Information management during a crisis – providing an open and reliable information infrastructure for a sustainable world

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Information management during a crisis – providing an open and reliable information infrastructure for a sustainable world

- Purpose: To analyze the impact of the Corona situation on the academic library services, policies, and activities.
- Design/methodology/approach: Opinion piece based on experiences.
- Findings: There is a need for global policy making for both the open academic resources dissemination and crisis management.
- Originality: Based on recent experiences.

Keywords: COVID-19, Academic Libraries, Crisis Management, Resource Management, Policy Work

Article classification: Opinion Pieces, Viewpoint.

Introduction

The scientific information management refers to the society's ability to ensure at least the functionality and availability of crucial information sources for research, teaching and expert work, even in times of crisis. During the era of printed material, this was managed in a manner where the designated scientific libraries each augmented their collections in their special fields and made them available to others via inter-library loans. During the printed era, the core collections were collected and managed locally in each information dependent organization thus securing the functionality also during the crises.

The situation changed radically since those times, and the acute crisis in the corona situation has shown that we have not been able to create comprehensive local, national or information services security in crisis situations. The from the 1990’s started outsourcing of collections to the digital providers and at the same time started the reduction of printed materials has meant that most of us are heavily dependent on the functionality of third-party resources (Saarti & Laitinen & Vattulainen 2017, 167 – 168). In normal times, this seems to be the most efficient way of disseminating scientific documents, but based on the corona situation, it seems that we do not have a plan B for unusual circumstances whether it be human, health or technology based large scale anomaly.
At the present, most of the scientific publications are behind the so-called paywalls: agreements regulate exactly who can use the acquired material and at what price. In practice, this has led to a situation where those universities and research institutes that can afford to obtain the materials are able to serve their users even in exceptional circumstances. The lockdowns set on the local library premises based campus use functioned quite well for the larger audience when the doors were open, but suddenly the larger public was closed from the use of academic library resources – both printed and digital (see about the global situation IFLA 2020).

It also showed that the library space with its technological facilities is of utmost importance to certain groups of our users: we encountered a double anomaly where the computers and networks inside the libraries were unavailable for our users and at the same time we urged them to utilize more digital resources which were mainly limited to the registered users of our own university. This showed explicitly how we have been building a closed academic library that is actually the most efficient way for the censorship of the academic resources and what is starting to be a travesty of what the (academic) librarianship is and has been about.

The need for reliable information resources and services during crisis

During the corona crisis a lot of the academic campuses and their library premises were closed although they tried to provide basic services. This meant relying heavily on the digital resources. Luckily, the major change in the availability of the e-books had happened and it helped in serving the local users. It also seems that there has been a change in the reading culture of the academics and students: they are already experienced e-resource users. (Baukoucheva 2015, 33 – 35.)

The biggest challenge was for the printed resources and especially for the disciplines that still are based heavily on the printed resources. Another big issue was the closures that happened in the ILL: those libraries that had good collections managed the situation well, others relying on the uninterrupted ILL were in trouble.

The academic community and some publishers started to patch up the situation either via peer-to-peer dissemination or creating temporary collections and opening, especially COVIC-
19 related resources for the open use. Added to this, the opening of the research data related to the COVIC-19 research showed us how and why the open and fast digital delivery of reliable scientific resources is the best way for both the academic work and for the humankind to evolve in a sound and efficient manner.

In addition to the core research resources, the closure of the libraries showed the importance of the comprehensive academic collections and securing their use for all. The enormous growth of health misinformation in the Internet illustrated that the libraries have a great responsibility for ensuring the access of all reliable and versatile collections that are need in building civilized nations and highly educated citizens.

Open future of the academic libraries

The recent discussion about the open science has emphasized the need to ensure access to research documents to every reader and this should not be dependent on the individual’s ability to pay for the increasing costs demanded by academic publishers.

The roles and tasks of the academic libraries have gone through several major paradigmatic shifts during the past couple of decades. During the 1990’s, we saw the emergence of the electronic journals as the basic tool for disseminate scientific findings. At the same time, the economic crises meant that the fiscal resources were cut back. The digital revolution meant that the use of the library resources started to move from the open society towards the paywalled use, designated to one’s own users. It also meant that the costs of the digital scientific resources started to rise constantly. (Saarti 2018, 111.)

At the beginning of the new millennium, the academic community started to see the rise in the availability and use of the digital books. This digitalization of the library resources meant also that the libraries started to renovate their premises from the print based thinking towards a learning center type of ideology.

Thus the decision makers and science funders have started to require openness from the scientific community. The library community has been a keen advocate for the open access and several repositories have been created in order to ensure the open access and use of the scientific results.
This is also changing the library’s role inside the academic community. The role of the library has become more and more important for both the academics and students, and the continuously increasing amount of the digital resources available via the Internet meant that the libraries’ expertise is needed more than ever.

The main roles for the future academic libraries seem to be threefold. The libraries and their expertise is still needed in managing the collections. The main body of these will be digital. This means for the libraries the building of new digital environments where the users can find and manage the resources they need for their studies and research purposes.

The other role is building new types of learning environments. The users need places where their expertise meets that of the libraries and library materials in order to build new knowledge. We have seen a lot of new or renovated library space projects recently globally.

The third one is active academic librarianship. This includes both marketing the library resources and services, and the ever increasing teaching input of the academic library staff (Biçen Aras 2014, 21 – 22). It seems that the library users are overwhelmed with the huge amount of data and publications available for their use. Thus there is a constant need for tutoring and coaching the users in the academic literacy skills.

This role must be opened to the larger public: the academic library community cannot remain silent in the fake news and science trivializing public discussion. We are not the guardians of the scientific knowledge but we must be the builders of pathways to the knowledge. This needs a totally new and active way of disseminating the academic resources including a more active presence in the social media, also where the science is mocked or disparaged daily.

Towards a global research resource network

The ongoing crisis has already changed our views what the academic library is and how it should function in the future. It is the most likely that the public economies will have major challenges, especially in funding. The libraries must be active in policy and funding lobbying – the global cutbacks during the 1990’s economic downturn still influence the libraries, and we have e.g. gaps in our collections. We must remember and be active in telling that investing in education and research is the most effective way to build a sustainable future.
An open scientific discourse and the associated idea of scientific publications open to all have eased and are likely to ease the situation in the future. Therefore, these actions and their resourcing need to be accelerated. The biggest challenge in seems to be the outsourcing of different types of library and information service activities to commercial actors or companies. The know-how related to information maintenance and the expensive products of commercial publishers are then easily restructured or closed in the transition.

When the acute crisis is over, a debate should be launched on the crucial information management in the human society, about its resources and the measures needed here. It seems that the nations have an interest to the self-protection during crises and it will become a priority in a real crisis. This might mean and end on the free flow of ideas what the academic librarianship is about. We either cannot afford to rely on general goodwill in information management in critical areas, but we must act proactively. The research-based information is critical to all the activities in the information and knowledge-based society and part of every individual, company’s, and community’s crisis preparedness plan.

The nations must also be ready to fund the building of an open and global academic library network that ensures together with other major actors – including researchers, publishers etc. – the open and reliable use of academic resources for the benefit of all the human kind. A democracy needs fact-based information, service providers and information literate citizens. Unfortunately, although the current crisis is a major one, it seems that we are already facing even more devastating challenges both ecologically and socially. These can be tackled in a civilized manner and in this the academic institutions and their libraries have a major role if they take it. Of course, we can also stay bystanders and watch the end of the world as we know it, but the choice is ours and it must be made.

References


