Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

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(digital) Papers, Please!

Daniel Albertsson
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
daniel.albertsson@slu.se

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Abstract

The SLU University Library has reached a point where almost every new acquisition is digital. Our current media budget is now 97 percent electronic resources and 3 percent print. The remaining print acquisitions are course books and a few professional journals.

Obviously this did not happen over night. The presentation will outline the transition we have made over the years, but will mostly focus on the present and the future. What challenges are we facing? The library as a physical space is changing when the print collections rapidly go out of date.

The increasing cost of journals is an ever present threat. All the different licenses, platforms and DRM restrictions for E-books are hard to convey to our users. How do students and researchers perceive the digital library? What about library staff?

What possible consequences come with increasingly digital collections in academic libraries overall? For instance, it's undermining collaboration between libraries regarding inter library loans. Perpetual access rights are a potential problem in the longer term since digital preservation services are quite expensive.
But let us not forget: the SLU University Library is already there, and so far the benefits far outweigh the negative aspects.
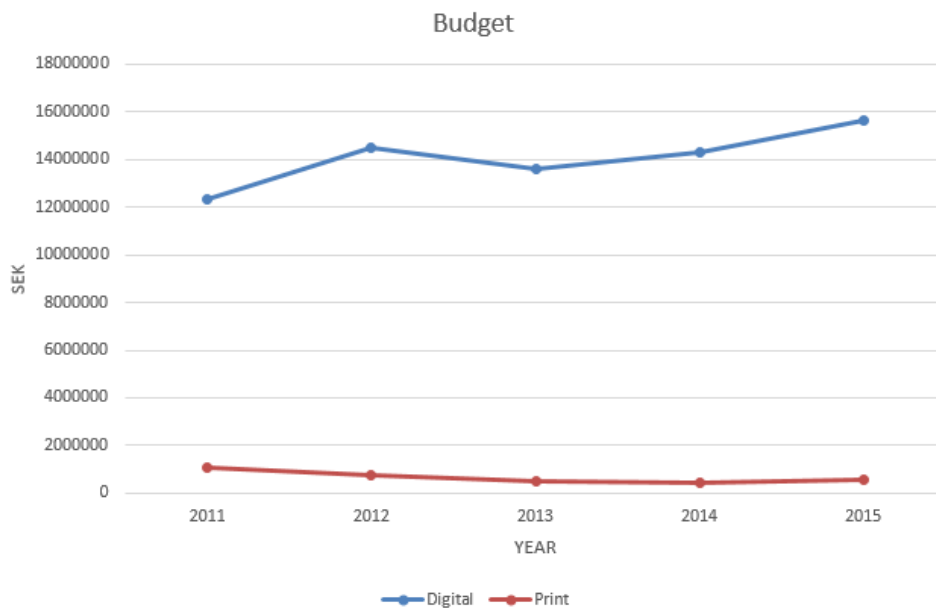
Introduction

First, let's introduce the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. It is usually abbreviated simply to SLU (after the Swedish name - Sveriges Lantbruksuniversitet). It's quite a young university and was formed in 1977

when three different colleges merged: Agricultural, Veterinary and Forestry. These three are of course still important subjects, but the university departments now span across natural and social sciences.

We're a proud little university, consistently ranking high in comparison with universities with similar subjects. In 2015 Times Higher Education ranked SLU in the top 10 of the world's best smaller (<5000 students) universities. There are barely 4000 enrolled students, 600 PhD-students and almost 3000 staff, researchers and administrative personnel. Everyone is spread out over three main campuses - Umeå in the north, Alnarp in the South and Uppsala in between. Research stations, test sites and minor teaching campuses are spread out all over Sweden. SLU is obviously a very research heavy university - as much as 70 % of the entire budget is dedicated to research and the PhD-programs.

This is an important backdrop to how the SLU University Library works with collection development. Like most academic libraries we're going towards a reality where acquisitions of printed journals and books is spiralling downwards while digital acquisitions is rapidly increasing. However, we have already hit the peak, and did so a few years ago. Currently we only buy a few hundred printed books a year, which is just a few percent of the collections budget. Everything else is digital.

I thought it would be interesting for you to know about our experiences from this; to hear about the challenges we face and have faced, as well as the benefits. The following is simply our story as a (mostly) digital library.

Death of print
The perfect starting point is the idea that print is dead. This is hyperbole in many ways, even if it's starting to become true for academic journals. But the printed book doesn't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon. There are two main reasons for this.

Firstly publishers doesn't seem to like the idea of putting up popular course books on the web. I'm talking about all these books that usually are

mandatory in every ground level course there is on any given subject. Quite annoying, since this is by far the books in highest demand by teachers and students alike.

Secondly, Swedish publishers doesn't seem willing to leave the printed world yet. None of the Swedish academic publishers sell e-books to libraries (the situation is not the same for fiction and public libraries). While the vast majority of our books are in English, especially in the literature of natural sciences, there are still plenty of books in Swedish that students read.

There is also half a third reason. People still want to read printed books, for a lot of reasons. We prefer not to deny patron requests. We have seen a distinct change in this area though. The reason is quite simple: the form for requesting purchases asks if an e-book is acceptable. The answer is automatically set to "yes", and from our experience few people change it to "no". This is an easy and subtle way to change patrons' perceptions!

One of the more interesting trends we see regarding the diminishing physical collection is the rate students and researchers borrow our books. The rate of newly purchased print books is declining rapidly. The majority of new purchases are course books however, and those are always very popular. So the number of borrowed books per year hasn't diminished as much as we thought it would.

One thing that never should be forgotten is the value of older, historic collections. Libraries have been keepers of cultural treasures for ages and ages. It is true that these collections are rarely used, but it does not diminish the importance of them. And they are of course seldom digitized.

Publishers
The image of the evil corporate publisher whose only goal is to suck library budgets dry is pretty common. Their prices are exorbitantly high, they enforce ridiculous DRM-restrictions and, on top of that, they even provide a bad service. There is certainly some truth to this viewpoint, but the reality is far from this bleak landscape that seems to populate many a librarian mind.

Actually, publishers come in all shapes and sizes and most of them aren't half bad. Also worth remembering is that the person you're talking to, whether it's support or sales, is not responsible for company policies. My point is simply to keep a good relationship with publishers (and aggregators). If nothing else, the day-to-day work will be more enjoyable. But it's also worth mentioning that publisher prices and licences aren't written in stone - it's possible to put pressure on them and actually negotiate a more fair deal.

DRM
Digital rights management (DRM), and restrictive licences, is one of our bigger and broader issues.

In Sweden every academic library collaborates with the National Library of Sweden to ensure that inter library loans (ILL) is an available option instead of purchases. This collaboration goes a long way back; printed books have been sent across the country for a long time. ILL is rarely (or perhaps never?) allowed for e-books, which undermines the collaboration between

libraries. In the long run this means that every single library will have to buy everything their patrons want, or deny them access. While I think few librarians think about this in their day-to-day work, it is bound to be become a problem sooner rather than later. The pool of available books for ILL is shrinking.

For journal articles DRM is never an issue anymore, and the open PDF is the norm. It's seldom an issue when bigger packages of e-books are bought directly from a publisher either. However, these e-book packages are expensive and something we usually can't afford. The SLU University Library depend on aggregators for providing our patrons with e-books.

DRM is of course ever present on the aggregators' platforms, and will remain so until the utopia of free and open scientific information arrives. We like them anyway, and think the positive aspects far outweigh the negative ones. The ability to choose almost any existing e-book for single purchase is something we utilize daily.

The hardest challenge with DRM is pedagogical. It isn't easy to convey the limitations on aggregator platforms e-books to students. Why can't everyone download it when it's technically possible? It takes some explaining to make the situation understandable to someone who's used to get everything with no strings attached on the Internet.

Subscription access

The SLU University Library almost exclusively develop our collections by demand. We are not subject librarians; if we lack something of relevance students and staff can request a purchase. For e-books we say yes to everything within reason. It is harder to take in a new journal, since the subscription cost is a strain on an already strained budget. Usually we cancel some subscriptions and add a couple of new ones every renewal period.

An interesting anecdote, which I have no actual evidence for. It is food for thought, regardless. A senior researcher complained about a pattern he had noticed in reference lists in students' master thesis and even in articles by PhD-students. He saw that there were very few references before 1997, which coincidentally is the year most of our subscriptions start. We still have a large historic collection of printed journals, but perhaps it isn't utilized enough. But why? Are students unaware of the libraries printed resources, or are they simply lazy? If it's more than a couple of clicks away it doesn't exist.

When you work with acquisitions this is something that makes you think twice. Backfiles is always something that is purchased at the end of the budget year, almost as an afterthought. But maybe this is an area which need to be actively pursued to ensure that students and researchers can access the information they need. On the other hand it would be unreasonable to assume that we could buy all relevant backfiles within existing budgets. There seems to be a larger pedagogical issue here: the printed journal collection has become obsolete in the minds of certain students and researchers even though it's still highly relevant.

An aspect of increasingly expensive subscriptions is the effects of currency changes. Even small decreases in the value of the Swedish krona can result in larger budget deficiencies. This became very evident at the end of 2014 and beginning of 2015, when the Swedish currency had a meltdown. We saw price increases between 10-20 % on many journals and databases, depending on if the original currency was in US dollars, euro or British pounds. This was a strain on the budget, to say the least. It is hard to develop a continuity and trust in the libraries resources if subscriptions gets cancelled for economic reasons rather than lack of usage. We took this case to our funders within the university administration and got our collections budget insured for currency changes as a result. Can highly recommend this as a way to reduce stress for the persons working with e-resources.

When you work with e-resources day in and day out you can always ask yourself if you're perpetuating an unsustainable model. Issues regarding big deals and the ever increasing costs of subscriptions has been an ongoing debate within the library sector for ages now. Is it feasible to continue this model with a constant growth of about 5 % in prices and publishers constantly churning out new expensive journals? It isn't uncommon for library budgets to crack under the pressure. Money used for acquiring information resources is money not spent on actual research.

And on top of all this sites like ResearchGate and Sci-Hub are increasingly used. The former boasts about being "the first website in the world to provide mass & public access to research papers". And they probably provide more content than most libraries. Our usage reports are showing a slight decrease in usage the last couple of years. Could this be explained by students and researchers finding other ways to the full text?

Open access
It is impossible not to mention Open Access in a talk like this. Open Access seems to be the other side of the coin (or maybe just an entirely new coin). In our organization it's apparent that the work we "subscription people" do is closely linked to what the "open access people" are working with. We are in contact with the same publishers to a large degree, if nothing else. Certain big deals now also include offsetting models for OA-publishing. How this potential collaboration and change in workflow will play out is hard to say.
We see a huge increase in usage for gold open access. Between 2014 and 2015 some publishers OA-usage increased with more than a 100 %. The reason for this could be a general increase in OA-published articles. Beyond that we aren't sure and need to analyse the data on a more granular level.

The Library as a Space
Let's go back to where we started: declining print collections. It is of course true that the rate of growth for our printed collections is very low. There isn't barely any need for new shelfs, for instance. The library as a space is certainly changing.
For the SLU University Library this isn't only because of diminishing print acquisitions. It is a part of library routine to weed out books, journals and other kinds of printed material, for various reasons. Between 2013 and

2014 we took this one step further in the Uppsala library. We weeded out almost every journal we had acquired in digital form. That is, almost every volume newer than 1997, and plenty of older material as well. In total we got rid of about seven industrial containers worth of journal volumes. This project received mixed emotions from library staff. Could the access to the weeded journals be secured on a longer timescale? Hopefully, but we're not sure. At least nothing has happened so far. It was however clear that the library can't afford to keep warming the shelves with unused items. We are not a storage facility.

Instead, the library space is used by students as a place to study, either in silence or in groups. When the weeding project was completed there were suddenly a lot of unused space. This was a perfect opportunity to buy some new and modern furniture, suited for student needs. The appreciation for this has been immense, especially portable whiteboards. They not only work as a tool to aid creativity, they can also be used to screen off others by creating a room within the room.

Photo: Moa Hedbrant & Erik Bergsten / SLU University Library

Last, but not least, it should be said that the whole organization has to jump on the digital train. Even if we're only a few persons working with acquisitions and licences the whole library is affected. Everyone has to learn about the resources, the different platforms and databases, to be able to provide the best support and education for students and researchers. There is also a technical aspect to it as users mode of access is changing more and more to smartphones and tablets. The SLU University Library solved this by simply giving a smartphone and a tablet to everyone. As librarians we have to be as comfortable with these devices as our users.

I guess the short of it all would be:
Be where your users are - even better if you get there before they do. While the world of the digital library is far from perfect there is no going back now.