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# SCONUL Winter Conference

Presentations available at  
<http://www.sconul.ac.uk/page/sconul-winter-conference-2012-presentations>

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The SCONUL Winter Conference 2012 was held at the Wellcome Institute in December 2012. The main theme was the new skills needed by university and academic libraries as a result of two major developments: the growth of digital technologies and content, and the increasing emphasis on student-focused services.

There was a very full day's programme with a mix of presentation, workshop and panel sessions. Angus Brown from the Focus editorial board volunteered to tweet from our account (@sconul-focus) and Lys Ann and I shared the note-taking. Most of the content in this report was written up by Lys Ann: I took my notes the old-fashioned way with a pen and promptly lost the notebook somewhere in London. Apologies to the speakers whose sessions have not been covered in detail, particularly the last panel session.

The keynote speaker, Victor Henning, co-founder and CEO of Mendeley (a global research collaboration platform), began the day with a thought-provoking presentation on the future of information provision and academic publishing. Dr Henning developed Mendeley when, as a PhD student, he struggled to manage his collection of PDF research documents, and realised that his colleagues were experiencing similar problems. By September 2012 the Mendeley database contained 300 million uploaded documents contributed by more than 2 million users. Henning believes that the Mendeley collection of documents is unique, because it is 'crowd-sourced' by its user base, and includes user-generated information, such as annotations and lists of recommendations.

Dr Henning advised us that users expect the same levels of usability and polish from the services they use in their professional or educational lives as from the services they use in private, such as Apple, Google and Facebook. In addition, users of sites such as Apple iTunes and Amazon increas-

ingly use social discovery rather than direct searching to identify useful resources. According to Henning, methods of information discovery have evolved through several stages, starting with centralised curation and searching, used, for example, by Yahoo and Google; moving on to focus on personal recommendations (Amazon); social broadcasting (Facebook and Mendeley); one-click social curation (Pinterest); and hybrid models (Google Search Plus). Dr Henning questioned if we are seeing the same trends in academic content discovery, quoting a study by King (2009)<sup>1</sup>, which found that most articles are found by browsing (e.g. through tables of content and journal websites), rather than through direct searching. In the same study, King also found that the more recent the article, the more likely it is to be found by browsing rather than by searching or using citations. Henning made the point that despite the importance of browsing as a method of identifying useful articles, most academic database providers appear to prioritise improving direct searching, rather than the browsing interface. In contrast, Mendeley's goal is to add a social layer to research data, using a model that pushes, rather than pulls information to users; for example, by generating personalised recommendations.

When considering what these developments mean for the future of academic publishing, Henning suggested that Mendeley is starting to fulfil some of the main functions provided by journals, including peer review, content discovery and prestige. His point of view appears to be supported by Werner Vogels, Vice-President of Amazon, who tweeted 'I strongly believe that Mendeley can change the face of science'.<sup>2</sup>

Dr Henning ended his presentation by advising librarians to follow the example of Mendeley, by providing open APIs to allow our users and partners to use their expertise to extend our services in ways that are relevant to them. This would enable librarians to focus on what we do well, while allowing others to contribute and help us to deal with the 'consumerization of everything'.

In the question and answer session that followed Dr Henning's presentation, David Ball, Consultant and formerly the University Librarian at Bournemouth University, suggested that since browsing was already popular with researchers, perhaps it was time to improve searching. Dr Henning replied that there is a trade-off between precision and recall; however, it is important that new services conform to behaviour that people have developed. In recent years, people have

become less used to active searching and more used to social discovery, and he believes that we should reflect on this trend and see what librarians can do to improve this aspect of our service.

The next session was made up of a series of short presentations on the challenges facing academic libraries and the skills that will be needed to face these demands.

### **Skills for delivering library services in a multi-device environment**

*Paul Walk, Director, Innovation Support Centre, UKOLN*

Paul described an environment in which users expect to access online services using a wide range of devices. These devices are evolving rapidly, and as a response to this, 'device-agnostic' web services (such as Mendeley), are becoming mainstream. Taking this further, he quoted Gartner, the IT research and advisory company, which stated that the 'personal cloud' will replace the personal computer as the centre of users' digital lives by 2014.<sup>3</sup> Today, users arrive at libraries equipped with a range of devices, but rather than worry about ensuring that library services can be accessed on these devices, it is perhaps more important for librarians to take into account the sets of services that users access, including services the library does not provide.

Paul identified a number of skills that will enable librarians to deliver services appropriate to this environment. He believes that it is important that efforts are made to keep up to date with new services, applications and cloud services, and for librarians to be able to understand and exploit modern web user interface design. Finally, librarians are advised that we need to be able to work with developers, and if possible, to learn to think like a developer.

### **Change, boundaries, skills and people value: a provocation**

*Stephen Town, Director of Information, University of York*

Stephen introduced his presentation by reminding us that provocation is likely to result in anger or violence – and judging from the instantaneous reaction to some of the sound-bites from his talk tweeted by delegates, this was a prophetic statement. It also highlights the misunderstandings that can occur when headlines are tweeted with no context: perhaps a discussion for another event. Stephen set out to disagree (without being

disagreeable) with the emphasis on 'skills' and proposed a broader consideration of the management and development of human capital in the university information environment. Stephen's slides are available on the conference website and these provide more detail on his definitions of library value and human capital. He outlined a 'people proposition' which sets out to define what our people should know, what our people should be and what difference our people make. Concluding his provocation, Stephen put forward the view that skills are only (a small) part of solving boundary and change problems and that the current model ignores the most significant skills for organisational success.

### **High quality customer experience: learning from retail**

*Matthew Cunningham, Customer Services Manager, Loughborough University Library*

Matthew described how he used his retail experience to develop a customer service ethos at Loughborough University Library. He told us that in the eight years that he has led the Customer Services team, he has transformed it from an all-female team with little customer service experience outside the library, to a diverse team that more accurately represents the customer base and with a wide range of previous customer service experience. The current staff of 32 now includes six men, 33% of the total being current students or recent graduates, and there is representation from a wide range of nationalities and age groups. Previous library experience is no longer a pre-requisite; good IT skills and customer service experience is more important.

The service is based around an integrated helpdesk which was created to provide a 'one stop shop', and is staffed by a rota drawn from all library teams (not just customer service staff). Matthew believes that the changes that he implemented have brought both benefits and challenges. Starting with the challenges, he reported that there was some resistance from other teams regarding staffing the helpdesk and answering circulation enquiries, and also that not all staff felt confident about having a customer-facing role. Some staff expressed concerns about the transient nature of student employment, which also results in higher recruitment costs. Moving on to the benefits, Matthew stated that having a work force that was more representative of the customer base made it easier to promote a high level of customer care, thanks to, for example, increased levels of empathy with the pressures experienced by stu-

dents. In addition, there is a larger pool of people available to staff this key service, and cross-team working is improved. The high level of customer service was noted in the Investment in People award (2010) and in the Customer Service Excellence accreditation (2011). Finally, in the Library User Survey, 2012, enquiry desks ranked first out of 15 library services users were most satisfied with.

### **Management and storage of research data**

*David Kay, Strategic Development Director, Sero Consulting*

In this presentation, David Kay invited librarians to consider the long-term curation of research data. In particular, he posed the following questions: does the library community want to take responsibility for curating research data? If we do, do we really understand what is involved, and do we have the appropriate skills to undertake what is necessary?

With regard to the question of understanding what is involved, Kay suggests that the task may be simpler than we believe; in essence, he summarised it as: 'make sure there is enough capacity, label correctly and don't mess with content'. Regarding the skills necessary to curate research data, Kay believes that librarians already have many of these skills, and where they are lacking, we have relationships with professionals who do have them; for example, university ICT colleagues and commercial vendors.

Kay suggests that the question of who should take responsibility for the institution's research data is key for librarians. In Kay's opinion, this is a long-term agenda and institutions should be wary of devolving too much control to the commercial sector.

### **WORKSHOPS AND PANEL SESSION**

The plenary session was followed by four workshops covering high-quality customer services; the online user experience; research data management and storage; and the boundaries of the library. These were highly interactive, facilitated sessions and the key points from each discussion were fed back to delegates in the main conference hall. Five panel members were invited to comment on the topics in their area of expertise: Sarah Porter, Head of Innovation, JISC; Annie Mauger, Chief Executive of CILIP; Professor Vesna Brujic-Okrectic, Chair of BAILER and Head of the School of Computing and information Systems at Kings-

ton University; Brenda L. Johnson, Ruth Lilly Dean of University Libraries, Indiana University; and Liz Jolly, Vice-Chair of SCONUL and Director of Library and Information Services, Teesside University. The responses were thoughtful and insightful, providing plenty of opportunity for questions and comments from the conference delegates. It was noted that perhaps the speakers on the morning panel, all male, had the easier task of being provocative while the afternoon panel, all female, took on the more difficult job of reconciling the different points of view and identifying ways forward. The format did provide an excellent forum for stimulating debate and there are a number of interesting themes to pick up at the summer 2013 conference.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 D W King, C Tenopir, S Choemprayong & L Wu (2009). Scholarly journal information-seeking and reading patterns of faculty at five US universities. *Learned Publishing*, 22:2, 126–144
- 2 [https://mobile.twitter.com/mendeley\\_com/statuses/4142887653](https://mobile.twitter.com/mendeley_com/statuses/4142887653)
- 3 <http://www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=1947315>