

# REENCHANTMENT OF THE LIBRARY

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Paper presented at the EAHIL-conference  
Utrecht, June 27, 1998.

### **Abstract**

Libraries have introduced a great many rules and procedures you need to familiarise yourself with, if you want to make use of the services. These rules are needed because of the manner in which libraries have solved the problems related to the explosion of information: the access to information has been rationalised in a one-sided way. The future's library's challenge is to bring its content to life. What matters is not what you search, but rather what you want to create, i.e. the extra value that comes into being as soon as various information sources come together. With the help of information technology it will become possible to browse through information as though you were strolling among bookshelves in a multidimensional fashion. Thus, the connection with man's creativity can be restored: the reenchantment of the library.

### **1. Introduction**

Technological developments have a fundamental influence on many aspects of today's society. This influence is most apparent for those processes in which information plays a crucial role and, consequently, this also applies to libraries. Technological developments will change the traditional 'paper' libraries to libraries that are to a large extent digital libraries, and at least some of them will become completely digital.

Of course we have to differentiate between different types of libraries and, within university libraries, between the different disciplines they provide their services for. But to a large extent these differences are only differences in the phase of transition. All libraries must and actually will use modern technology to change the way they are carrying out their traditional activities. The nature of these developments imply that they represent not just 'a change' but a fundamental innovation. It will become apparent that they involve fundamental changes in the services and the library's attitude to the organisation and the people it is serving, and, consequently, also to the library's own strategy and goals. These consequences for the library are quite radical.

### **2. Obstacles for innovation**

The radicality of these changes becomes even more obvious, as soon as we realise that a number of factors traditionally related to libraries and their organisation actually constitute an obstacle for innovating the library.

The first factor is the lack of flexibility in the library organisation as such. Customarily, the libraries have grouped their tasks according to rigidly defined function categories. The demands corresponding with these function categories have been strictly defined as well. Descriptions concerning the functions of subject librarian or catalogue librarian are examples of these categories. In practice, the rigid division and inflexible job descriptions do not contribute to a dynamic personnel flow.

Secondly, as soon as the average library staff member becomes confronted with the prospect of change, he tends to be somewhat conservative and cautious. Of course his cautiousness is related to the nature of his profession. In his job, the librarian is concentrated on the task of preserving. Therefore, he is always alert when it comes to protecting the cultural heritage.

In the third place, innovations as such do not easily find a firm holding within the entire library organisation. This circumstance is related to the position occupied within the organisation by the activities that are connected with information technology. Many libraries have had a department for information technology since the first computerisation wave, its responsibility being the supervision of computerised library systems and its proper functioning. In many cases, one of the activities this department is requested to instigate (or has chosen to create for itself) is the testing of new technology examining its usefulness for library purposes. Thus, the department in question becomes a centre of innovation within the existing organisation. This turn of events may bring along the risk that it eventually results in the creation of an electronic library within, or rather in addition to the traditional library, where the library's strategy should be aiming at an integration of traditional and new tasks.

Clearly, these circumstances are in obvious contrast with the requirements innovation and change demand from library personnel.

But nevertheless they will be confronted with a situation in which their position in the process of information provision is no longer certain. Traditional distinctions and boundaries will fade. This goes for boundaries between the library and other organisations in the information business, as they are traditionally described in the information chain. But also the boundaries between the library and the functions it is serving with information are disappearing.

### **3. The information chain**

The role of the library is often described in terms of a link in the so-called information chain. For readers who are not familiar with the jargon, the accepted definition of the information chain is as follows: 'An infrastructure consisting of a chain of groups who each fulfil one or more functions in the process of supplying information by using the available means.' This process stretches from the production of information to its consumption. Traditionally, the various stages have been strictly distinguished in terms of the chain's main functions, i.e. subsequently in the production, distribution, acquisition, and consumption of information. At the moment, we can notice several problems connected with the information chain. Usually, the chain is represented graphically. This traditional representation used to be comparatively simple. Lately however, it has grown more complex due to the pressure of an ever expanding information stream and as a result of various technological developments. It is as if the chain is about to explode.

Even so, this metaphor of an exploding chain or cycle is not appropriate. The chain is not bursting at all. What is erupting, though, is the amount of information as a result of the way it has been transferred.

Yet, the functions within the traditional information chain, i.e. production, distribution, acquisition and knowledge consumption, could all be carried out at a so-called integrated work site. In this context, therefore, the use of a metaphor describing an imploding chain would be more suitable, since due to the pressure exerted by the environment, the system has started to shrink.

The configuration of functions within the information chain has become subjected to change, whilst within this changing constellation, all the parties involved are struggling to determine their own position. At the moment, for instance, both universities and publishers are

instigating all sorts of arrangements between themselves on how they are to explore their new roles in unison. There is considerable danger, however, that they will remain stuck within the traditional chain.

In my opinion it would on the long run more effective to experiment in an innovative and creative way with new roles instead of the adherence to traditional patterns. All forced attempts to preserve the old structure will not only impede development as such, but will also expose it to the increasing danger of its arbitrary disintegration.

A conclusion from this analysis, in my opinion, would be that the libraries should aim at becoming electronic document publishers, instead of merely relying on agreements with commercial publishers.

#### **4. Library activities as a directly productive force**

The second important development is related to the traditional way in which the library tasks have been considered to be some kind of overhead. This idea is due to become obsolete rapidly. In time, library tasks will be regarded as directly productive forces.

We must realise that it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between the actual provision of information and the various processes in which this information is used. In the case of the university library, the primary university tasks are training and research. The fundamental aspect of training is the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student. The once clear distinction between knowledge transfer through teaching on the one hand, and the provision of information by the library on the other is fading as a result of the deployment of information technology in education. More and more, library services are blending with the teaching process.

A similar trend can be observed within the process of research. Here, the fundamental stages are the identification of sources, the exchange of information between colleagues, the interpretation and analysis of data, the dissemination of findings. In this case, the boundaries between information provision and the various stages in the research process are becoming faint as well.

Similar tendencies have become apparent in other primary processes supported by library tasks, for example in policy-making and legal consultancy.

In general, we may establish that library functions are progressively integrating with the primary processes they are serving. This implies that the library tasks can no longer be considered some sort of overhead services. On the contrary, they are developing into a directly productive force. And I would like to emphasise that, in order to properly determine the relevance of certain information amidst this vast available reservoir of data, it is imperative to acquire a thorough knowledge of the discipline in question.

#### **5. About procedures and regulations**

At the university, the library has the task of providing scientific information for the benefit of education and research. The library selects, collects, preserves and provides access to information sources. Since this information functions as knowledge in the educational and scientific research process, it has to have a key role. To reach this objective, it is necessary that the information provision is adapted to the manner and situation in which it is used. This, of course, implies that involved library staff needs to be familiar with the user's requirements. Only then the library will be able to provide the information with extra value which is needed for applying it in both primary processes.

In the past university libraries have taken great pains to improve the application of its services in education and research. However, the instruments the library has created for this purpose comprise a large number of procedures and regulations. That is, rules the user needs to grow accustomed to if he wishes to find his way within the library. The following examples are intended to illustrate this fact.

The library's contents are described in the catalogue that is organised alphabetically and according to subject. Presently, it has become possible to consult other library catalogues, either at your own library or at your own desk or working place. You can even order documents from other libraries.

This is a step in the right direction, since it is a step towards the virtual library of the future, assuring us the availability of relevant information, irrespective of the place where this information is stored. Nevertheless, when considered from these new developments' perspective, the current character of the catalogue seems to be somewhat awkward.

Let us, for instance, have a look at the unified Dutch Library catalogue. Oddly enough, this register does not contain a complete overview of all the information published. When consulting this catalogue, the user can only access the combined inventories of a limited number of libraries, who have agreed to integrate their respective indexes. Thus, when living near the Belgian or German border, you can never be certain whether this catalogue gives you information considering the contents of the nearest scientific library. Also, it does not even provide information on the inventories of various scientific institutes not belonging to a university.

Even more deplorable is the fact that this catalogue does not refer to available documents which have not (yet) been collected by the participating libraries.

Fortunately, there is another way of finding out whether any material has been published about a certain topic. This is by referring to a bibliography, that is, if there exists one on the subject in question. However, bibliographies also have a reputation for not being very useful when it comes to indicating the exact location where the particular information or documents can be actually found. To this end, you need to turn to the catalogues once again. There are sufficient examples demonstrating that it is virtually impossible to achieve the required result.

The library also uses a system of subject headings, which originally were designed to provide some help when searching for information. Like categorising, subject heading amounts to arranging information according to certain categories, presupposing a more or less rigid system of categories. But in effect, there are no categories at all. There is only a continuous flow. Moreover, the conceptual scientific landscape is in constant motion as well.

Of course, we must take into account certain differences between various disciplines. But we should also realise that the boundaries between them do not have a permanent character. Specialised subject librarians, having finished their curriculum several years ago and not actively participating in the research process, are no longer able to cope with the system itself, nor with its application.

There is another point of view from which the library's classification methods may seem to have a rational appearance, though in practice, they prove to be not quite as effective. The classification system can be useful if you have a specific question and you are looking for a specific answer. However, scientists do not just have simple questions. They usually deal with problems that only with the greatest of effort, can be translated into questions. The action nowadays referred to as browsing may be useful in that it helps them formulate new and fruitful ideas.

Naturally, I am not suggesting that all library activities involved should be cancelled, nor do I intend to say that they are useless. They are important activities which are valuable for our

users. On the other hand, they are time-consuming too, both for the library and its users. Furthermore, they tend to be of a bureaucratic and procedural nature, qualities that even further limit their effectiveness.

From these trends we may conclude that it is the library itself that has introduced and self-imposed a number of rules and procedures which are far from being self-evident. As a matter of fact, the use of library facilities has become rather complicated to such an extent, that users need instructions in order to properly make use of its services. Worse even, these instructions necessitate the training of special instructors who are to coach the users. Basically, that is the reason why we have set up library instructions, since the use of the library cannot do without it. It is a situation - if I am allowed to say so - the library needs not be very proud of.

## **6. Reenchantment**

As we have seen, the library has introduced a great many rules and procedures you need to familiarise yourself with if you want to make use of library services. If a scientist has a specific problem, these rules prove to be rather inconvenient for solving it. It seems, therefore, that generally the access to information has been rationalised in a one-sided, one-dimensional way only. I am convinced that this situation can be improved by means of information technology.

Surely, one could consider the application of this new technology as a mere continuation of the rationalisation process. Yet, this would be a one-sided observation. Soon it will become possible to link scientific intuition to technological achievements. Scientists and students will be able to browse through information as though they were strolling along bookshelves in a multidimensional fashion.

The future library's challenge is to bring its contents to life. We must create a library that is not merely a guide for receiving insight into the current way of organising information. The future library should also be helpful in establishing new methods of organisation. Search engines must not be designed to exclusively retrieve answers to specific questions. What matters is not what you search, rather what you want to create, i.e. the extra value that comes into being as soon as various information sources come together.

Such a library can be represented in terms of a philosophical parallel. For instance, as the realisation of the ideal presented by Leibniz. The philosopher Leibniz commenced his career as a librarian and he strove towards creating an encyclopaedia in which all knowledge was to be rationally gathered and interlinked. Referring to Leibniz's ideal, we could regard the library as an encyclopaedia of the sciences, as an encyclopaedia being endowed with a richly layered multidimensional order.

Modern information technology can and must be deployed to bring the library closer to scientists, teachers and students, in terms of both space and content. Thus, the number of rules and procedures, however rational they may seem to be, will be automatically reduced. Logistic automation has in effect created the large gap that exists between service and creativity.

We may see in this a parallel with Weber's 'Entzauberung' or disenchantment in English. This disenchantment of the library is caused by the manner in which we have decided to resolve the problems related to the violent explosion of information. A solution that in practice amounts to stacking information in such a way that it can be accessed by means of complicated logistic procedures only. This has inevitably led to a widening crevice between information and the individual's creativity and his values.

The original connection with man's creativity can be restored by introducing sophisticated

search engines that carry information to the user's working place at dazzling speed. This development suggests that using library services will become easier in the future, since these services are to be directly linked to the user's actual requirements.

In South Africa I saw a large picture in the children's department of a public library. When we transform the meaning of this picture to the scientific library, it very well illustrates what I mean to say about the library's future: 'Dreams take flight at the library'. This will be possible with the help of new technologies. And this will eventually result in the reenchantment of the library.