

USER EDUCATION IN A RESEARCH LIBRARY

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In the paper a background of user education in a research library is described, followed by the picture of changing environment not only in libraries, but is information society all together. Librarians have recognised other sources of information, which scholars use besides research library. Librarians have to improve their professional competences to meet the challenge of educating users in research libraries.

Background

Before describing the education of the user of a research library from education in other library, one has to be certain when the term “research” is applied to a library. Generally the distinction research library have from other types of libraries are *collection policy* and *research activity*, but these criteria are attainable for other libraries also.

- **Collection policy.** Research libraries collect in greater depth than other libraries. Their holdings include also scientific literature and historical collections, special literature collections. Learned and professional societies have had libraries since their foundation; they existed primarily to meet the scientific needs of the members. Historically special research libraries were joined or affiliated to big research libraries, but usually scientific units (laboratories, societies, institutes) develop their special libraries.
- **Research activities.** Research libraries perform research in librarianship and other congener sciences. As the keepers of valuable collections, librarians are also analysing them and publishing. Scientific activities in research libraries are either performed by special research departments, or by entire staff.

The history of user education begins long before the concept was born. Even before Samuel Swett Green (1837–1918) in his often quoted speech at the ALA Conference in 1876 advocated „improved personal relations between librarians and readers“. Librarians were promoting the services and collections of libraries; though major practise were library use instructions, some librarians had insisted on the importance of reference work and reader’s advisory work. We thank Samuel S. Green for the initiative of first reference desk, American universities – for the initiative to introduced library use rudiments into the curricula.

Such was the general policy in public and school libraries. Discussing the educational role of librarian in a research library, one has to beware of pitfalls the term itself hides. Historically – at the very origin of research libraries, the function of preservation generally prevailed over those of use. For ages research library policy and practise were tailored specifically to limit use (but not the information). Only selected individuals were

consulted by a librarian, who was the one to select the users. Libraries were limiting the consultations by appointment. When under the pressure of historical and economical conditions the regular opening hours were announced they were extremely brief; the rules to use thoroughly collected research libraries then were far from user education. The complexity of collections in research libraries became a real challenge for the public access and service issues. Majority of research libraries still do not permit to take the documents outside the premises, major parts of research library holdings are not openly accessed.

Change

A librarian has come a long way from a traditional role of that of “*custodian, collector and cataloguer*”. The library card catalogue’s primary role as a “finding device” has changed into interactive source of library holdings within one country or even wider. Library classification was accepted as knowledge classification, librarians made an essential contribution to preserving and organizing records of scholarship.

The change, which brought common literacy and enlightenment, encouraged librarians of research libraries to open the gates of scientific treasures to public. Not the last consideration was the changing librarian. Not any more the rule was an elderly, incommunicative scholarly man, who also looked after a library. More people with special library education were employed; their professional vocation was a promotion of collections they were responsible for. There you can feel the conflict arising – for centuries scholars were used to search for facts and information themselves, privacy and secretness was not an exception.

But the situation was changing – librarians started implementing all those “strange engines”: at first – card catalogues, then – computers (though invented not by librarians), and each novelty was advertised not only by traditional means, but also polling scholars at sleeve.

User

To improve the services, research librarians try to know their users and their needs better. Not only formal, but also informal interrogations of scholars showed, that as information seekers, they are interested in two things:

- **Convenience.** Scholars usually have very tight schedule, they are occupied not only in research, but also education at universities. Competitiveness in research is extremely high; the first announcement of results may turn to nothing many years of hard work. The information they need must be precise and in time.
- **Reliability.** As consumers, scholars are interested in any and all information of their professional activity. They want to be up-to-date within their and related fields. Scholars value research library as repository of the record of scholarship, the work of gathering, organising and maintaining the scientific records. Scholars could not accept research library’s incompleteness.

In the whole world the volume and complexity of scholarly information continues to grow exponentially, though limits for keeping up with it remaining the same (access to the latest information in a library always was conditional, as the period of time scientific results are published in a monograph is approximately 10-25 years, in magazine article 5-10 years, in conference proceedings 1-5 years). Technologies dispense information in formats, passing by libraries: reports, manuscripts, e-mail and internet. Electronic publishing offers time-saving and cheaper solution for scientific writing, scientific journals develop internet access, even withdrawing printed version. Electronic connections started a new era in scientific communication.

Though scholars value the effort research libraries have invested and continue to invest in gathering, organizing and maintaining the scientific information, they have individual information-seeking methods:

- **Information from other scholars.** It is achieved via informal communication (teacher-pupil communication, collegial communication, meetings at conferences, study visits, etc.);
- **Citation.** The method is important for student and beginning scholars, before they become actively involved in networks, though it is also valued by eminent scholars;
- **Journal browsing.** Titles include important journals of the investigated field, also less relevant ones. Titles are personally subscribed by scholars, achieved from their colleagues or found among library subscriptions (printed, databases), also free content on internet.

Education

Though the level of collection processing, search and virtual accessibility differs, the main trend for user education in research library may be generalized as:

- **Education in information search strategies.** Specially prepared information for scholars is useful, only it has to be proposed “politically correct”. Depending on the qualification, scholarly achievement or even age of a user – such information should be visible, accessible, but not a mean of information literacy test.
- **Education in possibilities of information sources.** As an expert of information sources, librarian should explain the importance of information literacy, time and labour saving features of information sources. Such practice is rather demanding for librarians.

Facing the IT changes and new possibilities, research libraries developed new information search devices for their users. You can hardly find a reader, who knows nothing about electronic catalogue or virtual library, specialised databases or full text databases. Digitization projects (usually initiated by libraries) help to access rare and fragile documents virtually. Yet the main area of concern for the users is the inaccessibility of information to those without the necessary IT skills.

Conclusion

Discussing a research library user education among colleague librarians, the activity, mentioned above, should not be directed only to a user of a library. In the age of life-long education each individual may be considered as a pupil, since the speed of IT development is not pulling down. Librarians are learning change of information environment together with users, yet also are solving the service improvement topics.

Research librarians are encouraged to participate in research process, as information professionals; they are encouraged to advance their scientific knowledge. Librarians are the persons, interested in and familiar with the issues of copyright, database administration, homepage development. Research libraries invite scholars to participate in library council activities, as advocates and consultants of library activities. As we all know, *“lookers-on see most of the game”*.

Literature

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