

IT as a Utility Network+ workshop: The library of the future

17 April 2013, the Bodleian Library, Oxford

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1. Introduction

The network was delighted to welcome a group of experts from a diverse range of organisations and with wide experience in the library and digital sectors to explore how developments in IT as a Utility are contributing to the evolution of libraries, whether research, public or commercial.

The ITaaU team presented four key topics as the starting points for discussion. These had emerged out of a preliminary literature survey conducted by a librarian and designed to offer an overview of the field.

The key topics were:

- Libraries as social spaces
- Future role for library information specialists
- Uses for mobile technologies in libraries
- The potential for libraries to offer data and information curation services

The goal of the day was to identify a small number of key issues relating to the library of the future – which may or may not coincide or overlap with the key topics above – and conclude with some tangible possible actions that would make a difference in a short time and that could be undertaken by the network, or others.

The discussion covered not only the key topics identified by the ITaaU but also considered the training needs of library professionals, shifting roles within the field, digital discovery v physical discovery, the use of personal profiling and data by libraries and the impact of open access developments.

Many creative ideas emerged out of the discussion, from pop-up libraries in department stores to the gamification of the library space through social networking tools.

A number of pledges were made of work to continue forward, key of which were a cataloguing and gap analysis exercise and a further workshop on the topic at the British Library in the autumn.

2. Who were we?

The wealth of knowledge and expertise, as well as geographical spread, of the participants in the room for this event is noteworthy.

As a quick overview, roles represented around the table included: a computer scientist working in the digital humanities; a university director of IT; the ceo of a social fund working with 3D technology; an archivist and historian; a university head of scholarly communication; a curator and programmer of children's literacy events in Ireland; the leader of project looking at digital tools, techniques and methods in social science; the head of an MSc programme training librarians in Scotland; the director of a commercial library management organisation; a university science librarian; a representative of Arts Council England; the Bodleian digital associate director; the head of SMARTLab; a Jisc representative.

3. What did we talk about?

Given the breadth and depth of knowledge of the participants, the discussion ranged far and wide. Broadly, the topics discussed can be grouped into the following areas:

- i. Changing roles within the library
- ii. The changing role of the library space
- iii. Commercialisation
- iv. Mobile and the library
- v. Diversity and accessibility
- vi. Designed discovery
- vii. The pull of the physical space
- viii. Profiling and data

i. Changing roles within the library

The role of the librarian is changing rapidly. The services that traditionally exist to support researchers have all evolved with the transformation of research in the digital era. New roles are entering the researcher/librarian sphere, from software developers and computer scientists to visualisers. With such potential for different career paths and areas of specialisation for information professionals, what are the skills librarians need for the future? How to prepare them for roles that don't even exist yet? There is no consistent definition across the industry of "knowledge management".

There are also questions around collaboration and the career paths of the people who help with digital work. Within that class of support roles, some are from the traditional IT services or library services and, on the whole, see themselves as providing support for researchers. But there is an interesting class in between who aren't quite researchers and aren't quite support and see themselves as collaborating with the researcher rather than supporting them. There are questions around how those different roles interrelate.

Developments in open access publishing, where researchers have to provide their data to be archived, are having an impact on the role of librarians. Librarians have to provide the training – and so they need training themselves - and need be up to date with understanding data and how academics need information collected. The relationship between the library and IT services is changing.

There is a realisation that IT will not solve all the problems and those organisations that have closed their libraries prematurely as a result of "digital" and digitisation are beginning to understand that those information professionals had a valuable role to play. Institutional information is being lost because the professionals are not there to capture it. IT alone does not solve the problem but "information professional plus IT" could have an impact.

"Archivists used to have the key to the door and now technologists have the key to the door. They need to be more IT savvy but they don't have to actually do it. They need to know about RFID but they do not need to do it themselves."

ii. The changing role of the library space

The space within libraries is evolving too. Are they spaces for "running around and grabbing data" or are they spaces to think, reflect, discuss and collaborate?

New library spaces are being created, such as the [Sir Duncan Rice Library](#) in Aberdeen – "it reduced the total number of books but allowed more space for collaborative working areas" – and also in [Birmingham](#), [Newcastle](#), and the [Hive in Worcester](#). Information has been shared informally but there is no formal survey of how these new spaces work. [Professor David McKitterick](#), the librarian of Trinity College Cambridge, was suggested as a potential speaker on the debates around new library spaces.

"The Duncan Rice Library was a very divisive building initially. It's not a traditional building – it's glass and green and black. But, on the inside, there is a consensus that it is a well-designed space."

iii. Commercialisation

Public libraries and the issues that local authorities are facing with budget cuts have very much been the focus of attention with regard to preserving libraries. However, the same pressures are facing commercial libraries, from news organisations to legal libraries, which are also threatened.

"Virtually everybody is looking at monetising their collection on some way. There are a disturbing number of tenders from organisations who think their collections are valuable and want us [a commercial information management company] to digitise them in return for recouping the cost later. There is no way of recouping that cost."

iv. Mobile technology and the library

"Digital aura" was suggested as a new, broader term for what we tend to think of as mobile (the devices you bring with you and use to connect to your environment) as it can encompass new trends such as Google glasses and clothes as well as phones and tablets.

There are two elements to mobile and the library: What services can you use mobile for within the library? (such as alerts that you are walking past the section you need); What can the library do for you wherever you are?

Library services on mobile have been discussed for a few years and there are already quite a few mobile applications around so it's about making students aware of them. Do not need to constantly reinvent the wheel and the one size fits all approach does not always work, especially for researchers. For example, many may prefer to use [Mendeley](#) over institutional offerings because they can use their own email address and it doesn't matter if they move institutions. With mobile there is a need to take a strategic approach across the institution not just focus the library – how can mobiles be used in lectures?

"We are in the process of designing a Jisc-funded app for undergrads just entering academia next year. It's based on feedback from students in the years above and provides essential information such as 'which library do I need to go for this? Which librarian should I contact with questions?' plus live chat with a librarian on the website, from whatever device."

v. Diversity and accessibility

It was noted that sometimes the same rigor around making library services accessible when building a new physical library is not applied to building apps.

vi. Designed discovery

Discovery is different when people use digital content from a library rather than walking through the physical space and browsing the shelves. It is more about the precise discovery of information. They can find information that they could not before and it is a form of serendipitous discovery - but not the sort that librarians talk about when refer to people browsing shelves.

The negative side is that if you don't go into the library you don't see the book that's sitting next to the one that you wanted. The positive side is the rich pickings from search – if the metadata is good.

vii. The pull of the physical space

What will make people want to come to a library? The example was given of a library on outskirts of Dublin that's mainly used as a conduit. How do you create a desire to be present that's about more than the books? How do we define a sense of presence? [Private libraries have experienced a resurgence](#) recently – what's the secret of their appeal and success?

viii. Profiling and data

Libraries offer an opportunity to think about profiling in institutions. Universities collect information about people but it is often not used to full effect. How do you re-use info about people and their research and the meetings they go to? Can it be used to link people together? How does the library know what journals and books to buy? Could the library and its provision be better tailored by using that information (eg research information gathered for REF shows what journals etc you use)? It's an opportunity to match the catalogue to what library knows about you and link systems together.

The same system could tell you that x number of people in the library are also dyslexic or are reading the same books as you - and allow you to hang out with people with similar issues or someone who can reach the book on the higher shelf. It would have to be an opt-in system for privacy reasons – the model works if you own that information and decide what information to make available and system does not have to retain it as persistent knowledge. A person walks into a space and is in negotiation with it [which links in with the network's discussions about [IT as a Utility and smart spaces](#)].

4. What sorts of ideas did we come up with?

During the day the participants came up with a number of ideas relating to the four key themes. It is not possible to take all of them forward but some may be explored further in the email discussion list created after the meeting. The ideas included:

Enhancing the buddy system: an existing system where a reader buddies-up with a non-reader to share a book with them could be made virtual and interesting using video conference technology. It would link up social spaces and project a digital version of the book being read onto a "book" of blank pages that detects when a page is turned and makes the experience more tactile. Allows interaction similar to being in the same room.

The gamification of library research: there is a much bigger role for augmented reality and playfulness in the library than presently exists. For example, located mobile games where, as a user walks by the bookshelf, perhaps Chaucer pops up on their phone and recommends other books.

Existing apps already exist and could be adapted eg [Grindr](#) for libraries or institutions - you like Chaucer, there are two other lectures going on which are a bit like this; or there's someone else in the library who likes Chaucer and might want to discuss Chaucer over a cup of tea; or five people in the room are also reading about teens with autism and maybe you'd like to talk to them. A virtual recommender because playfulness and friendliness draws people into the virtual space, just like cups of tea and cookies do in the real world.

What's a 'library'?: in terms of testing ideas, would be interesting to take an empty space, fill it with digital information such as ebooks, call it a library and bring people in and see how long they took before they saw that it was a place without books. They would have access to all the material they would normally but not physically. A six-month trial could be undertaken during a period of refurbishment in a library when users might not have access to the print anyway.

Selfridges has a "quiet room" where shoppers can recover from the trains of consumerism – how about suggesting another big department store creates a quiet room and calls "a library". Or doesn't call it a library but puts all the "library things" in it and see what happens. A physical or virtual pop-up library.

Collaborative learning in the library: on a Masters course there was a small scale pilot based on giving students digital texts and a toolkit and asking them to create their own textbook on whatever subject they wanted, pulling in whatever they liked (including video, music etc) and working collaboratively with others within the library. They could then print

off their own version with their name and the library name on the cover or take it home on a disc or stick. It emphasised the role of the library as collaborative learning space, iterating and discussing with other people who happen to be around. The process of doing it is the learning process. Another pilot on this theme would be achievable and, if the assessment issues could be worked out, it could be part of a course exercise. It could be a small-scale trial to create a recipe book for doing it which could then be used by local authority libraries. It could possibly be used for job-hunting information. It would make it easier for the library and local institutions to work together on it.

5. Which ideas will be taken forward?

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

- Develop a catalogue of existing IT utilities in this space followed by a gap analysis of missing utilities.
- Create a sub-mailing list, a spin-off network, for this group – and anybody else who would like to join it - to continue the discussion.
- Enrich this report with an appendix with further references.
- Plan a second, related workshop, which will probably take place at British Library later in the year.
- Give serious thought to holding a future workshop in Aberdeen to visit the [new library there](#).
- Consider ideas for a workshop+ (a scoping workshop followed by funded research time followed by another workshop to discuss findings) in this field.

6. References / contacts to follow up [please add / enrich!]

[Barry Katz](#) – University of Tokyo, smart learning spaces

[Dan Cohen](#) – Digital Public Library of America

[Tara Brabazon](#) - the universe of Google

[Marilyn Strathern](#) - anthropologist interested in digital

[David M Levy](#) - author of Scrolling Forward