical patient. Another example is a museum of art that offered huge touchscreens that visitors could walk up to and physically pull information about artworks onto their smartphones. Library examples could include the terminals in the building knowing who you are and tailoring the space appropriately or being able to curate your own tour through an exhibition. The suggestion is for a project around hybrid spaces and how to bring IT into libraries in a new kind of way - IT as Information Transformation as well as Information Technology.

Library innovation survey

Fund a very broad survey or list of broad innovative practices or projects currently taking place in libraries of all kinds. One example is seed libraries where borrowers check out seeds then harvest the seeds from whatever is grown and bring them back to the library. It reflects the generative function of the library and harks back to the days of libraries growing themselves via books given to them by visiting students.

Digital aura app

The idea of "digital aura" – the extension of yourself in the digital world and how that interacts with the digital world – first raised at the Bodleian workshop earlier in the year, continues to be of interest. Example given is that as a user walks past a bookshelf with Chaucer on it, Chaucer pops up in their phone and recommends other books, or informs them that there are two Chaucer lectures going on in the next week, or that someone else in the library is also reading Chaucer. The suggestion included building an app for a pilot, although issues of anonymity and data protection would need to be addressed.

Accessibility study

University students have a wide range of assets available to them via academic libraries and yet as soon as they leave university that access disappears. Is that right when people need to learn throughout their life? An interesting project would be to hypothecate a concept of a much broader access to the assets libraries have in their space and consider the barriers to making it ubiquitous. These might include a mix of big policy issues and smaller technical issues. There are public policy issues – if a society genuinely wants to have people learning through life then it must pay for it, either through taxation or individually. Do you then shift from paying to access to paying for curation?

New economic models study

Could explore new economic models that look at licensing and copyright etc in a pragmatic way. Suggested that this be passed to the New Economic Models network+ based at Exeter that is looking at this area.

Librarian-technology interaction project

A proposal to come from within the librarian community looking at the interaction between the librarian and technology and the systems they need that are different or

changing, based on information transformation rather than information technology, would be of interest.

Networking meeting

There is a need to bring people together to work on projects and to avoid duplication. One way to do this might be to highlight people from various agencies working in this area and bring them together for a small meeting in which to put the proposals before them and find out if there is any overlap or possibilities for partnership.

5. Next steps

The day ended with a series of pledges that will be taken forward as a result of the workshop:

- Future workshops: Oxford on 5 December 2013 and Aberdeen in March/April 2014 (date tbc).

- Wiki to be set up to explore possibilities for collaboration and avoid duplication of effort.

- Creation a sub-mailing list, a spin-off network, for this group – and anybody else who would like to join it - to continue the discussion.

- Continue discussing ideas via the mailing list, wiki and meetings but also come up with specific proposals for funding as soon as possible.

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6. References / contacts to follow up

Three suggestions of further reading were made during the workshop:

- Better Library and Learning Space: Projects, trends and ideas, ed Les Watson (Facet, 2013) Amazon
- The Politics of Libraries and Librarianship: challenges and realities ed by Kerry Smith (Chandos, 2008) Amazon
- Libraries and Society: role and responsibility and future in an age of change ed by David baker and Wendy Evans (Chandos, 2011) Amazon