QUALITY PORTALS TO KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURE - DEVELOPING COLLECTIONS AND SERVICES OF HYBRID LIBRARIES

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The Finnish library network is extensive and the services of the public libraries are very diligently used - 21 loans per inhabitant in 2004 make 109,7 million loans per year for a population of 5 million people, that is 1,24 % more than in 2003. Lending of books increased with 413 000 loans, 0,50 %, lending of other materials with 3,17 %.

About 66 million library visits make 13 visits per inhabitant and year, 1,21 % more visits than in 2003. The www-visits have increased with 18,50 % at the same time, that is six and a half million more visits than in 2003, 41,5 million virtual visits during 2004.

The hallmarks of the multiservice or hybrid library is not only related to collections available in electronical as well as in printed form, but just as much to the developing of both virtual and traditional services. Actually, in Finland, the virtual services don't seem to bring down the demand for material collections and face-to-face services.

Todays' library users can easily localize interesting material on the web - however, books and other items have to be picked from the shelves, registrered and packed and posted or transported from one library to another. One third of public library costs relate to logistics according to a report carried out by the Ministry of Transports and Communications and the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2004. Locistics, including the use of RFID (radio frequency identification), total automatisation of certain processes like handling CD:s and the development of transport systems between networking libraries have become main issues.

Other main issues in the age of the multiservice libraries are the promoting of comprehensive literacy as well as media or digital literacy. Reading promotion, traditional authors´ visits and book talks in libraries and schools as well as web sites, sometimes interactive, about books, reading, authors - and book talks - are strongly on the agenda. Teaching information retrieval to school classes, students and other groups of adults are other traditional library services performed now in a new way, using computers and information technology, presenting data bases besides the book shelves.

However technically advanced the library services are there is still, actually more and more so, the essential, the contents in focus; language, the importance of understanding concepts and deeper meanings, of being able to combine and compare with a media-critical attitude. And there is more to it than being able to use different sources of information and being aware of variations in reliability and validity. Other civic skills, part of needed social equity, are learning to communicate by various channels,

networking and developing skills to use the net for one's own purposes and for producing one's own material on the net.

In the vision of the Finnish Library Strategy there is a well-functioning national library network with adequate technical infrastructure, fast telecommunications and efficient systems and services.

Offering access to a wide range of culture and quality information retrieval as a matter of course also includes offering access and guidance in communicating with municipal and state authorities and using the virtual channels developed for this purpose. Currently libraries can apply for terminals, connections and training related to this as part of the national knowledge society program.

Centralized services

Licensing negotiating services for public libraries are purchased by the Ministry of Education from FinElib, the National Electronic Library. The use of the National library catalogues, including now also copy cataloguing, is bought from the National library. The prospective national portal encompasses the whole range of library and information services.

The House of Knowledge was initiated already in 1995, today it is libraries.fi with four full-time editors for producing and coordinating web services for public libraries and their users, tomorrow it will be part of the national portal, Citizens´ portal of knowledge.

Regional cooperation

More than 85 % of the public libraries belong to some regional network with common computer systems and home sites and joint catalogues on the web, common lending cards and an increasing number of inter-library loans between the libraries in the network.

Regional portals offer cooperation with other doers in the fields of education and culture, strengthening the identity of the regions. Extensive regional virtual libraries include public libraries and libraries at universities and polytechnics, sometimes also museums´ collections. There are targeted services for students, elderly people and children and adolescents made in regional library cooperation.

Local library work

Libraries cooperate with other municipal services, with schools and kindergartens, and add visuality and widen the field of information on their home sites in cooperation with local museums, archives and other cultural institutions or organisations - even tourism can sometimes be included. Smaller libraries often struggle with limited resources, with recruiting competent staff. Expectations are high though, everywhere, users of the knowledge society are well educated and demanding. Local libraries are important cultural meeting places, often the only ones in the community.

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Meeting new challenges

State grants, 1,5 million euros, are annually distributed for producing centralized services and for regional and local projects. This year many libraries applied for grants for working with definitions of currently needed librarian expert knowledge - 2005 is the year of expert knowledge in Finland so this is quite appropriate - and for regional in-service training. There are many projects concerning cooperation with educational institutions, including pedagogical training for librarians and information retrieval training for teachers and students as well as library-produced training material on the web. Regional portals are extended and targeted services for children and young people are developed in regional cooperation.

Information to library users about reserved books now ready to be collected at the library is given by e-mail and SMS, and customers can use their mobile phones to have a look at library catalogues. Even the National Library offers access to national library catalogues by making a mobile phone call. Digi-tv opens up new possibilities. All this is part of an extended accessibility, just as more diverse virtual library services and full-text material (licenses permitting) made available also from the home computer.

Centrally produced services level off the varying standard of services and collections in different parts of the country, acquisitions budgets, for instance, vary from two to fourteen euros per capita in Finnish municipalities. Developing versatile virtual library services certainly also offer solutions to part of the accessibility questions connected with physical handicaps or old age. With new generations of "computerized" people retiring in the future most of the digital divide between generations is certainly going to be bridged in our part of the world.

There are other challenges to rise to. The possibilities of developing individualized virtual services are tremendous and only a small part of the sources of information and knowledge are public domain - is there a limit for library services free of charge?

Currently there is much talk about consolidation of municipalities for larger service areas. Is this really the solution to the so called zip code lottery, the service level and quality of services depending so much on domicile?

Access to information and knowledge is crucial in a democratic society. What kind of information and knowledge would be so essential for a good life, so important for national identity in terms of cultural heritage, so constitutive for citizen skills and democratic rights that it should be offered to all and paid for, partly or totally, by the state or the municipalities?

And, some 93 % of newly produced information being born digital - are citizens really ready for this, are they in possession of the necessary means and the needed skills? Are libraries ready?