

**Satellite Meeting:** *Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning: Librarians and information professionals as (pro)motors of change: immersing, including and initiating digital transformation for smart societies*

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## **Exhibitions as an empowering act in the digital transition – libraries and librarians role as knowledge producers and curators**

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### **Abstract:**

*Digital practices are intertwined in everything we do, although in a society where the citizens are faced with fake news and alternative facts in the media - social as well as traditional - demands are placed on new abilities to debunk myths and pseudoscience. Through the project The Researchers Gallery we, at Malmö University Library, explored the question of how we can address the ways digitalization is transforming behaviours in processing information and knowledge. The essence of the project was the development of a model to co-produce exhibitions with researchers at the University. The co-production was central in empowering librarians involved as well as visitors in their information literacies and understanding of knowledge and facts. In order to document the processes and disseminate the experiences and new knowledge to others, the project group developed a web-based five-step model for sustainable exhibition production. The project is now completed and the activities in The Researchers Gallery continue as part of Malmö University Library's regular repertoire. In order to develop the Researchers Gallery, and in particular deepen the connection to information literacies needed in a digital setting, we are aiming at creating a digital representation of the exhibitions with interactive components. When it comes to professional development and new competencies discovered through the project, the next step is to start a network for Swedish libraries that want to explore the role of the librarian-curator and communicate research through exhibitions. This paper will present The Researchers Gallery further as well as the project that launched it.*

**Keywords:** Librarian-curator, Exhibitions, Research Communication, Staff Development, Information Literacy

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Digital practices are intertwined in everything we do, although in a society where the citizens are faced with fake news and alternative facts in the media - social as well as traditional - demands are placed on new abilities to debunk myths and pseudoscience.

Through the project *The Researchers Gallery* we, at Malmö University Library, explored the question of how we can address the ways digitalization is transforming behaviors in handling information and knowledge as well as a new professional role, the librarian-curator. The essence of the project was the development of a model to co-produce exhibitions with researchers at the University. The co-production was central in empowering librarians involved as well as visitors in their information literacies and understanding of knowledge and facts. The project is now completed and the activities in *The Researchers Gallery* continue as part of Malmö University Library's regular organization. This paper will present *The Researchers Gallery* further as well as the project that launched it.

## **2 THE PROJECT**

### **2.1 Premise and aim**

Malmö University Library primarily tends to the needs of students and researchers, and a target issue for the university library is the development of information literacy. In Sweden, however, the University libraries are open for the public and holds a position as a gateway to the universities for all citizens, as such, the University Library serve as a means to raise awareness about democratic views and critical thinking. Through exhibitions in the physical library room, the library wants to invite all visitors at Malmö University Library to consider and discuss difficult subjects as well as challenge their own ideas about complex social phenomena and scientific questions. *The Researchers Gallery* was to become a new space for students, researchers and the public to meet. The project *The Researchers Gallery* was initiated by the University Library and was funded by The Swedish Foundation for Humanities & Social science. It started in 2017 and ended in 2018.

The aim of the project was to test new methods for communicating research through exhibitions as well as to explore, enhance and develop the role of the library and librarians in a digital world. The exhibitions are not only a mere dissemination of a topic. The exhibitions challenge the librarians in taking an active part in knowledge producing processes at the University in collaboration with the researchers at the University.

The project thus also aimed to meet an increased desire among researchers to make their research, as well as the research process, visible to a wider audience. By participating in the public debate and communicating their research findings, researchers are able to counter myths, alternative facts and pseudoscience.

The project *The Researchers Gallery* met these objectives by communicating research in an innovative way, and it benefitted from the view of libraries as a credible and open place. The outcome of the project was to be a model for collaborative work between librarians and researchers at Malmö University Library.

### **2.2 Methods**

Librarian skills such as the reference interview and knowledge of scholarly publication formed the foundation. The challenge was to use these abilities and combine them with writing, visualization, artistic design and project management for the exhibition. In the course of developing these new skills and competences, we engaged in an iterative process of reading, shadowing programs, study visits and testing new ways of working. We evaluated and analyzed

the process and the results led to new testing. By formulating questions, testing, describing procedures and reflecting upon them, we established new experiences and knowledge.

In the final phase of the project, we invited 45 libraries and communications staff from 20 other higher education institutions in Sweden to a workshop. The purpose of this workshop was to test the model in small scale as well as get feedback. The workshop also contributed in the dissemination of the experiences and knowledge we gained through the project.

### **3 THE LIBRARIAN-CURATOR**

One important aspect of testing new methods for communicating research through exhibitions was to explore a new professional role where librarians act as curators of exhibitions; new tasks linked to the exhibition activities require new roles and skills. Curator is a (partly) new role for the librarian to explore and conquer. It can be compared to how teaching nowadays is a self-evident task at university libraries, librarians have taken on a pedagogical role.

To create an exhibition several different activities and competencies are required (Dukta et al. 2002, p 21). Within the project, we identified roles and skills necessary to create a research exhibition of high quality, skills such as design, lighting, stage design, writing etc. Through "talent spotting" within the staff group, we were happy to discover unexpected talents. Swanick (2014, p 99) explains that "[e]xhibitions will diversify portfolios, unleash hidden talents, and provide the impetus for new collaborations on campus" and, for us, this really proved to be true.

Early on, we recognized that the role of the librarian-curator was of great importance and chose to let two librarians share the role as curator. The curators worked in collaboration with a project group with colleagues who had extensive experience with learning environments. Our librarian-curators initiate contact with the researchers who wish to contribute to an exhibition. Through an interview with the researchers, the process of fashioning the research and making it apprehensible begins. The curators are responsible for the concept as well as intellectual content. In "The Curators handbook" George calls the curators the "editors of ideas"(2015, p 13), to curate becomes a balancing act between meeting the public's need for experience and preserve and respect the ideas of the artist – in our case the researchers (George 2015, p 32).

### **4 PRODUCING AN EXHIBITION – A 5-STEP MODEL FROM MALMÖ UNIVERSITY LIBRARY**

In order to document the processes and disseminate the experiences and new knowledge to others, the project group developed a five-step model for sustainable exhibition production. In the process of developing a model, study visits at museums and joint reading became important components. Books that offered inspiration were for example "Organizing Exhibitions" by Matassa (2014) and "The Curators Handbook" by George (2015). However, most of the literature about exhibition production and curatorship is about museums, and it was sometimes a challenge to translate it into a library context. At a museum the exhibitions are most often created for the long duration, many times the exhibits are created to last years. The exhibitions at the library change every 6 months, however, as most of the visitors at the library returns frequently they have many opportunities to be thoroughly acquainted with the exhibition.

At a museum, producing exhibits is the core assignment and the curators are educated in museum science. Exhibitions are not part of the core assignments of the library, neither are the librarians specialized; rather, they include the task alongside many others and only work on the exhibition part-time.

The web-based five-step model<sup>1</sup> (in Swedish) includes *idea formation, planning, production, exhibition period* and *closing*. Each step includes a description of the stage in the process, a specific checklist, the reflections on insights from the project and further reading. The model is created in such a way that it can help as a guide in the continued work with exhibitions at Malmö University Library, but also for others to use in setting up similar activities at their libraries.

There was an inherent tension when aiming at a model as an output. The methods used to explore how to work with exhibitions was creative and in some ways unrestrained by boundaries. A concern was that a model containing too many stages might be overriding and restraining, hence the model was later simplified. The model highlighted the different stages of the creation of an exhibition. This in turn contributed to an understanding that all stages needed to be named and allocated time.

The model has made the work clearer and more distinct as well as helped the participating researchers to understand both the process and where we are in the process at any given time. The purpose of the model is to serve as a support and guidance in the production of exhibitions, at the same time as it allows for creativity.

## 5 THE RESEARCHERS GALLERY TODAY AND TOMORROW

The project is now completed and the activities in The Researchers Gallery continue as part of Malmö University Library's established repertoire. Up until today, we have produced six exhibitions within the frame of *The Researchers Gallery*. These exhibitions was produced in collaboration with 28 researchers from all five faculties at Malmö University:

- #1 Women, Class, Culture – from Maria Sandel to Daria Bogdanska.
- #2 6 on Sex - Sexology and Sexuality studies at Malmö University
- #3 Space & Place – research on social sustainability in Malmö
- #4 Sense or Sensibility? Facts, Research and Conceptions
- #5 People have the Power - IOTAP on exhibit
- #6 Green Waves and Red Cottages

Some aspects proved to be vital to achieve success. It is worth highlighting the importance of continuous contact with the participating researchers. The contact varied, but always included meetings with one or more interviews as well as workshops on occasions. Through *The Researchers Gallery*, we have gained a valuable contact with a broad variety of the universities researchers. This in turn, has proven to be advantageous for other areas of the library such as education and publication. The librarians now have a deeper understanding of the conditions and terms of the research process, which in turn helps us provide research-support of higher quality.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://blogg.mah.se/forskarnas-galleri/>

## 6 FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

When it comes to professional development and new competencies discovered through the project, the next step is to start a network for Swedish libraries that wish to explore the role of the librarian-curator and communicate research through exhibitions. The idea of a national network took shape during the workshop for librarians and communication staff, held at the final stage of the project. Several other libraries are planning similar exhibition activities and there is a need to share experiences and learn together.

In order to develop *The Researchers Gallery*, and in particular deepen the connection to information literacies needed in a digital setting, we are aiming at creating a digital representation of the exhibitions with more interactive components. With digital versions of the exhibitions, the University's research can reach broader target groups, for example schoolchildren and future students. The digital and interactive elements mean that the exhibitions online can live and develop long after the physical exhibition has been taken down. Still, our experience is that the physical exhibitions contributes in new ways to the understanding of knowledge in an increasingly digital world.

## 7 WHAT WE LEARNED

The project *The Researchers Gallery* showed us the strength in using research exhibitions as a means to enhance information literacy. The exhibition form allows us to describe, explain and experience complex phenomena without having to simplify or reduce the complexity of the issue. We will continue producing exhibitions in the future- both physical and digital- and thus contribute to the scientific literacy of our visitors and users, this, in the hope of working against knowledge resistance. Working with *The Researchers Gallery* has also proved to be an empowering act for the librarians involved with the exhibitions. They were reinforced in a new roll, working with the researchers in getting the research dispersed to new target groups. The most important result of the project as well as the aftermath of the project is that visitors at Malmö University Library now have an entirely new platform to encounter and understand the research conducted at the University.

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