e>p and then what?

19 Aug 2016

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I have worked for a couple of years with e-resources, acquisitions and licences, at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU). Currently 97% of the collections budget is dedicated to digital acquisitions, and the remaining percentage is print acquisitions. A representative from a publisher exclaimed, "Oh, you're one of the e-extreme libraries!" when I mentioned it. The term was new to me, but I guess it fits. Lately I have had reasons to mull over what it means for the SLU University Library to be 'e-extreme'.

Why not go all the way and completely get rid of all physical acquisitions? A valid question, and a good place to start. We might reach that point some day, but it isn't a goal in and of itself. It feels like something that lies in the (near? far?) future, for various reasons. For one, publishers don't seem to like the idea of putting up popular textbooks on the web. I'm talking about all those books that are usually mandatory in every ground level course there is on any given subject. Quite annoying, since these are the books in highest demand by teachers and students alike.

Then there is a more local issue. Swedish publishers don't seem willing to leave the printed world behind. None of the Swedish academic publishers sells e-books to libraries (the situation is not the same for fiction and public libraries). While the vast majority of our books are in English, especially the literature of natural sciences, there are still plenty of books in Swedish that students read.

There is also this movement, or perhaps a subculture, of people who prefer the days of old. People still want to read print books and we prefer not to deny patron requests. We have observed something interesting concerning this though. On our website we have a form where patrons can suggest new purchases. A few years ago they had to fill in if they preferred an e-book or a print book. Plenty of people chose print. But now the answer is automatically set to 'e-book', and from our experience few people change it to 'print' (and don't complain afterwards, I should add). This is an easy and subtle way to change patrons' perceptions!

Our library is still very much a place for physical collections. We have a more than hundred year long history of buying journals and books in printed form. The collections are huge, even if weeding has always been a part of library routine. With the advent of digital media, new criteria for weeding have emerged, though. Lately we have been throwing out journals en masse. In the last five years, two of the SLU University Libraries three main campuses have undertaken huge weeding projects. There are various practical reasons behind this, not least economic ones, but also ideas of what an academic library should be today. We have adopted the 'just in time' principle, instead of 'just in case'. Personally I firmly believe that collections should be used, not kept. We are not a storage facility. Others have that mission, like national libraries and archives, but we don't.

So, how did we go about it? We didn't just weed out every single title that hadn't been used for a few years. But we got rid of every journal we had online access to. At our main library a couple of librarians, me included (I think they put new recruits on this because we are less likely to have emotional attachments to the print copies), went through a list of all journals we had in print. Did we have online access? If yes: strike, out! If not: let's keep it for a while. Perpetual access rights were also something we took into account, but weren't all that adamant about. Somewhat controversial perhaps, but we decided to take our chances. Hopefully, the option to buy a lost title again always exists.

The result of this endeavour was several truck loads of printed artefacts leaving the library. This left huge gaps in the shelves. The library was suddenly quite hollowed out (I guess some librarians would use the word 'wounded'). What happens when the library as a space is no longer used primarily for storage of physical media? Well, the library has always been used by students as a place to study. Now there is simply more space for them. However, a library filled with empty shelves is a pretty sad sight. Not to mention that the noise level is significantly increased when books no longer absorb the sound of students hard at work. This was a perfect opportunity to buy some new and modern furniture. We wanted noise absorbing furniture to make up for the loss of books. Then we wanted everything to be flexible. It should be easy for the students to change the room to suit their needs. The students have appreciated this immensely, especially portable whiteboards. They not only work as a tool to aid creativity, they can also be used to screen off others by creating a room within the room.

(Moa Hedbrant & Erik Bergsten, SLU University Library)

We have also been experimenting with simply leaving the regular library space. Why let the users come to us when we can come to them? We have tried this a few times – the pop-up library. A quite simple concept, devoid of physical books. First we advertise the time and place. Then at the advertised time, in the advertised place, two librarians show up, laptops ready on a foldable standing table (and a roll-up to tell who we are!). So far we've done this with specific themes, open access and working with mobile devices, but the concept could easily be broadened.

This is basically where the SLU University Library is now. The bookless library is still very much a theoretical concept for us, but we have never been closer to it; and the distance will only get shorter over time. But the question is how much the library identity is tied to the physical collection? We are still providers of information, but not in the classical 'keeper of the books' sense. Like the rest of

society, the library sector is moving towards a more service oriented organisation, leaning heavily towards information technology. For years librarians have worked with everything (and anything in between) from open access, to publication databases, to education. Only a fraction of the staff work with print acquisitions and maintaining the print collections, yet the image of a library is still tied to shelves upon shelves filled with books and journals.

Or is it?