

Astronomy library – An Endangered Species in a Small Country?

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Abstract. What will happen to small astronomy libraries in a country where academic library resources have been strongly channeled toward increased nationwide electronic access?

1. In the Beginning: The Fire that Did not Burn Astronomy Literature

I started work at the University of Helsinki Observatory in 1981. Those were quiet pre-electronic library days and everything that was needed we had or could easily procure. We had a steady influx of publications from other astronomical institutions; however, my work mostly involved handling those publications we purchased.

In the early 1980s, our contacts with other Finnish libraries were rather occasional. Once a year, I received a printed list of journals that we had on our shelves, and then I would send back an updated version, indicating changes by pencil markings. As for interlibrary loans, no one knew which books we had, so each request was an educated guess – “This is an astronomy title, let’s try the Observatory library first.” Our collections were rather representative, so that they met the demands of our local astronomers, and that was what mattered.

Then, in the mid 1980s, Finland started building its national union catalog and all its universities participated. Originally, the union catalog was distributed in microfiche. The observatory had an antique machine for reading the microfiche and occasionally I attempt locating some elusive journal. It seems unbelievable that it’s been just a little more than a decade since the first union catalog became available.

However, life with a card catalog system became increasingly difficult, and almost as soon as I received a PC, I began feeding data into a small dBase database for local use. In 1993, the online national union catalog, LINDA, was launched. I was told that I would have to start the cataloging from scratch, since my database was incompatible with the new VTLS (and later Voyager) based system.

When there is the only one available person assigned to the feeding of thousands of bibliographic entries into a database, it is not a quick task. There is another Finnish astronomy library – Tuorla Observatory library at the University of Turku. They have been able to solve their cataloging problems by

delegating the data entry to the mathematics and science library staff at the university.

We now have an online union catalog in Finland that includes bibliographic data from many participating libraries that are located in various parts of the country. Now anyone can locate our astronomy holdings and this has meant a growth in requests. The Observatory libraries at Helsinki and Turku each have a solo librarian. As the years have past, we have been expected to not only master new skills, but also growing workloads. Our colleagues, on the other hand, at large campus libraries enjoy the benefits of specialization and the luxury of assisting one another in the distribution of tasks.

During the last few years, we have acquired the skills for handling the acquisition of electronic materials. However, this task is increasingly being coordinated with the national electronic library (FinELib). By joining the appropriate consortia, under the auspices of FinELib, Finnish academic libraries can access electronic materials on many campuses. It is an ‘everything or nothing’ situation – either an entire university gets access, or no one does. Small libraries, such as the Observatory library, once bought online subscriptions for their institutions. Now, we either have to acquire them for the entire university, or a larger unit of libraries will be responsible for the purchases. The former alternative can be quite a challenge for a lonesome ‘do it all yourself’ astronomy librarian. The latter alternative means that someone else controls the decisions as to what materials astronomers need.

For this reason, the University of Helsinki Observatory has had quite a few access problems. For example, we lost electronic access to *The Astrophysical Journal* because another larger library did not return their license agreement in a timely manner.

In Finland, recent developments seem to favor the larger library units, where expertise can be shared and money for big decisions can be found. The strong cooperation for a national Union Catalog, and an electronic library, has brought our academic library holdings to everyone’s fingertips. At times, I feel as if I am the keeper of a museum filled with old books and journals, while someone else, with more resources, is making decisions regarding the implementation of new library policies. However, in the final analysis, when it comes to astronomy, it’s still likely that an astronomy librarian best understands the needs of the researcher.

During the past few years, there has been pressure for the Observatory to merge its library collection with a larger unit. This has been a difficult process for us. Is it inevitable? Are small astronomy libraries really sustainable, or are they just a reminder of a time when almost everything one needed could be found on the shelves?