

FINNISH NATIONAL LIBRARY NETWORK

ELAG 2004, Trondheim, Norway

Esa-Pekka Keskitalo
Helsinki University Library,
the National Library of Finland
esa-pekka.keskitalo@helsinki.fi

Introduction

Digital library is the concept that guides the building of library services today. Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science defines digital library as "a library in which a significant proportion of the resources are available in machine-readable format (as opposed to print or microform), accessible by means of computers. The digital content may be locally held or accessed remotely via computer networks."

The resources can be made available to the patrons without an experience of being in the library or getting service from the library. However, digital resources do not turn into useful service by themselves. Digital libraries are not merely resources, but "organizations that provide the resources, including the specialized staff, to select, structure, offer intellectual access to - - collections of digital works", as put by the Digital Library Federation. Indeed, the need for libraries' services is growing, not declining.

In a world of digital libraries, it is possible to redistribute traditional library tasks and responsibilities in new ways. It can be experienced both as a threat and as an opportunity.

Finnish libraries: increasing cooperation

Public service libraries in Finland fall into four groups:

- Public libraries are run by the municipalities. 80 % of the population of 5 million are using them regularly. There are 19 provincial libraries, i.e. large public libraries that offer information and interlibrary loan services in their region.
- University libraries are serving about 150,000 students and 8,000 teachers in 20 universities.
- In the polytechnics, there are 125,000 students and 5,000 teachers. There are 32 polytechnic libraries.
- Special library is a term used of libraries in public institutions, branches of administration, etc. Here belong e.g. the Library of Parliament, the Library of Statistics and so on.

Libraries of the same feather have found it useful to increase cooperation, and also appear as all of

a piece. The trend began with the establishment of the Council for University Libraries in 1997, motivated by changes in the funding system of the universities.

Since polytechnics were introduced in Finland in 1990s, they have adopted a policy of close cooperation on many fields, including libraries. Public libraries and special libraries followed the suit in 2003, both starting a Council of their own.

The councils have very little in a way of power, budget, or bureaucracy. Rather, they are a way of defining the consensual opinion and presenting it to the outside world.

That the libraries have grouped them in the manner they have, was never much premeditated. The grouping reflects differences in administrative affiliations and customer bases. It has never been thought to exclude other forms of alliances, for example on regional basis.

Helsinki University Library is the National Library of Finland. As far as library technology is concerned, the national library has traditionally concentrated in providing services to the university libraries. A committee nominated by the Ministry of Education recommended in 2003 that the National Library should be given a more prominent role in coordination and cooperation of the whole community of publicly funded libraries. This recommendation was adopted and will have a gradual effect on the work of the library. How its role exactly will change remains yet to be negotiated, and will probably continue evolving in the future.

With the university libraries, the National Library is building a shared technical platform that is nicknamed, lacking a better term, "the triangle".

The Triangle Model of Library Technology

The triangle will consist of these major elements:

- 1) Information Retrieval Portal
- 2) Integrated Library System
- 3) Digital Object Management

The Information Retrieval Portal

The National Electronic Library (FinELib) negotiates license agreements for consortia formed by libraries and research institutes. The service was first aimed to the research community, but today even public libraries can join the licensing consortia.

A portal for digital information resources was being planned already in the late 1990s, but the undertaking proved difficult. Finally, in 2002, a system could be chosen, namely MetaLib from ExLibris. Marketing of the portal to the patrons will begin in autumn 2004, although the service is available for testing already.

service. Today the emphasis is on the local level. What can be done in configuration of databases etc. is done centrally in the National Library, but then the libraries take over and make necessary customisations. The portal will be identified with the respective library.

Management of Digital Objects

From the library administration's point of view, the target services of the portal can be divided into external and internal resources. External resources are typically licensed or free resources, over which the library does not have full ownership.

Internal resources are in possession of the library, and the library must itself take care of preservation

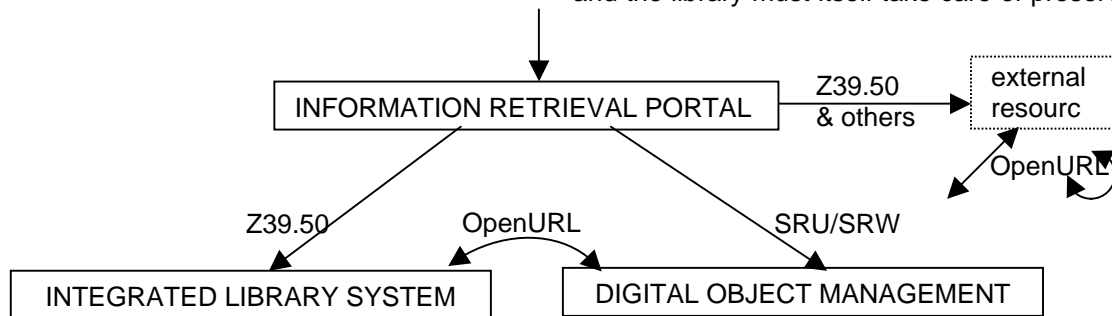


Figure: the three elements of the triangle

In the portal, there are several important features:

- Resources are displayed in an organized manner, with resource discovery tools
- Searches can be made to several resources at the same time. The patrons may also choose to use native interfaces.
- Every customer sees the services he/she is entitled to.
- Patrons are offered tools to customize the portal interface and to organize and exploit search results.
- There is an OpenURL resolving server that helps to discover relationships between different resources.

In the universities, the portal will be officially launched in autumn 2004. It will be introduced in the public libraries in 2005, and the polytechnic libraries will probably adopt it soon, too.

Implementation of the portal has brought up many questions of coordination. Years ago, the portal was generally conceived as a central national

and distribution of these digital objects. University libraries have various digital collections in their curation - and a variety of systems for these collections. There are dissertation databases, image databases, e-reserve databases etc., in short, a relatively large number of relatively small resources.

The National library has begun to build a digital object management system that could provide a well-maintained, modern tool for curation of digital collections. ENCompass for Digital Collections from Endeavor Information Systems will be the application used.

The system will be available for the other libraries, too. Three other university libraries will implement it in during 2004. - The system will also function as an OAI repository.

It is obvious that one management system cannot replace all existing systems, at least not at once. Results of harvesting of "Finnish" Internet will remain in separate system, as will the scanned and OCR'ed digital archives that rely to a fuzzy search engine.

Integrated Library Systems (ILSs)

On the whole, the traditional collections will continue to form a very important part of the libraries in the predictable future. The integrated library systems (ILSs) will be an indispensable part of the IT platform in the libraries.

Finnish university libraries first got a common ILS in 1988. In 2000, when a new software (Voyager) was introduced, all the databases were assembled on a single server. This model was adopted by the polytechnic libraries, which opened a similar system in 2003.

The public and special libraries offer a more heterogeneous picture, several systems being used by them. However, three out of every four public libraries belong to regional ILS consortia, having six or seven members in average. A number of special libraries participate in university libraries' ILS consortium, and others have expressed interest to similar arrangements.

Uniformity of systems, of course, is not an aim in its own right. The national library cooperates with domestic library software producers in e.g. implementation of standards, thus trying to ensure that all libraries have the benefit of software that does not impede the building of digital services.

Links

- Helsinki University Library, the National Library of Finland: <http://www.lib.helsinki.fi/english/>
- FinELib - the Finnish Electronic Library: <http://www.lib.helsinki.fi/finelib/english/>
- Gateway to Finnish Research Libraries: <http://www.lib.helsinki.fi/tilke/>
- Libraries.fi - the Finnish Library Services: <http://www.libraries.fi/>

Interoperability

The portal will use the target databases through Z39.50 when possible. The digital object management system will support SRU/SRW.

OpenURL standard will be much relied on. For instance, we often want to link records in an ILS to a digital object. The collections in the digital object management system will be described in the OpenURL resolver database, and thus the link is created on the basis of an OpenURL query, and static URLs can be disposed of.

Increasingly, we need to address interoperability issues that are not confined to the systems used in the library only. User authentication - single authentication to all services - and integration of library resources in the learning environments are good examples of acute challenges.

Conclusion

As the functions, tasks, and responsibilities of libraries intermingle, it is still important that libraries remember that they exist for a purpose: the patron. However traditional or modern a library is, it stands or falls in knowing the patrons, their needs and expectations. No amount of digital resources and tools for their management will result in a good service, if wrong kinds of tools are applied to wrong kinds of resources in a wrong way.