

The radical library: taking up the challenge

An overview of the UKSG seminar held at the Royal College of Nursing, London, 13 November 2003
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Five papers from the seminar are published in full on the pages following this report

The Radical Library – a contradiction in terms perhaps? Not if the papers presented at a recent UKSG seminar are anything to judge by.

This was a stimulating collection of papers based on practical examples of libraries and librarians taking a radical approach to old and new challenges, together with examples drawn from the publishing world to demonstrate how they too are responding to the changing information environment.

Bob Campbell, President of Blackwell Publishing, kicked off the day with a challenging paper entitled 'Libraries: do they have a future in academia – or only a past?'. He described a world without librarians where electronic media had largely replaced print as the dominant format and other agencies, such as consortia purchasers and national e-archives, were providing users with the bulk of their information needs. (*Paper in this issue.*)

Diana Leitch, Assistant Director and Deputy Librarian of the University of Manchester, provided a practical illustration of the old adage that necessity is the mother of invention. A major refurbishment of the Library's Special Collections accommodation required that the Special Collections stock be accommodated elsewhere for two-and-a-half years. Given the enormous significance of the Collections at Manchester, it was imperative that the temporary store be secure but accessible. To release at least 18km of shelf space in a major academic library required considerable invention, but Diana and her team were more than equal to the challenge. As the Library had already made significant investments in e-only provision of journals, it quickly became apparent that the space targets could most readily be achieved by converting more current subscriptions to e-only and purchasing electronic back-runs of core STM collections. As a major research library it was felt that the print runs could not be discarded, so they

have been relocated to a secure store on the top floor of a cotton mill. Key to the success of the project has been the communication with all stakeholders, including academic staff and bindery staff, so that they were aware what was happening and why. Manchester now has 3,000 fewer print journal subscriptions, but is providing access to over 12,500 e-journals. This was a high risk strategy, which can be challenging to those who are less comfortable using e-resources, but it has enabled the library to achieve its objectives and there will be no shortage of new demands for the space which will be released when Special Collections moves back to its refurbished home in two-and-a-half years' time.

The session resumed after coffee with a thought-provoking description by Jan Howden of Glasgow Caledonian University of their Learning Café, which is founded on the somewhat radical concept that computers can comfortably co-exist with coffee and cakes! (*Paper in this issue.*)

Our next speaker, Heather Keeble, provided a fascinating insight into the ways that Leicester University Library supports its large community of distance learners. The highly responsive service culture of the Distance Learning Unit is clearly valued by its users. The University also seems to value the service highly since it is using some of the income from distance learning students to fund it. (*Paper in this issue.*)

The afternoon session kicked off with a stimulating paper from *Ruth Stubbings*, Academic Services Manager at Loughborough University, describing how they ensured that the electronic databases the library purchased (often at great expense) were earning their keep. What had really revolutionized the way databases were used was the implementation of the MetaLib portal, which permits simultaneous searching of databases. The Loughborough team had also implemented SFX alongside MetaLib, which enabled them to link article records to the library catalogue and/or to the OpenURL of e-journals, which could then take the user directly through to full text. Reflecting on the successful implementation of MetaLib and SFX, Ruth provided some useful hints on project management and urged us to keep our project team small and the implementation deadline tight! (*Paper in this issue.*)

Ruth was followed by *Terry Hulbert* from the Institute of Physics Publishing (IoPP) who described how librarians and publishers are interacting in the electronic world. He outlined the guidelines which JISC recommended publishers follow if they wish to make their output more accessible to libraries and thence to users:

- expose metadata about content; support Z39.50 searching and data harvesting using OAI
- share news alerts using really simple syndication (RSS)
- become an OpenURL source
- become an OpenURL target
- provide persistent URLs.

Terry went on to illustrate not only how IoPP has complied with these guidelines but also how they have developed, or are developing, some additional features:

- forward linking – enabling users to see papers from other publishers citing the article that they were viewing

- clustering technology – enabling more drill-down browsing
- more OpenURLs, enabling you to integrate ‘see also’ links
- COUNTER-compliant usage statistics – IoPP are currently building a portal to deliver these statistics. Some publishers, such as OUP and Elsevier, have already done this.

Terry concluded by highlighting some of the other interesting developments by publishers which demonstrate their commitment to interacting more effectively with libraries and users. Customer portals, such as Emerald’s Litterati Club for authors, and librarian gateways, such as Blackwell Publishing’s Librarian Site, are becoming increasingly important. And as for the future, there would undoubtedly be further examples of publisher/librarian interaction in the electronic world, including perhaps Terry’s idea of a graphical history of a reference linking trail!

Arguably the most challenging task of the day fell to *Michael Breaks*, Librarian of Heriot-Watt University, who succinctly summarized the key points to emerge from the day’s papers and reflected on whether librarians were indeed radical enough to meet the many challenges we face in the digital world. (*Paper in this issue.*)

In conclusion, Michael observed that in order to deliver radical library services, you need radical librarians who are bold, visionary and responsive to change. The challenge is there and – on the evidence of the speakers at this seminar – radical librarians are rising to it admirably, so perhaps we do have a future after all!

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