

A national LIBRIS-Portal at the Royal Library. Do we need it? ELAG lecture 9-11 June, 2004 in Trondheim, Norway.

LIBRIS – the national database system is today a well established concept in Sweden. Students are most likely to become aware of LIBRIS – the joint catalogue of collections at universities and colleges - from an early stage in their educational process. As a joint catalogue, LIBRIS has – despite its ups and downs – existed for 30 years. There is never the slightest doubt when a librarian refers a student to begin with “a search in LIBRIS”. LIBRIS is a durable and forceful trademark, and those of us involved in higher education should take care to protect it.

The question is to what extent a traditional library catalogue can guide a user among the library collections. And as for collections, is not the very notion of a collection somewhat outmoded. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to talk of information resources, made available to the users in higher education via the university and college libraries – irrespective of where in the world the material is shelved or stored.

In 1996 the Swedish government decided to allot the Royal Library a not too inconsiderable amount of money to the purpose of instigating further development and the modernisation of LIBRIS. As early as March 1997, the LIBRIS union catalogue was made freely available on the Internet. It was a decision based on democratic values, foresight and of strategic importance taken by the Swedish government as early as 1996 enabling the general public access to all collected information resources found at universities and colleges. LIBRIS was offered the opportunity to establish itself on the Internet during a period when competition for the user’s attention was less intense than it is today. The catalogue information and the underlying physical collections (and in 1997 physical collections were the order of the day, with emphasis on “physical”) became a central, distinct and obvious database in the new information and knowledge based society, whose structure then began to take shape on the Internet.

### **Are library catalogues used at all?**

The competition of today is comparable to a balancing act on a knife’s edge. The information of interest to higher education and research no longer acknowledges boundaries. The concept collection – as in physical collection – has long since played out its role. Research information is available wherever in the world, seamlessly it appears, via the Web, electronic archives, but also commercial databases with restricted access. All these sources are to be found somewhere on the Web and the structure for retrieval is created by the individual on each occasion a search is performed. Total freedom and endless possibilities. If there are obstacles they are more likely to concern funding issues. Statements of spearhead research published in periodicals, often requires a generous bank account to access.

Do we need portals in order to structure and assist? Are not those days bygone when inquisitive minds attached themselves to a, in advance, padlocked and given structure? Are the middlemen between users and the producers of the databases needed? The child’s assertion of “can do” should apply equally to the student and the researcher. Is not a portal a complicated or awkward Google-engine, glossing over rather than simplifying?

Despite the increase in competition from the various information retrieval services, the use of the LIBRIS union catalogue is, strangely enough, on the rise. When comparing the number of searches performed in March 2004 with the same month a year earlier, 2003, there is a

noticeable increase of 13 percent. However, searches performed by robots, like beacons in the night scanning the World Wide Web's databases, have been excluded. To this date the Swedish universities and colleges lack alternate portal software able to perform anonymous large scale searches. The LIBRIS database register in the region of 50,000-60,000 every twenty-four hours. An impressive figure from a country with a mere population of 8 million. Furthermore, LIBRIS contains only bibliographic information describing collections housed at universities and colleges in Sweden; very few of these descriptions are linked to full text material.

### **Keep it simple!**

Or is that why it is? Knowing that the LIBRIS database is the collections at Sweden's universities and colleges? Is it so obvious what it is about that it becomes evident what the source is? It is clear and distinct and easy to understand what kind of material is being searched.

Sweden is gifted with yet another national database, also under the auspices of LIBRIS. Its name is bibliotek.se and consists of information from the LIBRIS database expanded with the addition of the public libraries equivalent, BTJ's BURK-system. Together they form the database bibliotek.se. bibliotek.se is a co-ordinated project between the Royal Library and Bibliotekstjänst. bibliotek.se contains a great deal more information than LIBRIS, both with regard to information about the libraries and their collections, and also the amount of bibliographic data. Yet, the appeal for this search service is considerably less than for LIBRIS. The number of searches performed in bibliotek.se has never exceeded more than a tenth of the number of searches in LIBRIS, or 5,000-6,000 per day.

There could be numerous reasons for this. A question would be whether bibliotek.se is in any way less distinct than LIBRIS? Is the user as certain to what a subject search in LIBRIS will produce, compared to the result of a similar search in bibliotek.se, despite the fact that the hit rate is higher in the latter? Is the LIBRIS trademark a guarantee setting high standards (universities and colleges) and that LIBRIS actually contains information aimed at higher education and research? The LIBRIS database has on the strength of its expected and distinct contents, actually aided the person searching information with the first assessment of the search results.

Will the arrival of portals confuse rather than create order? With the aid of modern portal searches, results are compiled from a variety of sources and material of differing characteristics and structure. Searches of this kind will place onerous demands on the user. To understand and grasp search results from Google, an American archive, 15 library databases from around the world and a commercial source for e-journals – a mixture of fulltext and bibliographic information, and/or articles and books – is not an easy task.

### **Local library catalogues, national library catalogues or international library catalogues**

Library catalogue and library catalogue, how interesting is the local library's catalogue when it concerns itself with the information referring to a particular subject? Especially in conjunction with those resources that are freely available on the Internet. The strength of the local library catalogue is of course that it can inform on whether my library has the book or not.

From a pragmatic point of view it is of course preferable to present one's own collection before those of other information resources, as it is mainly to be put to use close to home. The

method, however, is archaic and primitive and costs are enormous. A national union catalogue, as opposed to a local catalogue, has functions such as search filters and other applications easily applied as local OPAC.

As soon as anyone wants to initiate a subject search, one realises that even the major university catalogues are inadequate. A union catalogue, on the other hand, can offer a substantially wider selection of resources. In a union catalogue the metadata is uniformly standardised and indexed. Searches are performed in the same interface and are therefore accessible in a logical manner.

There are a number of interesting catalogues at our universities and colleges, some of which have yet to be digitised and are only available on campus via the libraries. Lack of adequate funding and appropriate technology has held back a complete account of university and college collections.

At present there is a rapid development in the area that aims to intensify and expand descriptive measures for our collections. A significant part is to be found in the digitisation of images and texts, as well as the scanning and retrospective data conversions of old card catalogues encompassing special collections. Material produced digitally – i.e. examination papers or research assignments – are instantly available via the university's databases.

There are today numerous ways to make a country's collected information resources accessible to the academic community. National programs and ventures are pursued to maintain the technological developments. Metadata, electronic storage and searches need to be of a similar kind to facilitate each individual user. This is where we need a portal tool...or maybe not. In Sweden we are configuring the structure of LIBRIS to offer the user several logical databases with differing contents, structurally similar, instead of only one. Searches will be more advanced and accurate than with the assistance of a portal.

### **The Metadata revolution**

Never before has the need for metadata been so crucial. All new collections make demands for obtainable metadata. Metadata gains even greater significance when the notion of a physical collection no longer has any relevance. Access to reliable material is the new guideline, by which we navigate our way in the world. It replaces previous surveys at the library shelves. I do not intend to comment what this might imply to the structure of future library catalogues, but suffice to say, that catalogue and format experts have in unison with computer scientists initiated some very interesting attempts.

Even greater yet is the need for co-ordination on an international scale, and in this field there is a lot happening. International co-ordination is a necessity if libraries are to stake out their place in the future. Our rules for formats are being streamlined – MARC21 and Unimarc — contents refined to enable increased exchanges than was previously possible. What the library community can contribute to make the Internet more intelligible than before is the internationally structured metadata and the creation of authority information. This will be the libraries major contribution to future societies. Each country must assume responsibility for their national bibliographies and authority records and permit them to become free tools for the world community.

## **ONE and ONESAC**

The ONE-Association (Open Network Europe) is a European association, founded in 2002. The purpose of the Association aims for collaboration between its members on issues of bibliographical data, and that each country should make their national and bibliographic records freely available to the other members. The present members are Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, United Kingdom (British Library), Italy (ICCU) and Hungary. They are currently constructing a joint, so called, service database, which contains each country's national bibliographies and other data of mutual interest. Today, the available bibliographic records have been supplied by the Library of Congress and the British national bibliography. The shared server also allows for other data that might be of benefit to the other members. The idea is to create a "one stop shop" The data is freely available to its members and can be imported to their national or local databases. There might even be the possibility that ONE can assist its members to gain direct access to the various databases belonging to publishing houses with information about e-journals, e-books and other material. Even the database hosts could be contacted directly instead of attaching unnecessary, and costly, middle men.

The ONE catalogue is not intended to replace the national catalogues, but to serve as a complementary resource. Neither is it intended to be utilised by the end user. On a national level this is understandable, whilst the notion of general European database or search service is vague.

Within ONE there is yet another project, building on the same notion of co-ordination and sharing of resources. The project goes by the name of ONESAC and aims to create a joint European authority database, *ONE Shared Authority Control*. Neither is this database to be free of use to the end user, but considered as a resource to the national catalogues. The creation of authority records are an essential part of the cataloguing process and a lot of time could be spared if an efficient approach to share this work could be attained. There is in existence a prototype containing authority records from Sweden's Royal Library and the British Library. Promises to deliver authority records have been given by Bibsys in Norway and ICCU in Italy, the Helsinki university library in Finland and the UN agency FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization). It is expected that the database will be put into production and made available to the members of ONE by 2004.

The aim of ONE is to increase efficiency when working with our catalogues and to make them even more attractive than before. ONE's contribution will be that libraries and library resources shall play a role in the future alongside all the new services and emerging collections.

It is only to be expected that the ONE database will sometime in the future be put to use in the field of interlibrary loans. By attaching holdings data to bibliographic records, one can begin lending books and other material between libraries. Especially interesting in this context is the ONE member, British Library and its Supply Centre.

### **Of course we need a national portal!**

Even if we are not quite familiar with the product yet, especially how it is intended to be used and by whom, Sweden still needs a national library portal. The portal should nevertheless be seen as part of a larger structure – a greater construction – enabling an efficient process in which the information can be made accessible. It is a question of standardising data and the standardisation of technology and technical solutions.

To create technical solutions today for the dissemination of information is akin to building cars. The ground plate is produced in vast series, whilst the details differentiate the various bases or services. Similarly structured data and streamlined technical solutions allow the end user the possibility to perform advanced and intelligent searches regardless of search tools.

With a national LIBRIS portal in Sweden, we do not intend to make the same mistake as when we procured our library systems. Following much disentanglement about LIBRIS as a central library system, we finally decided on a joint union catalogue, but also compatible with complete local library systems. In a way the solution was similar to that in the rest of the world – in as far as local library systems are concerned – with Norway as the splendid exception. Today, we have better techniques and far more powerful computer networks, which all points towards centralised solutions. We can only hope that suppliers of portal systems share this vision. On a national level, we expect to make considerable savings by not having a number of local library portals activated.

Simultaneously to having a central portal software, the construction of which will follow in the tradition of LIBRIS co-operation, that of the co-ordination between its member libraries. If the service is to be accepted, all LIBRIS-libraries need to have substantial influence in the shaping of the LIBRIS-portal. Students and researchers need to recognise it in a distinct way, realise to whom it is intended. This will be a major challenge. For instance, one context where this will have bearing is on Sweden's net-libraries. This means that students and other users are no longer bound to one campus. Instead they can pursue their research or participate in courses, which several universities and colleges would share. This is where the national LIBRIS-portal comes into its own and becomes the tool to be used. Local adaptations such as the logotypes of the seats of learning and a selection of information resources can be kept apart pending on target group, geographical positioning etc.

The national LIBRIS-portal with its local adaptations of mainly interfaces should function in a world crammed with other portals. Even as I speak there are new portals being built at universities and colleges – student portals, portals for administrative departments or the unions etc – all with different aims and purposes. A problem in this context is the need to authenticate. The user must be able to identify and to be made aware of their rights in all the different systems. This should, of course, be co-ordinated, a job already initiated. The starting-point is the individual user who will have his or her rights in a number of different functions and systems. Systems development should harmonise and the Royal Library has established contacts to become a part of this project at the nation's universities and colleges.

But, to begin with we need to amass the information resources into a national portal, learn how to collaborate in the sphere of higher education and see how the portal can be made as distinct as possible with regard to contents and of belonging.

Clarity is the issue.

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