

Electronic Resources in Finnish Public Libraries

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This presentation will look at the national Nelli (National Electronic Library Interface) portal services and their regional and local applications at Finnish public libraries.

I will focus on the Nelli portals of public libraries, but as the licensed electronic resources are an important part of the services accessible through Nelli, I will also outline the licensing process at the national level.

First, I will look at the national funding of the centralized networked services for and of the public libraries in Finland and the administration of the services offered by the National Electronic Library. Then I will take a closer look at the licensing process (FinELib) and the Nelli portal services. I will present the division of labour between the National Library and the provincial libraries in both licensing and the provision and development of the Nelli portal services. Next, I'll look at the Nelli portals in public libraries: their production and maintenance, and the services available to the users.

Lastly, I'll say a few words about the results of a national online survey on the use of the licensed electronic resources for the end-users at public libraries.

Centralized Government Funding for National Networked Services

Since the mid-1990's, the Ministry of Education has supported the different network projects of the public libraries. The municipal libraries can apply for discretionary subsidies each year, either on their own or with partner libraries. During the last ten years an increasing part of this funding has been directed towards the maintenance and provision of centralized national services, such as the Libraries.fi portal, which provides access to Finnish Library Net Services through one user interface. The Ministry of Education also finances e.g. the development of the statistics database for public libraries and the Search*Find*Locate search service, the maintenance of the web thesaurus

Kaunokki for the indexing of fiction, and the web version of the Finnish Public Libraries Classification System.

The Ministry of Education also finances some central services and contents provided by the National Library for the part of the public libraries. An important part of these national services are the licensing and the Nelli portal services offered by FinELib, the National Finnish Electronic Library.

Although the Ministry funds the centralized services offered by the FinELib, the municipalities themselves pay the license fees for the use of electronic resources from the library budgets. The software, development costs and services of the Nelli office are also covered by the Ministry of Education, whereas the public libraries stand for the implementation and maintenance costs of their regional Nelli portals.

Services of the National Library

According to a change in the university law and decree last year, the National Library now acts as a service center for all the four library sectors of the Finnish library network: universities and polytechnics as well as special and public libraries. In practise this has meant that the services of the National Library have been given a permanent status with permanent staff.

The aim is to provide access to high quality information for the purposes of research, learning and teaching as well as life-long learning and active citizenship. Another goal is the development of the digital work environment, including the Nelli portal services. The National Library thus offers services in the form of information resources, national licensing of electronic resources and digital library services such as digital library software and development of standards and formats.

The Licensing Process: coordination, cooperation and participation

FinELib (Finnish National Electronic Library) is a consortium which comprises Finnish universities (21), polytechnics (30), public libraries (19 plus the Central library for Public Libraries) and about 40 research institutes. FinELib turned ten years old in May 2007, and has been a service center within the National Library since the year 2000.

The steering mechanism of the consortium ensures that the consortium member organisations can influence the consortium strategy, choice of e-resources and the development of the services. All the sectors are represented in the steering and consortium groups. The steering group consists of representatives from the rector's councils for the universities and the polytechnics, the Ministry of Education and the libraries. The consortium group comprises of representatives from all the library sectors. In addition, there are seven subject-specific expert groups and a separate expert group for public libraries. These groups make suggestions for new e-resources for the coming negotiations every year. Every consortium member organization has also signed a service agreement with FinELib.

The seven licensing coordinators negotiate license agreements for electronic resources with publishers and vendors. They also provide the consortium members with user support, usage statistics, take care of the invoicing, coordinate user training, organise seminars and meetings and carry out user surveys.

The provincial central libraries have a crucial role in the licensing process as they gather the applications for consortium membership for all the e-resources from the libraries in their area. The provincial libraries also act as information contact points between the National Library and the municipal libraries, organise user training for the library staff and, of course, their own users.

The public libraries benefit from both the steering mechanism whereby their voice is heard in the consortium and the concrete services of the FinELib team. Each and every library cannot and need not have the same expertise needed in negotiations as a centralized service center can offer. License agreements only have to be negotiated once and not separately at every municipal library. This also means more licensed e-resources for the library network at more reasonable prices and better usage rights. At the moment, the public libraries use 27 different licensed resources (e.g. EBSCOhost databases, Grove Dictionaries of Art and Music, the Finnish National Biography etc.) and only 46 of 400 library authorities have no FinELib resources available for their users.

All in all, the licensed FinELib material for the whole library network in Finland comprises 273 databases, 18 600 e-journals and 278 000 e-books. This autumn, the FinELib licensing coordinators will begin

negotiations on 6 – 10 new e-resources with vendors and publishers. Around 30 license agreements will be renewed for the next term.

Nelli, the National Electronic Library Interface

Nelli, the National Electronic Library Interface, is a one-stop-shop service to networked resources. The user can search and access licensed resources (reference and full-text databases, image databases etc.), library OPACs, free networked resources, and virtual collections of the libraries involved through one portal. Nelli is a national information retrieval portal, and does not as such replace library catalogues, but makes it possible to access several electronic resources simultaneously.

Nelli uses the MetaLib and SFX software by ExLibris. The MetaLib software is used to organise the resources, to perform cross-database searches and for the personalisation of the services. SFX provides contextual links to related information resources and services. The services of Nelli portals for the end-user thus include the organisation of resources, cross searches, linking services, treatment of search results, personalised services plus authentication and authorisation needed for accessing the licensed material and for remote use.

The Division of Labour in the Provision of Nelli Services

The staff of six at the Nelli portal office coordinate and develop the Nelli services, provide technical support, information, instruction and training for the libraries. The staff describe the resources licensed by FinELib, union catalogues, the university library OPACs and other significant Finnish and foreign databases in the system. The Nelli office also maintains a data management database for handling and managing the subscriptions of the libraries for all the licensed electronic resources.

The Nelli office organises regular meetings with representatives from all library sectors both separately and together with all contact persons. There is also a yearly conference for all interested with workshops, meetings and plenary sessions. All library staff who are interested in the use and development of the Nelli services can join their mailing lists and make use of the detailed instructions for the system operators at libraries on the web site.

The provincial libraries are responsible for their own regional Nelli portals. They do not have to pay separately for the services of the National Library, nor the hardware, operational system or the software itself as the portal services are funded by the Ministry of

Education for the public libraries. The National Library is responsible for maintaining the application software. The provincial libraries do, however, stand for the costs of their own portal and its maintenance. Most provincial libraries have received a grant for the development phase from the Ministry.

In other words, the provincial libraries are in charge of their own portals: the choice of material, its organisation and information and training to users. Any regional material not covered by the Nelli office has to be described in the system by the provincial libraries themselves. The regional Nelli portals are just that: regional. They make use of the same structure, software and search options but can look different as the user interface can also be modified. They also offer access to those resources they choose themselves. It is possible to include predefined sets of databases and 'free' web resources in the searches which enables a local and regional angle. The libraries can also build 'virtual collections' to their own material, these are predefined searches of e.g. the music materials of the libraries. This usually requires some procedures from the part of the library system provider which the libraries obviously pay for themselves.

Nelli in Finnish Public Libraries

Today there are 12 public library Nelli portals in production (13th July 07). Some of these are joint portals for several libraries, even across library sectors. The first public library Nellis were opened as early as 2005. All in all, 19 university libraries and 24 polytechnics have opened a Nelli portal.

One of the first public library Nelli portals was Pohjanportti, which is the joint portal of the provincial central libraries in Oulu, Lapland and Kainuu, plus the university and polytechnic libraries in Lapland. All the public library catalogues from the area are all accessible through the portal. The portal has been in operation since late 2005. Depending on from which library the user accesses the portal, they get a different view and in the case of licensed material, also a different set of resources.

The Nelli portal of the Provincial Central Library in Varsinais-Suomi also offers access to the library catalogues of Turku City Library and the four research library catalogues in the region. Most of the public libraries in the region are accessible also through this portal.

Where the proportion of public domain resources in the portals of the universities usually revolves around 50% of the total resources, in the public library portals the proportion lies somewhere between 80% and 90%. This is understandable, as public libraries do not have as much licensed electronic materials as the other library sectors. This has to do with the range of materials on offer: most of the FinELib resources are still aimed at the needs of researches and students and there is relatively little resources in either Finnish or Swedish.

The most frequently used resources in the portals also consist of the public domain resources. One of the reasons for this are the predefined sets of resources which unarguably steer the user to this direction. This is not to say it is a bad thing; the libraries can choose resources which they consider reliable and useful which the users may not know of.

Remote Use, Authentication and Personalisation in Nelli

Some of the electronic resources used in public libraries are still only accessible at the library premises, due to the usage rights defined in the license agreement. These resources carry user restrictions usually implemented using IP address ranges. The above mentioned public library portals are piloting the authentication methods and techniques needed to enable remote use of licensed resources where it is possible at the moment. It is hoped, that when the authentications methods are proven to function at public libraries, that more vendors will be willing to grant remote access rights to the public libraries, too.

Another advantage of the Nelli software is that once the user has registered on the portal, they can create their own lists of resources (My Databases) or e-journals (My e-Journals List), keep selected records in a personal E-Shelf for use in future sessions and set alerts that run searches automatically on a set of resources selected, at intervals of their own choice. The personalised services enable users to store a search they have executed previously, in order to run it in the future. This My Space service is accessible for all authenticated users.

What Next : tips from the end-users

The FinELib service center runs a user survey each year. The surveys alternate between two target groups: the customers of the service center, i.e. the libraries, and the end-users at the local libraries. This year was the first time the public library users also were included.

It became clear that more information, instruction and training are still needed in order to market the electronic resources and the Nelli portals. Still, 20% of the public library respondents stated that they had found the information or resource they were looking for through a Nelli portal. That is no mean feat when most of the portals have been in production for about a year or less.

Most of the public library respondents also remarked that they could give up printed dictionaries and reference books or encyclopedias in favour of electronic versions. When they get better acquainted with the services available through the Nelli portals and if remote use becomes more wide-spread, the Nelli portals have a bright future.

The user interface still needs some development work when it comes to the public library users as the Nelli portal was originally designed for use in research libraries. As several university level master's theses on either FinELib or Nelli services are under way, some of the usability issues can be addressed in detail. According to a recent survey by the Nelli office to the library network, the public libraries appreciated especially the information, training and customer support given by the staff.

Infrastructure, content and access

The formal and representative structure of the steering mechanisms of the service centers at the National Library ensure that processes and services are being

developed continuously and with a user-driven approach. All library sectors are represented at all levels, and even if the structure is formal, the contacts between the National Library and its customers and partners are not.

The provision of centralised services means savings in time and money for the libraries who don't have to pay or acquire all expertise needed in licensing or digital services. It is also clear that the efforts of all partners, the Ministry of Education, the National Library and the library network, is needed as infrastructure alone is not enough - content is required. Content in itself is not enough either as easy access is needed. All this can only be achieved when the funders, developers, coordinators and users cooperate.