The radical library and the radical librarian

Based on a paper given at the UKSG seminar ‘The radical library: taking up the challenge’, London, 13 November 2003

The article offers a perspective on the radical library and is based on the papers delivered at the UKSG seminar ‘The radical library: taking up the challenge’. The three basic functions of the library – location, collections and services – are discussed and developed on in the light of the seminar presentations. New challenges and opportunities are confronting libraries, particularly as networked information access and delivery impact on both teaching and research. In addition, the changing nature of UK higher education means that libraries and librarians need to adapt to the new demands of users, many of whom no longer want the services that libraries have traditionally provided.

Introduction

A search on Google, as is now the established practice in academia, for the ‘radical library’ and the ‘radical librarian’ led into the ‘radical world of the Rockabilly Librarian’, the ‘Leather Librarian’, the ‘Bellydancing Librarian’, the ‘Progressive Librarian’ (for librarians who refuse to be classified) and ‘Macho Librarians with Guns (step away from the Reference Desk – SLOWLY)’. This avenue was proving interesting, but diverting, and would not contribute to the right level of discussions of what we might mean by the radical library.

In order to draw out some of the major points of these stimulating presentations from the perspective of developing new models of libraries and librarians, the best approach is to begin with the basic functions of the traditional library and to see how the ideas today are influencing and reflecting changes in these functions. Libraries provide three basic services: a location, a set of services and a collection of resources. All these come together in a physical building where users and staff can interact. Librarians tend to take their future existence, based on these three functions, however they might be expressed, for granted and assume that they will have a continuing monopoly on the combination of these functions.

Library as location

When looking at the library as a location, it offers a sense of place, a learning and collaboration space, a display and exhibition space, what can be called ‘a social assembly space’, and above all it is a neutral space on campus. In addition, there is now a significant investment in new library buildings, both academic and public, re-establishing a sense of community that was almost destroyed in the 1980s. However, the investment in physical libraries has run in parallel with the development of electronic information, and the two key outcomes of the first Follett Report in 1993 were a significant investment in both physical buildings and in new virtual services.

Bob Campbell (Blackwell Publishing) sees a radical future where physical ‘libraries’ might still exist, but with many of their traditional functions stripped out or outsourced and only a few key functions remaining. The physical library will become an Internet café, with outsourced management and outsourced supply of content for student and staff use, with only the construction and maintenance of a ‘virtual front door’ remaining as a specialist library task. Another picture of the radical future of the physical library is the concept of the Learning Café as presented by Jan Howden...
(Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU)), an idea which has much in common with the Information Commons, a term used in the USA for such learning spaces. The Learning Café is based on a student-centred learning model and responds positively to the way that students now learn at GCU, rather than constraining their learning by an inappropriate building. However, there are difficulties with terminology; a library is still a library with a rich set of functions, and a learning centre is still a learning centre with a more limited, though exciting, set of functions. The two concepts should not be conflated into one. When looking at radical library space, the library should also be considered as network or virtual space, bringing together virtual resources and virtual users into a radical research and learning space. There the library can make the invisible both visible and usable.

Librarians are translating the skills that they have in creating usable physical spaces into the building and maintenance of virtual spaces and are continuing to mediate the engagement of users with information resources through subject and institutional portals. Librarians can create what Lorcan Dempsey has described as the 'Third Place', combining the physical and virtual.

**Library as service provider**

The second task of the library is to provide services. Traditionally, librarians create services which attempt to link the users with the collections, either physically or virtually, and enable the effective interaction with collections. By establishing and maintaining a predictable, supporting infrastructure, library services can make collections come alive. Without these services, which can provide a reliable ‘brand’ for users, quality resources, such as published refereed journals, can easily become invisible and lost amongst the noise of information. How are these traditional services developing to fit the radical library? Bob Campbell sees academic staff and students taking on many of the service roles traditionally undertaken by library staff. The growth in individual article-ordering direct from such publishers as Blackwell supports the idea that for some users libraries can get in the way of providing access to scholarly information, and only complicate the picture. If an increasing amount of material is licensed for national use, the job of servicing this type of material need only be done once from a central service and the concept of individual library services could be diminished.

By contrast, Heather Keeble (University of Leicester) describes the growth of a new range of library services aimed at distance learners. These new services provide users with a proactive and highly responsive library and information service, which is seen by academic staff as a key element of distance learning course provision, thus strengthening the University’s competitive edge. Many, if not all, universities are developing distance learning courses and, while some packaged courses require little if any library support, the majority of courses are still adjuncts to the on-campus version and so library support is still integral. This new set of services extends the role of library services to new areas. Terry Hulbert of the Institute of Physics Publishing (IoPP), perhaps the earliest UK publisher to realize the potential of the Internet, showed us how IoPP is still remaining ahead of the game as it exploits facilities such as RSS (RDF Site Summary), CrossRef and COUNTER to link its collections with its users and allows their integration into library services.

New service developments, such as virtual reference, which can provide 24/7 reference support to staff and students, the development by the library of information literacy courses for students, and the building of accessible institutional repositories for both theses and other research publications are all areas initiated in most cases by libraries. However, the role of library as publisher, a role that some libraries are pushing, is a radical step too far. Librarians cannot emulate the skills of the publisher and should not try.

**Library as a collection**

The third area is the role of the library in providing a collection of resources for its user communities. Traditionally, these resources include printed books and journals and special collections of books, manuscripts, maps, etc. However, an increasing number of libraries provide access to licensed resources, and it has been a skill of the librarian to create collections of resources meeting users’ present needs while anticipating the needs
of future users. It is how effectively this is achieved which marks the radical from the traditional library. Ruth Stubbings (Loughborough University) shows how access to networked resources can be significantly improved for staff and students with the effective application of the appropriate technology, such as MetaLib. The growth in networked resource usage at Loughborough results from understanding the approach that staff and students adopt in looking for information and then in designing and promoting systems and services to support this approach. The key is to support the right content with the appropriate services. Without this, much of the content produced by publishers would be invisible. However, libraries can only work with what is available from publishers, and perhaps the really radical library will only be created when we can get back to offering our users the exact material they need rather than aggregating the output of particular publishers.

Networked resources provide a whole set of opportunities for libraries to reformat the space that they control. So far, few libraries have taken the opportunity provided by the online availability of journal back-runs to remove the printed versions from their shelves. Admittedly, it is only recently that libraries have begun to feel even slightly confident that the material will be available for the guaranteed future and librarians are naturally not great risk takers. However, Diana Leitch (John Rylands University Library of Manchester) has shown how necessity in the form of a major library refurbishment has created dramatic opportunities for the reuse of space, and for a move to a new service delivery model, however temporary. Again, this move from print to electronic did not happen by itself but required the Library to assist and support users, by providing the right support at the right time in the right atmosphere.

Bob Campbell quoted Odlyzko’s analysis of library costs and, based on his evidence of library spending on acquisitions (low) and overheads (high), argued that the scholarly journal issue is really a library cost issue. It is true that few libraries spend less on staff than on acquisitions but the cost of library space will tip the balance of spend onto overheads. However, librarians are not helped by publishers who are using continuing access to back-runs as another revenue stream, and few libraries want to continue paying twice for the same content. This is causing them to hold onto the print versions, incurring predictable storage and serving costs. This results in few libraries being ready for the radical step of discarding their print back-runs in favour of the electronic versions. There is also little incentive for this as building costs are born centrally in most institutions.

It is clear that there is a variety of activity being undertaken by libraries. We must move away from the model of the ‘bog standard’ library and build libraries, physical and virtual, services and collections that meet the needs of an increasingly diverse set of users, both on and off campus. To take two extremes, GCU is not the University of Manchester. These two institutions have different missions and this should be reflected in their libraries. A large research-led university will need a library which supports its mission by providing a wide range of materials, collected and maintained in depth and made accessible by a catalogue which unlocks such a rich collection. A teaching-led university will need a library or a learning centre which supports a different model of learning and, for example, does not invest scarce staff resources in building elaborate catalogues for transient resources.

A selection of quotes from these presentations gives a flavour of the speakers’ contributions. From Bob Campbell: “Libraries should forget their past, make some tough decisions and focus on the digital future.” From Diana Leitch: “You don’t need great printed collections to provide a great service.” From Jan Howden: “No-one wanted this to happen.” From Heather Keeble: “Simply providing the content does not provide the solution. We have to provide the supporting services around the content to make it usable.” From Ruth Stubbings: “It is making their lives so much easier”, and from Terry Hulbert: “Seize the traffic!”.

The radical librarian

What, then, of the radical librarian? How will we recognize one? Some would say that this is a contradiction in terms as librarianship is all about continuity. The first thing that the radical librarian does is to develop and deliver the radical library
agenda, some aspects of which have been outlined in the above presentations. The radical librarian will also:

- stay in advance of need
- believe in themselves and what they have to offer
- not take their existence for granted
- learn from each other
- get out more.

The key role for the radical librarian is to seize the opportunity as it arises. For example, the development of VLEs in many institutions is a key opportunity for the library and the librarian that must not be missed. Librarians have the metadata skills, the integration skills and the presentation skills which will add value to the new learning paradigm currently developing on campuses. The key for the library is to work towards the integration of its services into both the learning and the research process and to create seamless access to information in the support of both areas. To conclude with a radical quote from Elsevier’s current advertising campaign: “Never underestimate the importance of a librarian”, to which it could be added: “Without them, your content will be invisible”.

References

1. Radical Librarian: http://www.geosites.com/SoHo/Cafe/7423/radlib.html

Michael Breaks
University Librarian
Heriot-Watt University
Edinburgh
EH14 4AS, UK
Tel: +44 (0)131 451 3570
E-mail: m.l.breaks@hw.ac.uk