

From Special Subject Collections to Discipline Driven Information Provisioning

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There are libraries that house no collections, and it is for this reason that they are no libraries in the ‘proper meaning of the word’ even if they say they are. It is about the same as if swimming pools without pools pass themselves off as swimming facilities because visitors may do ‘dry runs’ there.

But why should readers visit libraries which have no collections to offer? In contrast to swimming baths without pools which have nothing to offer but dry-run facilities, libraries without collections might be called libraries because they allow readers to do research work due to the libraries’ virtual nature. Consequently, libraries without collections which “provide functionality in a potentially virtual environment” for their user communities – to specify the meaning of ‘virtual’ – must be seen as libraries and their collections understood as potentially or functionally existing although they cannot be seen or touched. Therefore, readers in libraries that house no collections may read and work on the potential or functional basis offered by the institution.

However, there is no permanent access to the collections possible as they only exist potentially or functionally. Hence, readers of virtual libraries often have no other real chance than creating ‘their own libraries’ in one way or the other access repositories necessary for their current scientific work. Once the job has been done and the particular work completed, there is no further need for the readers to use their self-created library any longer and they simply delete their compilations.

The outlined phenomenon is neither fictitious nor weird but illustrates the consequences if Special Subject Collections are transformed into a Specialised Information Services since 2012, which is a discipline driven information provisioning with library collections that contain expiry dates.

The policy of supra-regional, national literature supply for science and research has existed in Germany since 1949 – that means an internationally unique and world-wide renowned model of cooperation among leading German scientific libraries – which provided international specialist literature for research. The extension and further development of these ‘treasures of knowledge’ has been organised on a federal basis and has been focused on the priorities of the most important German scientific libraries. This system of Special Subject Collections, which was funded by the German Research Foundation, has guaranteed that at least one copy of every relevant scientific publication is available in Germany. That means there has been a nationally defined and distributed research library whose acquisition profile covered all sciences and comprises 23 national and university libraries (libraries with Special Subject Collections) and three main

specialist libraries for economics (Kiel), for medicine (Cologne) and for science and technology (Hannover). The benefit of this provisioning model was evident: comprehensive Special Subject Collections are available for the scientists throughout Germany via document delivery service, interlibrary loan or as online publications. Among collections for many disciplines the system of Special Subject Collections – funded by the German Research Foundation – has had its focus on humanities and social sciences, because the majority of the STM disciplines and economics are covered by the main specialist libraries.

Is such a system still relevant in view of the existence of Google & Co. and has it justified the German Research Foundation's budget allocation of about 15 million Euros annually over recent years? This sum represents about 8% of the acquisition budget of all German university libraries whose total annual budget for the acquisition of information and media aggregates 210 million Euros.

What explains the attractiveness of the Special Subject Collections and what do the involved libraries have to offer? At first sight, the answer might be that it is the topicality of the collections – for example the data warehousing paradigm – to meet the demand and requirements of the market as efficiently as possible. But this scenario is primarily dominated by short-term provisioning motivations. To extend collections merely on the base of topical need scenarios also implies the exclusion of all those books and periodicals whose contents are not in the focus of current research interests and it does not consider the fact that those information resources might be highly significant for future research and teaching – a recurrent phenomenon that proves to be true. In other words: 'Treasures of knowledge', as libraries with Special Subject Collections are referred to, do not meet primarily temporary requirements but go far beyond with their claim to the collection completeness which may be entirely different across various scientific disciplines.

With respect to this, provisioning approaches that are oriented towards short-term demands may only be applied with restrictions to libraries with Special Subject Collections as those approaches could not meet the requirements and expectations predetermined by their profile and claim. The outlined issue must be seen in the immediate context of changing Special Subject Collections into so-called Specialised Information Services or discipline driven information provisioning. The process of transferring tranches has started in 2013 and is supposed to continue over a period of three years.

The German Research Foundation has not made a hasty decision in this matter but analysed thoroughly in advance the existing system of Special Subject Collections. The result can be summed up as follows: The role of the Special Subject Collections' network has been redefined with reference to the evaluation results in order to take greater account of discipline-specific interests as well as improve substantially the immediate access to digital publications. The network's main task is the competent provision of special interest communities with printed and electronic resources as well as all kinds of relevant media, search engines and reference tools. The main focus of responsibility is not the collection completeness as such but it implies the care and enlargement of collections pursuant to the individual subject needs. The supervision principles for the subjects are not longer based on the same conditions for all scientific disciplines but are autonomously defined by the responsible libraries in their dialogue with the scientists. The system will have to undergo a considerable restructuring if it wants to meet the challenge of this task modification. A more appropriate name than Special Subject Collections has to be found in order to emphasise the differentiated subject needs in the sense of information services. The panel of experts for the library sector which consists of librarians and scientists agreed to

change from the Special Subject Collection funding to that of a discipline driven information provisioning and they consequently support the associated measures.

The funding of Special Subject Collections includes an increasing number of E-Books and E-Journals. This trend has continued over recent years and always aimed at the integration of digital publications. Thus it is not a new phenomenon and neither is the development of value-added services as tools for the collection search and processing. Considerations worthy of discussion, which come along with the funding policy of a discipline driven information provisioning underline the emphasis of subject specific interests, the greater importance of a qualified supply of the user community whilst the principle of collection primacy becomes less important. Meeting current needs and user interests of a particular subject are becoming the precondition for the funding by the German Research Foundation. The associated demand-driven orientation is directly inconsistent with the supra-regional approach of literature supply but characterises impressively the change in user behaviour described above when library collections exist only potentially or functionally and the user creates 'their own library' for their particular needs. The assessment that the specific interests of the scientific user groups has not been paid sufficient attention to the context of the special subject collection funding is rather paradoxical and may suggest that it has not reached the specific target groups. But are temporary needs and demand scenarios really able to improve the quality of the information provisioning and hence justify the phasing out of collections?

The findings of the evaluators' committee did not lead to application approvals only in 2013. Several requests of important disciplines of the humanities and social sciences were refused. These results show clearly the incompatibility of the new German Research Foundation's funding approach with the considerations of the Special Subject Collections' claim to provide media on a lasting basis. It is self-evident that the exploitation of Special Subject Collections by other value-added services should be improved and this holds particularly true for the transformation process from the printed towards the digitised media paradigm. However, sciences prioritise contents (in the form of books and periodicals) instead of communication and processing tools and exactly this preference is questioned in principle due to the further implementation of the discipline driven information provisioning.

In 2013 twelve applications for Specialised Information Services have been submitted, five of these applications were approved upon by the German Research Foundation. In 2014 again twelve applications for Specialised Information Services have been submitted, five of these applications were approved. Totally more than 50 % of the submitted applications has been rejected. In 2015 the submission of twenty five applications is expected. Nobody is able to envisage, what will happen with them. If the tendency of approvals and rejections continue, smaller and even larger subject areas of the humanities, cultural studies and social sciences will have to face serious cuts in the literature and information supply. This loss is not likely to be compensated by other sources as it is definitely not balanced by the funding of the Specialised Information Services.

Additionally, the Specialised Information Services' three-year project approach means a disproportionate effort for the applicant libraries. This effort is combined with great uncertainty whether the approved measures for the provision of information and the development and expansion of value-added services will be sustainable beyond the three-year funding period. Mere project funding is rather counterproductive in a permanently operating infrastructure. This fact

raises the question why the German Research Foundation has changed their funding policy in this supra-regional context at all.

Although this cannot be discussed in depth, the main reason may be seen in the Foundation's funding approach which seems incompatible with a more than 60-year-lasting infinite funding like that of the Special Subject Collections. In the Foundation's point of view the support of such an infrastructure, which is a legitimate national model, has to be ensured by other sources than the German Research Foundation. The transition towards the Specialised Information Services' project approach may respond more appropriately to the Foundation's funding criteria. Furthermore, the envisaged Specialised Information Services' model may, from the Foundation's perspective, harmonise the transition from analogue to digital media as well as the change of scientific work methods, and thus have greater opportunities than the funding of Special Subject Collections.

This leads consequently to a more fundamental consideration of the term 'collection': What are collections and on the base of which criteria may they be characterised?

(1st) Collections show defined profiles which are determined by particular individuals as scientists, persons of public interest, collectors etc. or by thematic focuses of all kinds such as Special Subject Collections. Besides, quite a number of scientific libraries possess material- or language-specific holdings like handwritings, old prints, pamphlets, pictorials, bequests, children's books or volumes of Asiatica, Hebraica, Orientalia and so forth.

(2nd) In the majority of cases, collections are possessed or owned by the responsible libraries. Compilations have often been the reason and trigger for the foundation or development and extension of libraries. Therefore, collections often come into existence by chance at a certain location or library. Several – and especially renowned, precious collections originate from the treasure chambers of royal and princely houses.

(3rd) Collected holdings turn into library collections through the professional supervision and their active further development. This includes the expansion of holdings and, besides collection-relevant items, also comprises interdisciplinary media, both with the prime objective to enlarge and structure the collection systematically. In this context, it is needless to mention the key role of the items' long-term availability and their archiving. It is doubtful whether these and other demands could be fully met by means of a Specialised Information Service funding, because it is a very discipline driven information provisioning.

Against the background of the above mentioned collection criteria, I would like to come back once more to libraries that have no collections. Virtual libraries must be made a subject of discussion still from another perspective relevant in the context of revised funding policies. Library collecting activities such as the development and profiling of holdings undergo generally fundamental changes. These long observed activities have been dominated by the practice of granting licences for digital resources on the basis of which publishing houses grant access authorisation and user as well as archiving rights to libraries.

However, in most cases this does not include the libraries' right to the possession or ownership of these media. Licensed content (for example E-Books and E-Journals, data bases) – and in particular if they are e-only-resources – therefore will not undergo the same collection development as this has happened to analogue paper versions for libraries. The obvious reason for that is the restricted exploitation as the libraries are not the owners of those materials.

Digital libraries provide e-content based on user subscriptions and are consequently libraries without collections of their own. According to the above-mentioned criteria, it means in other words that libraries lack their collecting character in the supply segment of licensed e-books and e-journals. They are virtual libraries as they provide their user communities “with functionality in a potentially virtual environment”. This applies after all to e-books and e-journals as a continually growing part of the literature and information supply which gradually replaces the further extension of analogue collections.

The impact of libraries without own collections has been pointed out in connection with the changed funding policies from Special Subject Collections towards Specialised Information Services – that means expiry dates of collections! The increasing numbers of licenses for electronic media, which restrict the libraries’ rights of possession, are leading to a comparable impact. If the licensed media do not become the libraries’ own property, it will result in virtual libraries which have no collections of their own. At the same time, one is tempted to say that libraries are likely to become the long arm of publishing houses and even more so regenerate them. In view of this, libraries must have or regain the right to the complete possession and ownership of analogue and digital collections in order to justify their claim as “treasures of knowledge”.

As mentioned in the beginning, swimming baths without pools fall short of the users’ expectations and therefore are no swimming pools in the proper sense of the word. The same applies to libraries without own collections. However, even the most fully-packed picnic hamper will not appease the hunger if the cutlery is missing. Hence it would be wrong for libraries to retreat completely to their collection activities as they are clearly under pressure to offer support and services for content retrieval and processing. This involves services and tools for the digital processing and structuring of content for research, for evaluation and referencing of text- and picture corpora, for annotation, comment and publication of research findings, and last but not least measures that allow the long-term access to and archiving of analogue as well as digital data, objects and texts. It is essential in this context to provide the tools complementary to the content of the research projects.

However, these tools must not dominate the scientific work by focusing on social interaction and communication as well as material processing and transformation instead of concentrating on the research content as such. That is why libraries should not only collect items but, along with their holdings, offer their readers specialised services and this exactly in libraries that possess collections of their own and thus may justifiably be called libraries.

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