The meaning of collections for the identity of academic libraries – a Swedish university library study.

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Introduction

My study aims to contribute with knowledge of the significance of the collections[1] of university libraries, which have changed in character, for the libraries' identity and for their position in the higher education landscape. The thesis contributes with knowledge in the form of an analytical study of the Swedish university libraries from a management perspective with a focus on its collections and identity. It constitutes a contribution to national and international library research and should have the potential to form a basis for the further development of the Swedish university library sector.

Historically, the print collections were the core of the library identity (see for example Edquist et al. 2022, 74; Hansson 2010, 4; Levine-Clark 2014, 425). Societal changes have pushed for a change, not to mention the digitization movement, and it is clear that the focus has been replaced by something else. Today there are voices that claim that the collections should be considered a service like any other that university libraries offer. Even so, the printed book appears as an artifact in contemporary depictions of the library, as a symbol of the library. In my study, I intend to go behind this romanticized facade and study which identities university libraries have and are attributed to based on their collections.
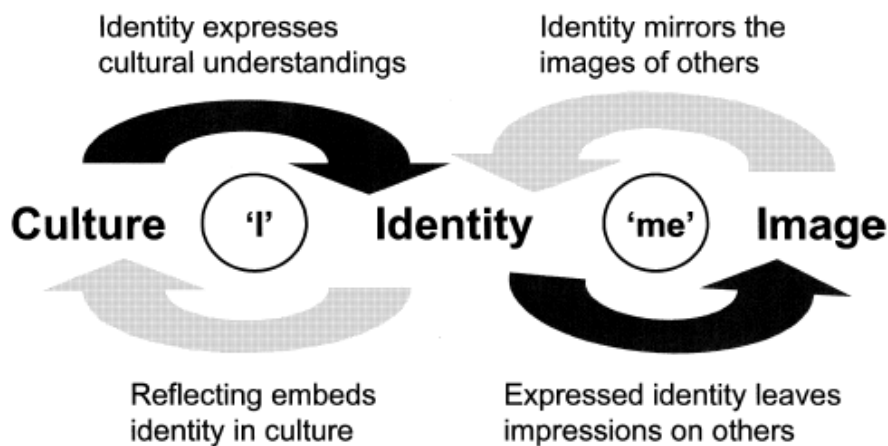
Libraries need to align with the strategies belonging to their parent institution is emphasized and discussed in several research articles and reports (see for example Pinfield et al. 2017; Cox et al. 2019). The emphasis put on collection is therefore, at least partly, decided by the management level at the universities. Hence, the management perspective, in the form of vice-chancellors and library directors, is my focus.

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[1] That means all form of collections of documents: older artefacts, print, digital, digitized etc.

To limit the study I intend to focus on the preservation[2] of collections and the pursuit of open science. Libraries spend considerable effort and funding towards open science, for example in the form of transformative agreements. Recently, two preservation initiatives have seen the light of day in Sweden, and the larger Swedish university libraries are important participants in both, together with the national library.

Theoretical framework

Document theory will most probably play a part in my theoretical framework. I make use of how the document is said to move between the physical, social, and mental dimensions based on the message/identity we have assigned to them (based on Buckland 2016; Levy 2016; Lund and Skare 2017). The different qualities of the document are emphasized and expressed in different ways in different contexts. Sometimes its physical qualities are at the forefront of the analysis, sometimes the content is in focus, and in other contexts its social dimension. In adherence to the concept of identity, Hutch and Schultz's theory on organizational identity, culture, and image, can be useful (Hatch and Schultz 2002, 995):

Identity expresses cultural understandings

Identity mirrors the images of others

Culture   'I'   Identity   'me'   Image

Reflecting embeds identity in culture

Expressed identity leaves impressions on others

Figures 1. Hatch & Schultz Organizational Identity Dynamics Model.

Research questions

Overarching research question: What tensions exist at Swedish university libraries between the task of preserving material and developing new collections, and what impact does it have on the library's identity?

This in turn leads to the following specified questions:

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[2] Whit that means preservation of print material, not preservation of digital material. But I would like to discuss this limitation with you at the conference.

1. How is the task of preserving material at Swedish university libraries described from a management perspective?
2. What significance, according to the management level, is attached to the development of new collections in a context characterized by open science?
3. How are these sub-collections given importance in relation to the library's identity?

Methodology

Surveys and interviews are my main methods. The survey will be sent out to all libraries at Swedish higher education institutions, hopefully before the summer. It is important since there is little research on Swedish academic libraries and their collections, at least in connection to their identity. I see a need to collect data from a broad number of libraries, and from there on prepare for the next stage in my study.

In the next step, I will interview vice-chancellors and library directors. Since my focus is on the management level, I have no intention to interview users or librarians. I will direct my attention to a selection of libraries: the larger university libraries in Sweden. They work closely with open science and at the same time store and preserve large collections of cultural heritage. It makes them ideal to study.

Research Results, Discussion & Conclusion

Since I am the beginning of my PhD journey I have not yet collected any data and hence have not done any analysis.

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