

How public libraries deliver value online: the perception of librarians

Marie Lundsryd Nielsen, Marie Cecilie Lensch, Tove Faber Frandsen (University of Southern Denmark, Denmark)

Introduction

Digital resources have brought many changes to libraries and has reshaped the structure as well as the form of libraries (Kehinde, 2018). Mickiewicz (2016, p. 239) describe these changes: “libraries are no longer ‘just libraries,’ but a hybrid of different specialisations and services that have come together to create a new public space”. Calhoun (2014, p. 18) emphasizes that digital libraries support the advancement of knowledge as well as culture. Some have been concerned that libraries would become obsolete with the expansion of digital archives (Brindley, 2002). However, as argued by Leorke, Wyatt, and McQuire (2018, p. 37) “libraries have turned out to be highly adaptable institutions that have not only survived the digital revolution, but are helping to shape it”.

According to Sørensen (2021) digitalization is among the reasons for examining public library values and the studies exploring the values of libraries acknowledge the digital services as a value, however, the digital library is not addressed specifically. Most public libraries can be characterised as hybrid libraries trying to create a space where the analog and digital coexist (Palfrey, 2015). Many digital library services such as training tend to be available to users only in a library facility (Audunson et al., 2020) and libraries cannot necessarily translate the physical library into a digital library (Hedvall, Ôgland, & Lindberg, 2022; Mestre, 2022). Stachokas (2014) argues that the transition from print to digital needs to be planned very carefully to ensure that access to information is enhanced rather than reduced. Until recently, many library directors did not expect the fully digital library in their lifetime (e.g. Bahr, 2000). One of the reasons being that the physical library offers context and provides a sensory understanding of knowledge.

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic forced all types of libraries to develop a wider variety of digital services that do not require physical presence at a library facility. Mehta and Wang (2020) describe the various digital services offered by a university library that are used to meet the needs of its end-users during the COVID-19 pandemic. They find that digital libraries can have the potential to provide richer e-content and online services although the digital library did not succeed in replacing the physical library. Ćirić and Ćirić (2021) argues that the increased usage of digital content during the pandemic enables increased educational, informative, and cultural engagement of the communities they serve. Reid and Mesjar (2022) capture the responses of public libraries in Scotland to the lockdown in 2020 and find that despite difficulties great efforts have been made to sustain the communities that they serve. Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic forced all types of libraries to develop a wider variety of digital services and as a result, they have gained an understanding of what they can and cannot do digitally.

The lockdowns across the world have thus accelerated the development of digital library services and it is therefore relevant to revisit the value of the public library with a specific focus on the digital public library. More specifically, the aim of the present study is to

explore how librarians perceive the digital public library services offered at their institution and how they supplement or replace services in the physical library.

Methods

We conducted interviews with three public librarians of which one is currently head of a library. For this purpose a semi-structured interview guide was developed in five phases following Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, and Kangasniemi (2016): (1) identifying the prerequisites for using semi-structured interviews; (2) retrieving and using previous knowledge; (3) formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide; (4) pilot testing the guide; and (5) presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide.

All participants were presented with and signed a consent document in which they consented to their conversation being recorded and used for research purposes. The interviewees all work with developing digital services in public libraries. The interviews were conducted in Danish and quotes were translated to English for this publication. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analysed. In the analyses key themes and categories were identified and coded. The coding was inductive using no theoretical framework to guide the coding.

Findings

Three themes were identified in the data set: the librarians trying to attract users using digital services, the digital library in the physical library and information everywhere.

Attracting users and use

The digital library services can be considered means to attract more users to the library as well as increase the use of the library. The librarians wish to reach out to as many potential users as possible and consider the digital library services an opportunity to do exactly that. The digital library service can attract users not familiar with the physical library services. Wanting more users and increased use may not necessarily be achieved through traditional services and the digital library services are not necessarily considered parallel to the physical library services. One of the interviewees even characterize this as a more commercial approach to librarianship although it is emphasized that the digital services are not commercial and trustworthiness is essential for digital library services.

The digital library in the physical library

The interviewees describe how the libraries balance the digital and physical services and try to merge them. Libraries try to provide inspiration for their users and consider the digital and physical services equivalent and they therefore recommend physical materials using digital platforms and vice versa. The interviewees describe how the libraries are trying to tell the stories available in the library and argue how the library and its staff has unique and valuable services to offer. Therefore, offering a personal service of high quality is essential and there is less focus less on the platform. But the digital platforms allow the libraries to reach users with specific interests and meet their needs which allows for a more personal and specialized experience for the users.

Information everywhere

Librarians consider very carefully how they use the digital services as a supplement to the physical services. They consider the content and target audience carefully but also how they present the material to their users and adjust to the platform used. As an example, one of the interviewees explain how they consider using more humor on social media and address their users more directly than in the physical library. However, the librarians put less emphasis on the digital services being available without boundaries of place and time. Statistics are being used to identify popular content and therefore the libraries evaluate their digital services and how they are being received by their target groups. Consequently, attracting interactions with their users is a high priority, however, temporal aspects are not considered when planning or evaluating the digital services.

Discussion and conclusion

The development and usage of digital library services have accelerated, and most libraries offer a wide variety of services digitally. It is therefore relevant to explore how librarians perceive the digital public library services offered at their institutions and how they supplement or replace services in the physical library. This interview study with librarians finds that librarians use digital services to attract users and librarians consider the digital and physical library equally relevant for the users. The digital library is in principle without boundaries of place and time but librarians do not necessarily put emphasis on this aspect when planning their services. The implications for digital public library services are discussed and recommendations on the basis of this study are considered.

References

- Audunson, R., Andresen, H., Fagerlid, C., Henningsen, E., Hobohm, H.-C., Jochumsen, H., & Larsen, H. (2020). 1 Introduction—Physical Places and Virtual Spaces: Libraries, Archives and Museums in a Digital Age. In *Libraries, Archives and Museums as Democratic Spaces in a Digital Age* (pp. 1-22): De Gruyter Saur.
- Bahr, A. H. (2000). Library buildings in a digital age, why bother? *College & Research Libraries News*, 61(7), 590-592.
- Brindley, L. (2002). The Future of Libraries and Humanities Research: New Strategic Directions for the British Library. *Libraries & Culture*, 37(1), 26-36. Retrieved from <https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy1-bib.sdu.dk/article/18941/pdf>
- Calhoun, K. (2014). *Exploring digital libraries: foundations, practice, prospects*: Facet Publishing.
- Ćirić, J., & Ćirić, A. (2021). The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Digital Library Usage: A Public Library Case Study. *Journal of Web Librarianship*, 15(2), 53-68. doi:10.1080/19322909.2021.1913465
- Hedvall, K. N., Ôgland, M., & Lindberg, J. (2022). Digital first: challenges for public and regional libraries in Sweden. *Information Research*.

- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 72(12), 2954-2965.
- Kehinde, A. (2018). Digital Libraries and the Role of Digital Librarians. In *Handbook of Research on Managing Intellectual Property in Digital Libraries* (pp. 98-119): IGI Global.
- Leorke, D., Wyatt, D., & McQuire, S. (2018). More than just a library”: Public libraries in the ‘smart city. *City, culture and society*, 15, 37-44.
- Mehta, D., & Wang, X. (2020). COVID-19 and digital library services—a case study of a university’s library. *Digital Library Perspectives*.
- Mestre, J. (2022). Derrida and Digital Libraries: Exploring the ImPossibility of Virtual Hospitality. *Information Research*.
- Mickiewicz, P. (2016). Access and its limits: the contemporary library as a public space. *Space and Culture*, 19(3), 237-250.
- Palfrey, J. (2015). *BiblioTech: Why libraries matter more than ever in the age of Google*: Basic Books.
- Reid, P. H., & Mesjar, L. (2022). “Bloody amazing really”: voices from Scotland’s public libraries in lockdown. *Journal of Documentation*. doi:10.1108/jd-03-2022-0067
- Stachokas, G. (2014). *After the book: Information services for the 21st century*: Elsevier.
- Sørensen, K. M. (2021). Where's the value? The worth of public libraries: A systematic review of findings, methods and research gaps. *Library & Information Science Research*, 43(1), 101067.