

# Taking the Big Step to the Virtual Library

## What the Virtual Library Really Means for Public Libraries

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A library is traditionally a repository of information, a place where information seekers come to find answers for their questions. And should the library not have what is needed, there are resources for locating where help can be obtained. This library is defined and constrained by physical elements: the physical place (both building and community), physical patrons, physical staff and physical holdings.

A building is always too small, insufficiently equipped for the continually expanding needs of clientel and staff, and is expensive to maintain. The location within the community can not be changed easily to respond to fluctuations of the populace, the clientel. Patrons are expected to come to the library, the library rarely comes to them.

The more patrons we have (i.e. when we are successful, when what we do corresponds to our professed goals), more spatial and logistical problems are encountered. Patron demands become more diversified, more books are borrowed and returned and more services are expected from the library. A strange dichotomy arises for the library: on the one hand the patron is purportedly the reason why we exist, on the other hand he places constant demands on our physical facilities.

We court the public, trying to convince them to use the library. We extend opening hours to meet changed use habits. We justify our existence by keeping statistics on how heavily used we are, how many visitors we have, how many books an average user borrows.

When we are successful, when we have too many patrons, then we try to find ways of satisfying their demands without them actually having to come to the library. We try to discourage them from coming to us! We create decentral book drop-off points, have telephone renewals, telephone answering services, offer internet access to our catalogs, etc. Patron expectations and demands increase the more we offer.

There is never enough staff to manage all the services which are demanded. Furthermore they need rooms, desks and equipment, get sick, bring personal problems to the job, go on vacation (or attend conferences), are not always willing to work the hours when the public would like to visit the library, and ... (the list can be extended considerably).

Our holdings must be purchased, cataloged, shelved and administered. If a book is popular, we overstock it to meet current demand, knowing full well that soon the demand will fall off and we will be left holding surplus copies of the books. Annual book production (not to mention the production of serials) is exploding, not only the number of publications but also the costs. What is not increasing is acquisition budgets. The numbers involved here are counter-productive to any one library being a place where all information can be found.

While we may possess the physical objects, we do not own, do not have control over the content - it is copyrighted. We are relegated to administering objects, without being able to create capital directly from them.

Recently new variations have emerged: we no longer even get ownership of the objects we administer, but merely have the right to use them. With many CD-ROMs, for example, we may only use them for a specified length of time before they must be returned to the producer. And with the current trend to make material only available in electronic form from a server somewhere in the world, we no longer will even have temporary "possession" of the objects.

Physical objects have always imposed restrictions on us, our services, our patrons. Objects take up space (which has always been insufficient for our needs), cost money (which we never have enough of), get sick, have to travel to reach us, etc. Suddenly, however, the "virtual" world has become a reality, and with it we are presented with a world which appears to have none of the physical restrictions of our familiar world. It is not surprising that we often hear predictions of the demise of the library. Fears voiced that with the advent of the virtual world the library will no longer exist.

The introduction of computers evoked predictions of a paperless office. Since then the amount of paper has increased, not decreased. The predictions were wrong. Predictions that the library will become obsolete with the total networking of all information are equally wrong. The strength of libraries has always been the combination of holdings (information) and persons trained in navigating in an environment containing huge amounts of information. While the physical number of holdings may decrease, they will never totally disappear. We will have to learn to incorporate non-physical objects among our physical holdings.

The most important element in the emerging library is the human interface to all the various forms of information (the book, the new forms which are now available and also those which will most certainly be developed in the future); this interface will continue to be needed. We are living in an information society, a society in which knowing how to find information, knowing how to navigate in the flood of information is and will remain of prime importance.

Librarians have prided themselves on being information, resource specialists. Without our professional skills, our patrons will be fighting a losing battle in dealing with the uncontrolled flood of information. The needs for our services, for our skills, like the use of paper in the computerized office, will increase, not decrease. With one stipulation: if we don't prepare ourselves for the new demands, the new environments, the new tools, if we are not able to reorganize and market our services, our skills, others will most certainly do so - and probably earn a lot of money in the process.

Working in the virtual world requires that we rethink where we are and what we are doing, why we are doing it and whether we want to keep on doing what we have done in the past. The virtual world is a networked world. Having access is more important than having

possession. And before we have access, we must know where the point of access is and how to use it.

Although most of us are hooked up to the internet, I would venture to say that we still have a mindframe which has not made the transition to a networked environment. We are conditioned by the past, which was largely defined by physical presence. Our attitude is that of someone who has a PC and wants everything on his hard disk, wants to physically have everything. We talk virtual, but act local.

Access, not possession, is the critical characteristic for libraries in the future. Libraries offering round-the-clock access to information will be the winners. Existing administrative and financial structures must be drastically modified to create an international, multilateral, multilingual, networked environment. This is more than connecting cables and computers. Although cables and computers are necessary for a virtual library to function, they are technical things and are not equatable with a library, much less a virtual library. A building without books and staff is not a library, even though it has the word "library" over the door. It is the content, the professional interactions with the content, the services, the staff which create a library environment. A library with computers and a web site is not necessarily a virtual library.

In 1992 Michael Buckland (*Redesigning Library Services*. Chicago: ALA 1992, pp. 5-6) mentioned three development phases of the modern library: the paper library, the automated library and the electronic library. These three phases are tied to a physical environment, an already existing structure. Currently a fourth phase is evolving, a phase which is more revolutionary than all of the other phases: the virtual library.

The term "Virtual Library" is a buzz word with so many connotations that it is often difficult to know what is really being referred to.

### **1. Being present on the internet.**

The internet is used either as a locality where access to the catalog is offered (an online OPAC) or as a place to advertise services of the (still very physical) traditional library. The library waits for the patron to discover the services being offered and then come to the library to use them. Experience has shown that internet access to OPACs (either directly or via the Z39.50 interface with parallel searches of numerous OPACs) results in an increased usage of library holdings, i.e. a dramatic increase in usage of the existing physical facilities, whether it be with more patrons actually visiting the library to borrow books or other media, or by other libraries making interlibrary loans. This very traditional presentation of the library limits the chances of the library becoming an active player in the information society. Innovative libraries will relegate this to a less visible level in their web presence, since it does not offer them a chance to become competitive in the international information market place. Only by achieving a high level of competitiveness will libraries have the possibility of tapping financial resources which will allow them to maintain a self-sustaining basis for further development of services.

### **2. Offering holdings virtually.**

The library converts those holdings over which it has content control (generally older, historical material) into an electronic form and makes it available electronically to patrons. This is an extension of the traditional role of the library as a repository of objects. The

holdings are still physically "present" on the library server and the library has the responsibility of administering them, i.e. providing electronic storage space, marketing them, making them available. Since this material may be of commercial value, there is also the responsibility of protecting and safeguarding the investment by making sure that third parties do not misuse the content. Libraries will try to generate capital from this material and thereby assume a dual role of being both repositories as well as producers of information.

### **3. Offering virtual holdings.**

This area will become more important in the future. The explosive increase of information in electronic form makes it difficult to find what one is looking for among all that which is available. (Let us not forget that both the printed and the electronic forms of information will remain with us.) Just as in the past libraries selected holdings from the production of publishers and created an interface by which patrons were able to locate the material they needed, in the combined internet and print environment there will be an increasing demand for tools to help in finding whatever information is needed, irregardless of the form in which it exists. Search engines and clearinghouses may be a partial help, but they are not able to satisfy all the many needs. Here is where the professional skills of librarians working as human interfaces between consumers and producers will assume increased importance. The big difference to the past is that the sources will no longer be only those physically present in the library, but also those electronically accessible, and the added-value services provided by the library will become the critical key for those seriously seeking the best possible information.

Currently libraries include link collections to other (free) offerings on the internet. This is akin to a library only offering the clippings and brochures in it's vertical files: insufficient for that what is expected, demanded, what is needed. Books (and other media) cost money. Libraries have traditionally bought books and made them available to their patrons free-of-charge. Increasingly, much information which traditionally was available in print form will only be available as fee-based services on the internet. How such services will be incorporated into the virtual library is difficult to say. What is clear, however, is that this is an area which will become increasingly important for all libraries, whether they be academic, specialized or public. Not providing access to such sources will reduce the effectiveness of a library.

It would be wrong to think that this development will not take place. It is already taking place, and fee-based electronic services are become increasingly commonplace. The question for libraries will be: how to manage such expenditures within current administrative and financial structures? One such scenario is that libraries band together either with other libraries (or with publishers) to form consortia in order to create a financially viable access to these resources. Most consortia work within a homogeneous, closed network environment, generally defined by IP address, accessible to a clearly-defined, easily-identifiable user group.

Public and non-academic libraries do not have such an easily definable environment. The general public is excluded from accessing material available in academic consortia. It is imperative that the general public also have a way of accessing the electronic material which has traditionally been available in public libraries. It will do no good to wait until those offering the material approach us with offers - we librarians must take the initiative and incorporate the new forms of old, familiar material within our new environment.

### **4. Serving a virtual patron in a virtual world.**

Being present on the internet means we are offering our services on the international market to whoever finds or needs our services. It is no longer possible to define where a user of a virtual library is at the time he or she utilizes our services. The patron has become potentially anyone anywhere in the world, not just our traditional patron. Just as we may not know who or where our virtual patron is, he may not necessarily even be aware of where the library is whose services he is using (and may not even care!). This will cause administrative problems for libraries. Specialized and public libraries are intended for a special, generally local community which finances them. Losing control of where and who the patrons are will most certainly result in financing bodies requiring libraries to justify their services to this international community, which in turn will require libraries to impose certain access restrictions on their virtual patrons or to seek new forms of financial support.

### **5. Offering and using virtual services.**

Patrons were traditionally required to physically come to the physical library when it was open. The virtual library eliminates this restriction. Services can be extended considerably, particularly with the use of e-mail, and do not necessarily require massive investments in facilities. The impatient patron standing in front of a reference desk demanding immediate attention will not disappear, but the patron using virtual services will not impose the same sort of emotional pressure on staff members. The staff can be organized more effectively; the reference librarian need not sit and wait for someone to utilize his skills, rather he will be able to make respond when he has the time or pass the problem on to somebody who has the time or is best suited to the problem at hand.

Conversely, librarians themselves will also increasingly use services offered by other institutions in order to satisfy the needs of both library and patron. Libraries and librarians will create new alliances with both old, established partners and with new partners in response to patron needs. The more successfully these alliances are cultivated and expanded, the greater the potential for all the partners will be. In a sense these alliances will become the non-physical holdings of the virtual library. The extent to which the library promotes these "holdings" will determine the use and the visibility of the library in the information market place.

### **6. Using a virtual staff.**

Whether or not the person responding to the needs of a virtual patron be physically present in a specific library is irrelevant. Just as telephone services of companies need not be run on the company site, but can be setup and staffed anywhere in the world, so is it equally conceivable that the persons responding to virtual users be anywhere and not necessarily be on the staff of the institution providing the virtual interface for the patron. By joining together and utilizing staff facilities over a network, all participating libraries can drastically increase the competency of their individual services without increasing the actual staff.

Without a doubt the initial reaction here is that what is being proposed is that the staff will be disposed of. Quite the contrary, the staff of the library is it's most important resource and needs to be more fully, more effectively utilized than has been possible in the past. The question is not whether the staff can be reduced, but how the professional, personal skills of the staff can be optimally incorporated into the services of the library so that the patron is assured of receiving the best possible treatment of his needs.

This is not really as new an idea as it would seem. Union catalogs were initially created to assist librarians in locating where a certain book was held. Interlibrary loan networks holdings so that individual libraries could make a greater amount of material available to their patrons. The next step would seem to be to apply this principle to the reference desk and to other services where professional, personal skills of librarians can be more effective and contribute greatly to the marketability of library services. This can be achieved by entering into collaborative relationships with other institutions either officially or informally. Already small groups of librarians have created primitive tools which partially attack this type of a problem (the English-language reference mailing list [Stumpers-L](#) and the German-language mailing list [RABE](#)) - they have organized mailing lists which extend reference services by drawing on the collective knowledge of a network of sources to meet the needs of the individual libraries. These mailing lists were not officially created by libraries, nor have they been officially incorporated into the library services of the respective libraries; they were created by professionals who realized the potential of collectively using facilities to which none of them alone had access.

The fully virtual library is an environment independent of the physical restrictions of the traditional individual library, utilizing the facilities of numerous traditional libraries to create a dynamic new library which greatly expands the potential of all of them into a resource which is capable of competing with other competitors in the information society.

It would be wrong to assume that an individual library, much less a lone public library, can effectively compete against the big names, not to mention all the other libraries, fighting for a place in the information market. Patrons want help, they want answers. Whether they get it in your library or mine is of secondary importance to them. If there is a (virtual) library where the services are offered, and if this library and its services can be located and satisfy the needs of the patrons, these services will be used.

What we now need is to collaborate with each other and with other institutions, form formal and informal alliances to create consortia offering our combined expertise in finding information, in providing answers to the increased demands which are being placed on us. It will be up to us to find ways in which we can effectively offer and market these new possibilities so that we can position ourselves to have a visibility and acceptance within the virtual community similar to that which we have traditionally had within our local communities.

We must cease regarding our library as a physical location, but rather view it as an intrinsic part of a global library. We must define what we can collectively offer that others can't offer. We need to unite to create administratively and financially viable services. The move to a truly virtual library will require more courage than we can imagine, since it will mean reorganizing administrative, organizational, financial and personal structures.

Here in Sudak representatives from many different types of libraries have gathered. Each of you will leave here with personal contacts which will hopefully be of benefit to you in your professional work. I would also hope that you will also leave here with contacts, alliances which will be reflected in the services (both old and new) which you provide your patrons. These services are the reason for us being librarians. Are we ready and willing to be virtual librarians, providing virtual services for our virtual patrons?